



Parashat Devarim
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In Parashat Devarim Moshe recalls his appointment of judges to assist him in leading the people. Moshe relates that after appointing these leaders, “I commanded your judges, saying: Hear out your fellowmen and judge justly...” (1:16).

Maimonides, in *Hilkhot Sanhedrin* (25:1-2), interprets Moshe’s admonition to the new judges as including guidelines relevant to all those who assume leadership roles among *Am Yisrael*:

It is forbidden for a person to conduct himself imposingly over the public or with arrogance, rather, [he should act] with humility and fear [of God]. And any leader who imposes excessive intimidation upon the public not for the sake of Heaven is punished... Likewise, it is forbidden for him to deal with them lightly, even if they are ignoramuses, and he should not step over the heads of the sacred nation. Even if they are simpletons and lowly, they are the children of Avraham, Yitzchak and Yaakov and the legions of God who took them from the land of Egypt with great force and a mighty hand. He shall tolerate the burden and load of the public like our teacher Moshe, about whom it is said, “as a nursemaid bears a suckling babe” (Bamidbar 11:12). It is indeed written, “I commanded your judges” – this is a warning to a judge to tolerate the public like a nursemaid tolerates the suckling babe. Take example from Moshe, the teacher of all prophets: once the Almighty sent him in Egypt, it is said, “He assigned them over the Israelites” (Shemot 6:13). It has been taught through oral tradition that [God] said to Moshe and Aharon, “even if they curse you and hurl stones at you!”

According to Maimonides, although Moshe makes explicit reference here only to the specific instructions concerning the judicial process, he speaks as well about the general demands of leadership. Namely, he commands that they must follow his example of patience and tolerance in dealing with the people. Just as Moshe testified about himself that he tended to *Benei Yisrael* “as a nursemaid bears a suckling babe,” so must all leaders follow this model of commitment.

This analogy to a nursemaid is instructive in helping to identify precisely the kind of commitment of which Moshe here speaks. A nursing mother feeds her infant at any time of day or night, and without any strings attached. Even though the infant cannot reciprocate, show appreciation, or make any attempt to minimize the imposition upon the mother, she nevertheless tends to the baby lovingly, devotedly, and limitlessly. She never resents the “unreasonable” demands or the ingratitude; instead, she continues to give without any question or protest.

Maimonides here emphasizes the extent of the leaders’ required commitment to the people “even if they are ignoramuses” and “even if they are simpletons and lowly.” A leader should expect no more of his constituents than a nursemaid expects from the

infant under her charge. It is God's role to judge whether or not their demands are reasonable and just; it is the leader's role to try to meet these demands unconditionally and to the very best of his ability. The fact that the people may be as ungrateful and imposing as an infant does not diminish from the extent of the leader's responsibility. They deserve the same unconditional attention and care as an infant.

The reason for this requirement, as Maimonides explains, is that all *Am Yisrael* are "the sacred nation" and "the children of Avraham, Yitzchak and Yaakov and the legions of God." Even when they act unreasonably, the devoted leader must look upon them as God's beloved children with whose care the leader has been entrusted.

This perhaps provides a model for all people to follow, even those who do not serve in leadership positions. In all our dealings, we must recognize the importance of seeing our fellow Jews as "the sacred nation" and "the legions of God," people who deserve our concern and respect despite their failings and shortcomings. And even when criticism is warranted, it should be conveyed with respect and dignity, and not with ridicule or contempt. Even those of us who are not assigned the task of bearing the nation's burden "as a nursemaid bears a suckling babe" can still learn from this model of unconditional love and devotion, and show care and concern for all our fellow Jews.