

Parshat Vayechi & WZO Elections

- Jacob J. Schacter.

The Tosefta in Berakhot 4:16 reports a dialogue that takes place between R. Akiva and his colleagues. What is the criteria for Jewish leadership? Why did Judah merit to kingship?

PARSHAT VAYECHI
Rabbi Jacob J. Schacter

Time is short before the deadline for one of the most important acts we can do in support of maintaining Judaism and Jewish life in the Jewish State as well as supporting it in the Diaspora. Elections are now under way for delegates to the Thirty-Fifth World Zionist Congress which will choose the leadership responsible for the allocation of over \$1 billion for Jewish causes in Israel and in the Diaspora in the next few years. It is imperative that the Religious Zionist voice be large and strong to represent the kind of values so important to us in our beloved State of Israel and in Jewish communities throughout the world.

The concept of “leadership” has elicited a great deal of attention in recent years, in the general society as well as within the Jewish community. Many important books have been written on the subject in an attempt to illuminate this often elusive notion and help clarify its significance. What does Jewish tradition have to offer to this very important and developing conversation? The central component of today’s Torah reading is the special, unique and tailor-made blessings the Jacob bestowed upon each of his children before he died. The blessing for Judah was kingship or royalty: “The scepter shall not depart from Judah” (Genesis 49:10). He will be the king; his descendants will rule the people, “from David and onwards” (Rashi, ad. loc.); he and his family will be the leaders of the Jewish people.

But why Judah? Why was he singled out of all his brothers for this extraordinary honor and distinction? What qualities did he have that made him more worthy than they of this special designation? In short, what made Judah a leader? asked this question: “For what reason did Judah merit kingship?” and first answered, “Because he admitted he was wrong in the Tamar story.” In an earlier passage (Genesis 38), the Torah described how Judah had sexual relations with a woman whom he did not realize was his daughter-in-law and subsequently acted very harshly towards her. When confronted by the facts, he acknowledged his error, admitted his mistake and uttered those famous words, “Tzadkah mimeni,” “She is more righteous than I” (see the commentaries of Ramban and Rashbam to Genesis 38:26; cf. Rashi). The first quality of leadership, then, is to recognize and, if necessary, publicly confess one’s guilt and transgression. Face the truth, squarely, genuinely and honestly. But R. Akiva rejected this suggestion. “Does one get a reward for a sin?,” he wondered. Yes, very nice, he admitted his transgression, but this requires that a sin had to have been committed. Better not commit the sin in the first place than commit it and then benefit from it by admitting to it. While I think we can all appreciate the importance of this quality very much (and were

struck by its absence in the behavior of a prominent American public figure not long ago), R. Akiva was not satisfied. And so, once again, the question was posed: "For what reason did Judah merit kingship?"

This time he answered, "Because he saved his brother from death." When his jealous siblings wanted to kill their brother Joseph, Judah intervened and said, "What gain will there be if we kill our brother? (Genesis 37:26). What quality is necessary for leadership? I would characterize this answer as compassion. With sensitivity, tact and wisdom, Judah tempers his brothers' anger, counters the extremism of their attitude and saves Joseph from death.

But this too is rejected by R. Akiva. With it all, Judah did not demonstrate real leadership, claimed R. Akiva, because Judah proceeded to suggest that they sell Joseph into slavery (37:27). After all, had he been a really effective leader, he would have been able to prevail upon his brothers not only to save Joseph's life but to set him free entirely! Perhaps, had he pushed, he could have achieved not only a compromise but a more dramatic and meaningful objective. Finally he answers that Judah merited kingship because a few generations later when the Jewish people would be standing in front of the raging sea after just having left the servitude of Egypt, it would be one of his descendants who would take the initiative to be the first to jump in. This, ultimately, is the real criteria for Jewish leadership. You want to be a Jewish leader? Produce children and grandchildren who will be motivated and inspired to extend themselves to sacrifice of themselves on behalf of the Jewish people.

What better way to demonstrate this than to support those in our beloved Israel who have been in the forefront of trying to insure and maintain those Jewish values that are so important to us there as well as in the Diaspora. Let us insure that we will have leaders who will be committed to the kind of Israel and Diaspora Jewry we want to see. Register and cast your ballot for the Religious Zionist slate in the forthcoming World Zionist Congress and please make sure that all the members of your family who will be eighteen years of age by June 2006 register as well. To do so, please go to www.votetorah.org.