

Pinchas Dvar Torah – Rabbi David Mahler

In his unending care and concern for *Klal Yisrael*, *Moshe Rabbeinu* initiates a conversation with *Hashem* making sure that there is a nurturing and competent leader to succeed him as he will not be the one to lead *Am Yisrael* into *Eretz Yisrael*.

Amazingly, Moshe has led the Jewish people for the last 40 years – leaving his family in *Midian*, confronting *Paroh*, executing the exodus, splitting the sea, fighting battles and tending to their needs while traveling through the wilderness – and in the final year of his life, he is barred entry to Israel. Yet, completely selflessly, his primary concern is who will take care of my people when I am gone. He broaches the subject with *Hashem*. Not the other way around.

Moshe reaches out and asks, “You, who knows the spirit of all humans should appoint a leader to this congregation who will go out and come in before them. He should take them in and take them out. Let *Hashem*’s people not be like sheep who have no shepherd” (*Bamidbar* 27:15). That is Moshe’s request.

The *Sfas Emes*, Reb Yehuda Aryeh Lev Alter, the second of the *rebbe*s of the *Ger Chasidus*, wonders how Moshe could have made such a statement to *Hashem* that His people would be like a sheep without a shepherd. Isn’t *Hashem* our shepherd! We are never really alone. He resolves the difficulty by stating that our leaders, the *tzaddikim* and *gedolim*, are our physical shepherds on earth.

The *Sfas Emes*’ premise is what is astounding. He, a world-class saintly person, is intimating that people need leaders because people often feel distant from *Hashem*. We can feel ignored, abandoned and forgotten by Him. He is addressing that reality of the human condition. People can feel that for a moment, a few hours, days, weeks months or years. It is normal – especially during these past few months of unknown. There are so many questions we cannot answer and we feel lost and sometimes alone – without a shepherd.

The *Pnei Menachem* adds to the thought of his illustrious great-grandfather. *Dovid HaMelech* wrote the famous words, “*Hashem* is my shepherd, I shall not lack” (*Tehillim* 23). What was *Dovid* requesting when he asked *Hashem* that he should not lack? The *rebbe* answers that his request was that he should never lose sight of the fact that *Hashem* is my shepherd. It was almost like he was saying – G-d, You are constantly guiding and loving me. Please don’t ever let me forget it. That is

why we utter these words at a funeral, at times so ripe with despair and abandonment.

For some, our *Emunah* has been tested and even rattled the past few months and the commencement of the *Bein HaMeitzarim* (3 weeks) period makes this no easier. It requires even more mettle.

The story is told of an actor and an opera singer who was known for his readings and recitations from the Classics. He always ended his performance with a dramatic recital of Psalm 23. Each night, without exception, as the actor began his recitation - "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want" - the crowd would listen attentively and then rise with thunderous applause, in appreciation of the actor's ability to bring the psalm to life.

One night, just before the singer and actor was to offer his customary recital of Psalm 23, an old Jew from the audience spoke up. "Sir, would you mind, if tonight, I recite Psalm 23?"

The actor was surprised by this unusual request. However, he invited the old Jew to come onto the stage to recite the psalm; curious to see how the ability of this Jew weighed against his own talent.

Softly the old man began to recite the words of the psalm. His voice was parched and weak, and his tune pretty lousy.

"The Lord is my shepherd: I shall not want..."

"Though I walk in the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for You are with me; Your rod and Your staff-they will comfort me..."

"Only goodness and kindness shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the House of the Lord for many long years."

When he was finished, there was no applause. There was no standing ovation as on other nights. All that could be heard was the sound of weeping. The audience had been so moved by the man's recitation that every eye was tearful.

Amazed by what he had experienced, the opera star queried, "I don't understand. I have been performing Psalm 23 for years. I have a lifetime of experience and training - but I have never been able to move an audience as you have tonight. And frankly, you have a horrible voice and can barely carry a tune. Tell me, what is your secret?"

The Jew humbly replied, "Well sir, you know the psalm...but I know the Shepherd."

Emunah, our faith in *Hashem*, is like everything else in life. It must be worked on. It's a muscle that needs training, exercise and strengthening. Each person works on their *Emunah* in their own ways but it takes thought, preparation and effort to grow in this area of life.

I love the shepherd. I am thankful to the shepherd. Do I know the shepherd?