

PARASHAS PINCHAS

All Eyes on the Shepherd

Moses knows that his life is drawing to an end. Very shortly, the Jewish people will arrive on the banks of the Jordan River, and then they will cross into the Holy land. Moses know he will not make that crossing. He will not enjoy the privilege of entering the Holy Land along with the people he has led out of Egypt and through the desert for forty long and trying years.

At this time, Moses does not think of his own desires and yearnings. Rather, his thoughts are with his people, the unruly but beloved flock he has guided through many crises during his tenure as leader. What will happen to the people when he is gone? he wonders. "Please appoint a leader for them," he pleads with God, "one who will go out and come back at the head of the people, so that they will not be like sheep without a shepherd."

According to the Sages, Moses wants the new leader to "go out" and "come back" at the head of the people during times of war. Kings of the other nations customarily stand in relative safety at the rear of their armies, but a Jewish king should go out to the battlefield in the vanguard of his armies, setting an inspiring example of faith and courage for the soldiers that follow behind.

So now we understand why they must "go out" at the head of the people. But why must they also "come back" at the head of the people?

The commentators explain that the test of faith is far greater when we return victorious from battle than when we go out to fight in the first place. The soldier that steps onto the battlefield knows that his life hangs in the balance. As confident as he may be about his own prowess, he knows that by nightfall his own blood may be soaking the trampled earth. As brave and ferocious as he may be, he cannot help but feel a measure of powerlessness and humility. At moments like this, the Jewish king must inspire the soldier to place his faith and trust in our merciful father in Heaven.

But when the soldier returns victorious from battle, he is likely to be entirely full of his own self, intoxicated with his valor, endurance and martial skills. He can easily forget that it is only by the grace of God that he has lived to see this day and glory in it. This is where the Jewish king must exert himself to the greatest extreme. He must "come back" at the head of his army, showing his followers that a faithful Jew returns from battle with an even greater feeling of humility and the most profound

gratitude to the Almighty for protecting him and granting him victory over his enemies.

This was the kind of shepherd Moses was for the Jewish people for so many. This is the kind of leader he prayed would be his successor.

A young man began experiencing regular headaches. Most nights, he would go to sleep with a severe migraine, and in the morning, he would awake with his migraine still intact. He found it increasingly hard to study, work or simply to function at all. So finally, he decided to take a drastic step for a vigorous young man. He went to see a doctor.

"This appears to be very serious," said the doctor after examining the young man. "I want to run some tests on you. See me day after tomorrow."

Terrified, the young man spent the next two days deep in prayer, pleading with God to spare him from an untimely death.

"I have good news, my friend," said the doctor on his next visit. "There is nothing seriously wrong with you. It seems it's just a seasonal allergy."

The young man breathed a sigh of relief. "Well, God," he said when he got back into his car, "I guess I didn't need Your help this time, but thanks anyway."

In our own lives, we often tend to ascribe our good or ill fortune to happenstance. We sometimes look at the world as a place of random events, and whether we suffer or prosper is governed by sheer chance. To do so, however, would be dangerous self-delusion. Real security derives only from faith and the knowledge that we are all in God's hands.