

“Judges and officers shall you appoint.” (16:18)

Jewish leadership has to be strong – yet flexible. Compassion for, and sensitivity to all Jews are prerequisites for leadership. Strength of character and fear of no man are just as essential. The following narratives demonstrate these two inimical qualities which were the hallmarks of two Torah leaders.

Horav Yosef Chaim Sonnenfeld, z.l., was a talmid chacham without peer. Yet, he had no problem performing the most menial task if it would help another Jew – regardless of his age or station in life. Rav Yosef Chaim was once late in returning home from Shacharis. This was an anomaly, since he was a very punctual person. Concerned, his wife sent their daughter in search of Rav Yosef Chaim. She found her father drawing water from a well and pouring it into pitchers, which two little boys – ages six and seven – carried to their nearby home. The boys emptied the water into a large earthenware barrel and quickly returned to the well for more water.

“Father!” his daughter exclaimed. “Have you added water-carrier to your list of positions?”

“No,” responded Rav Yosef Chaim, “but as I was returning from *shul*, I noticed these two little boys bending over the well in an attempt to draw water. What they were doing was dangerous, and I told them so. They replied that they had no alternative, since there was no water at home, and they could not afford to hire a water-carrier. Their mother had recently given birth, and their father – a poor *talmid chacham* – was laid up in bed with a severe case of the flu. What could I have done? I immediately took off my *Tallis* and *Tefillin* and began to draw water for them. I will continue doing so until I fill their water barrel.”

“But, father, what will people think when they see a *talmid chacham*

of your stature engaged in such menial activity?” his daughter rejoined.

“I care much more about what they would say in Heaven if I were to sit and eat a leisurely breakfast while Jewish children are putting their lives in danger, so that they can bring some water to their sick parents,” was Rav Yosef Chaim’s reply.

This was the attitude of a *gadol b’Yisrael*. His overriding concern was for the welfare of two young boys. This concern overshadowed whatever position he held. The lives of Jewish children were involved. What could have greater significance? It would serve our own leadership well to digest this story and take heed of Rav Yosef Chaim’s reply. How many children do we overlook because of vested interests? How many mothers’ complaints fall on deaf ears because we refuse to take a stand? How many children leave the path of Torah because it is beneath our dignity to help? There are leaders who lead, and there are leaders who are led. It all depends where one places his emphasis.

The second story is really excerpts of a letter written by the *Klausenberger Rebbe, z.l.*, to the Jews in free countries, following World War II, pleading with them to fulfill their duty towards their destitute brethren who had survived the Nazi inferno. The letter demonstrates the *Rebbe's* concern, compassion and strength of character. He saw his brethren perishing before his very eyes, and no one was doing anything about it. He was not subject to petty politics or protocol. Jews were dying, and action had to be taken. This was *Torah* leadership at its zenith.

“To our Jewish brethren:

“As a result of our sins, we, the Jews of Europe, have suffered years of persecution, in which the evil oppressors have risen against us to wipe out, kill and destroy all the Jews. During all those years, no one rose to share our suffering or to assist us. Those few who survived, did so only through the promise of the Torah, ‘I will not cast them away, nor will I abhor them’ (*Vayikra* 26:44), and by the covenant that the Jewish people will not be destroyed. Yet, though we have been freed from slavery, we have not yet regained our freedom.

“Single family members, the remnants are going from place to place in search of their lost ones – fathers, mothers, husbands, wives, children and relatives – wandering and confused in the land of their enemies. Burning tears stream down our faces, we see our enemies already content and at peace, while we linger in pain and deprivation.

“All the doors have been shut. Even the gates to our Holy Land are closed to us. We are kept in camps in poverty and shame, without clothing or shoes. Some of our people are still wearing their accursed prison uniforms.

“Our supply of kosher food is limited. Thus, many of our fellow Jews are relegated to continue eating non-kosher food. While I am aware that a number of organizations have been founded under a variety of names, they have yet to accomplish anything. Indeed, I can honestly say that to date, nothing of value has reached the camps.

“Is it not your responsibility to care for the remnants of European Jews – especially the thousands who are deathly ill? Our military commander is doing whatever possible to ease our plight, but even his hands are tied.

“Are we to ignore our spiritual obligations? Literally a hundred men grab onto a single *Tallis* which one person received from a relative. Men wait for hours to don a single pair of *Tefillin*, so as to recite the first paragraph of *Shema*. Holy Jews who survived the crematoria crowd together and look from afar at a page of a *Siddur*. Immeasurable time is wasted from Torah study, because there are no *seforim*. Even during these holy days we have no one to supply us with kosher Torah scrolls, *Tefillin*, *Mezuzos*, *Tzitzis*,

Siddurim, *Machzorim*, *Chumashim*, *Mishnayos* etc...

"I have been silent too long. I thought that the feelings of mercy would be aroused in my fellow Jews. However, my pain does not permit me to remain silent any longer. I cry out, again and again, to the heads of every committee and organization: Where are you?

"Jewish nation! Have you examined your deeds before your Creator? Have you fulfilled your obligations to your brethren who are withering away from agony, living in the valley of tears, fearful of what the next day will bring? After all the years of suffering, do they deserve this?

"On behalf of all the holy martyrs who were murdered and burned alive, we scream! Please save us! Do not wait any longer! Please see to it that your assistance reaches those in need without interference or politics.

"I sign this with a broken heart with the hope that my pleas will be heard.

Rabbi Yekusiel Yehudah Halberstam"

I am sure that the *Klausenberger Rebbe's* pain expressed here was felt by many, but no one else had the fortitude and resolution to make a public demand. Not everyone wants to be *Klal Yisrael's* conscience. It takes true leadership.