

PiNCHAS

Teamwork and Leadership

"Alone we can do so little; together we can do so much."

"Teamwork is the fuel that allows common people to attain uncommon results."

I believe that most of us will enthusiastically agree to these two dictums, the first by Helen Keller, and the second by Andrew Carnegie. We have all seen instances of the effectiveness of teamwork in our personal lives, in our careers, and in the realm of politics.

Despite our conviction that teamwork is a good thing, we certainly have our doubts about how to achieve it. We are all familiar with groups getting together to try to build a team, only to discover that dissension and disagreement make it impossible for the team to even get off the ground. When we analyze the reasons for their failure, we discover that there are two schools of thought regarding the most effective composition of teams. There are those who believe that the most effective teams are composed of individuals who are very much alike, both in terms of their temperament and their opinions and beliefs. Others insist that, on the contrary,

the most effective team is one that is heterogeneous; that is, the members are quite different from each other and bring different styles and skills to bear on the tasks at hand.

My own research and reading on this subject has led me to conclude that studies about the effectiveness of teams often omit one very important factor: team leadership. The talents of the leader are crucial if the team is to be successful. His or her skills are especially important if the team is a heterogeneous one. Working together with individuals who differ from each other can be quite challenging, but the truly adept team leader knows how to utilize the differences within the group to maximum advantage.

One leader who was particularly successful at forming a team of individuals who were not only different from each other, but who were in conflict with each other, was Abraham Lincoln. His ability to guide the members of his cabinet in a manner designed to achieve his own ends was remarkable. It is described in *A Team of Rivals*, a fascinating book by Doris Kearns Goodwin. This book has become required reading not only for students of American history, but for all those who are interested in understanding how groups function best, and who can appreciate the role that leadership has in achieving effective teamwork.

This week's Torah portion, Pinchas (Bamidbar 25:10-30:1), provides us with much food for thought on the subjects of teamwork and team leadership. The team in this case is not a small group, but rather the entire Israelite nation. Aside from the myriad difficulties which all leaders face, the group leader in our parsha has the additional, perhaps insurmountable, challenge of following in the footsteps of none other than Moshe Rabeinu.

I refer, of course, to the following text: "Moshe spoke to the Lord, saying, 'Let the Lord, God of the spirits of all flesh, appoint someone over the community... So that the Lord's community not be like sheep that have no shepherd.' And the Lord answered Moshe, 'Single out Yehoshua, son of Nun, a man with a spirit in him... Invest him with some of your authority...'"

This seemingly straightforward text offers commentators a basis for many interesting observations. I will draw upon two commentators, both of relatively recent times. I refer to two 20th century rabbis, both trained in the great pre-Holocaust yeshivot of Lithuania. One is Rabbi Yechezkel Abramsky, and his contribution is drawn from a collection of his edited writings, Chazon Yechezkel. Rabbi Abramsky passed away in 1976. The second is Rabbi Zalman Sorotzkin, author of a most insightful commentary on all five books of the

Torah, entitled Oznayim L'Torah.

Rabbi Abramsky is concerned with the phrase "spirits of all flesh". "All flesh" is best understood as a phrase indicating "each and every individual". The question arises, "Does each individual have many spirits?" Rabbi Abramsky begins his lengthy discussion of this verse with a passage in Rambam's Guide to the Perplexed, in which the great medieval sage describes the human being as a "social creature"; that is, a creature who requires relationships with others.

Rabbi Abramsky then shares with his readers the Talmud's observation that just as no two people look exactly alike, so do they differ in their personalities and attitudes. He finds it paradoxical that a creature designed to live in relationship to others should be inescapably surrounded by others who are very different from himself. Does that not lead to inevitable conflict and strife?

Rabbi Abramsky suggests that the ultimate purpose of each individual is to combine his personality, with all of its contradictions and complexities, with the personalities of others. Thereby, the group will be composed of a multitude of individuals whose stark differences result in a harmonious and well-functioning group. "Each one of us", he writes, "is composed of a balance of opposites: mercy and cruelty,

pride and humility, courage and fear, love and hate, self-control and lust, diligence and laziness. Yet, the mature person is able to find harmony in these inner opposites. So too, the group, even the national group, reaches its greatest potential when the opposites within the group achieve harmony."

He goes on to say that just as the individual achieves this harmony with his internal "leader", that being his intellect and self-discipline, so too can the group achieve its harmony through its leader. This is the function of leadership, and this is the reason that the Almighty chose the person of Yehoshua, a man who had "spirit within him", to guide the Children of Israel after Moshe's death.

Rabbi Sorotzkin also finds teachings about leadership in our text, and they well supplement - one might even say enhance - the observations of Rabbi Abramsky. Quoting a close relative of his who was murdered in the Holocaust, Rabbi Hirshovitz, Rabbi Sorotzkin notes the manner in which Moshe approaches the Almighty as he asks Him to find a new leader to replace him. Normally, when we approach the Almighty in prayer, we do not begin with our requests. We begin with words of praise and adulation for the Almighty. We first attempt to gain entrée, so to speak, into His divine presence. Only then do we dare ask

Him to address our worldly needs.

However, in our text, Moshe does away with words of praise for the Almighty. He utters no special requests for His mercy. Rather, he goes straight to the point. He "speaks to the Lord"; and the Hebrew word for "speaks" here is YAYDABEIR, which connotes a strong and demanding type of speech. And without hesitation, he cuts to the chase: "Let the Lord appoint someone over the community!" Rabbi Sorotzkin finds an important lesson here: When one is acting on his own behalf and asking the Almighty for His intercession, then one must preface his request with words of praise to the Master of the Universe. But when one is in a leadership capacity and addressing a request to the Almighty for the benefit of the greater public, the tzibur, then one must eliminate words of praise and "demand" the Almighty's response. This is one aspect of the responsibility of leadership.

This week's Torah portion is replete with fascinating texts. They range from the drama of Pinchas's zealotry to the picturesque scene of the daughters of Tz'lofchad bringing their case before Moshe. The latter half of the parsha is dedicated to details about the sacrifices to be offered in the Mikdash for various holy occasions. In the midst of all of

this rich material, we can very well lose sight of the few verses that we just explored, which draw upon rabbinic commentators of a very recent generation.

Let us not forget that our Torah is designed to teach us everything that human beings need to know. We certainly need to know how to lead and how to follow, how to create communities and how to work together constructively and harmoniously. In this week's Torah portion, we have an excellent opportunity to learn about some of what the Torah has to say about leadership and about teamwork. 📌