

In Pinchas, the Torah portion this week, Moshe, about to leave this world without being allowed to step into the Land of Israel, makes one of his final requests of Hashem. But the way he addresses the Almighty is unusual. He starts his request with the unusual title “G-d of the Spirits.” The full translation of 27:16 reads as “Let the Eternal One, source of the breath of all flesh....”

One of the Midrash’s explains that with this title Moshe was making a point about the individual value and worth of all members of Bnai Israel’s community. He was prompting Hashem to remember that he should recognize the individual spirit of each of his creations. The subsequent request is for Hashem to appoint a leader for Bnai Israel to replace him on his death. Moshe wanted to ensure that this leader would understand or even embody all the individual characteristics of Bnai Israel.

What is the implication of this request on leadership capability? The Midrash explains that Moshe’s request captures the essence of Judaism’s view on genuine leadership. A leader must be one who embraces, not shuns or isolates, human diversity. A great leader is not one who proclaims, “My way or the highway.” Diversity is built into the natural world, into our very existence. No two humans are alike, just like no two snowflakes are alike. A leader should not endeavor to have all his or her followers look or think alike. The best leaders foster individuals in their community to reach their highest potential. This does not mean that every whim or declaration by an individual needs to be sanctioned by leadership in the name of self-expression, however. Hashem and the inspiration provided humankind have created universal standards of morality and ethics that bind us together. We already know that thinking alike is detrimental. Thinking individually is better but the Midrash argues that thinking together is the best way forward, no matter whether one is leading a business, government, social organization, or family unit.