



The more a text matters to us, the more likely we will see in it what we already believe. This is not necessarily a bad thing, or a prescription for distortion – the opposite of passionate engagement may be not objectivity, but rather shallowness.

Moreover, reading someone’s interpretations of texts that matter deeply to them is an excellent way to uncover their core convictions.

Powerful prescriptive texts about leadership are often such texts, as they should be. Bamidbar 27:17 is one of them.

Let us set the scene. Hashem has reminded Mosheh that he will not be leading the Jews into their Land. Mosheh’s response is, on the one hand, a newfound assertiveness – this is the only occasion where he addresses G-d using the hierarchical *vayidaber* - and on the other, a remarkable acknowledgement that he is replaceable. He demands that he be replaced by someone who can fulfill a particular set of tasks so that “the community of Hashem not be like flocks that have no shepherd”.

We can legitimately wonder what the *hava amina* was. Malbim suggests that Mosheh was worried that the Jews would be given a bellwether rather than a leader – leaders, he says, have to be as different from – as superior to - the led as human shepherds are from sheep. Giving a fool the trappings of office does not make him or her a leader.

I suspect Malbim has Mosheh fearing that G-d will give the Jews the leadership they deserve, rather than the leadership they need, and justice is certainly a reasonable *hava amina*. Perhaps in this reading Mosheh is harking back to the last time he disappeared, and returned to find himself replaced by a heifer.

We can suggest other *hava aminas*. Perhaps Mosheh feared that he would be replaced by committee, as Hashem (and Yitro) have in the past favored greater decentralization, and he had little faith in committees. Perhaps he was afraid that Hashem would choose to lead them Himself, despite the risk that their failures would generate total destruction.

But what do leaders do? A leader is someone  
“who will go out before them, and  
who will go in before them, and  
who will bring them out, and  
who will bring them in”.

Targum Yonatan succumbs to the temptation of context, saying “Who will bring them out *of the grasp of their enemies* and who will bring them in *to the Land of Israel.*” Rashi’s second option is a more poignant version of the same “who *unlike me will be allowed to bring them in to the Land of Israel.*” But I prefer to read the leadership description as generic.

Rashi’s first option focuses entirely on war: the leader must be at the head of battle (but why must he be at the head of those returning? Alshikh seems to suggest that he will not flee the battle alone, but rather return *only* at their head), and it is his merits that must bring his soldiers victory and safety. R. Chaim Paltiel, after raising the textually difficult possibility that Mosheh is describing more than one person, concludes that the leader must begin by subordinating himself to the people, as a result of which he will gain the capacity to subordinate them. His intertext is 1Kings 12:7, where the elders tell Rechav’am that if he will be the *eved* of the people, the people will become his *avadim*. Rechav’am of course rejects their advice, and loses the Ten Tribes as a result.

But why would Mosheh think that G-d would appoint an incompetent or unrighteous leader?

Malbin and Seforno both divide extra and intracommunal responsibilities. For Seforno, in military matters – and perhaps in matters of foreign policy – the leader must be first in and first out, whereas in domestic matters not necessarily so. Seforno does not define the alternative to “Follow me!” leadership. For Malbin, leaders in both spheres sometimes need only set an example for others to follow, but, and at other times they must exert coercive authority.

Neither Malbin nor Seforno explains Mosheh’s *hava amina*.

My preferred intertext is Devarim 31:2, where Mosheh explains that he is no longer able “to go in and go out”, so that

“Hashem your G-d – He will pass in front of you;  
He will smash those nations from in front of you;  
Yehoshua – he will pass in front of you  
as *diber* Hashem”.

What is missing is any mention of causing others to go out, or in.

My suggestion is that Mosheh has only one valid basis for suspecting that Hashem will give the Jews inadequate leadership – that basis is his own appointment. What he must be asking for, then, is not that Hashem find someone like him, but rather someone better than him.

Mosheh’s quite biting self-critique is that he was often out in front of the people, but he never quite got them to follow his example.

It should also be clear that Mosheh is not being entirely fair to himself. Leaders cannot *make* anyone decide to follow their example, whether in war or in peace – ultimately the people have to take responsibility for that themselves. Ultimately each individual, leader or otherwise, must take responsibility for his or her own decisions.

And yet – with apologies to Tolstoy, Mosheh was not wholly unfair to himself, either. Leaders do matter, and influence is legitimate.

And in the end – Mosheh taught Yehoshua, and according to Yehoshua 24:31 and 2:7, Yehoshua did succeed in leading by example.

Starting this Wednesday, I am privileged to again spend six weeks trying to develop – purely via Talmud Torah and influence – Klal Yisrael's next generation of Torah leaders. The task is complicated by the weakness of my own example, and because – while it is likely that never before in history have so many in Klal Yisrael learned so much Torah, the Torah seems often to be sent out before them as a shield – you can't do this to us, we study Torah! – without actually being given influence at the level of values. But the Torah teaches us here that it *is* possible for teachers and communities to produce students and successors greater than ourselves.

Shabbat shalom  
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