PARSHAT PINCHAS
Lessons Of A Leader

Parshat Pinchas contains a mini-essay on leadership, as Moses confronts his own mortality and asks G-d to appoint a successor. The great leaders care about succession.

In the case of Moses, the sages sense a certain sadness at his realization that he would not be succeeded by either of his sons, Gershom or Eliezer. Unlike the crowns of priesthood or kingship, it does not pass dynastically from father to son. Charisma rarely does. What is instructive, though, is the language Moses uses in framing his request:

“May the Lord, G-d of the spirits of all flesh, choose a man over the congregation who will go out before them and come in before them, who will lead them out and bring them in, so that the congregation of the Lord will not be like sheep without a shepherd”. (Numbers 27: 16-17)

In the opening clause of the statement: “…choose a man over the congregation who will go out before them and come in before them, who will lead them out and bring them in…”, this sounds like saying the same thing twice, which the Torah tends not to do. What does it mean?

The Torah is hinting here at one of the most challenging aspects of leadership, namely timing and pace. The first phrase, “who will go out before them and come in before them”, means that a leader must lead from the front. It is the second phrase that is vital: “…who will lead them out and bring them in…”. This means, leaders must lead from the front but they must not be so far out in front that when they turn around they find that no one is following. Pace is of the essence. Sometimes a leader can go too fast.

Respect for diversity, care for the lowly and powerless as well as the powerful and great, and a willingness to go no faster than people can bear – these are the attributes of a leader.

Excerpt from:
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by Rabbi Jonathan Sacks