

Provide for yourselves distinguished men, who are wise, understanding, and well known to your tribes, and I shall appoint them as your heads. (1:13)

In a play on the word "onhatu" , "and I will appoint them," the *Midrash* changes the "sin" to a "shin", transforming the word "onhatu" to "and I shall hold them guilty". The *Midrash* is teaching us the importance of listening to our spiritual leaders. If they lead properly and the common people still do not respond with respect, the people are liable. They cite an interesting analogy. Once a snake was sliding along its path, when the tail began complaining to the head, "Why are you always in the front with me dragging along behind? I want to lead, while you follow in the rear."

The head responded, "Very well. We will switch positions, and you will lead. Since the tail has no eyes, we can well understand what happened. The snake fell into a pit, then it was singed by fire. Finally it was scratched by a thorn bush into which it had run. The fate suffered by the snake was to be expected, given the fact that the tail had guided it.

Similarly, when the common Jew attempts to usurp the spiritual leadership of *Klal Yisrael*, we are beset with bruises -- and in many instances -- serious injury. Our *Torah* leaders are the "eyes" of the nation. They lead because they have vision. They have the necessary perspective to guide the people on the correct and safe path.

Even the best leader will succeed only if he has the respect and approbation of the people he is to lead. One earns this respect by virtue of his character and scholarship. At times, however, the people themselves are not worthy of their leadership, not recognizing the leaders' virtue and capabilities. In the *Talmud Chagigah 14A*, we find a compelling statement from *Rav Dimi*. He said, "Yeshayahu cursed *Klal Yisrael* with eighteen curses. Yet, he was not satisfied until he pronounced, "The youngster will behave insolently against the elder, and the base against the honorable." Yeshayahu uttered eighteen terrible curses, each one grave and serious with awesome ramifications. That was not sufficient. He wanted to deliver the final blow, the blow that would have the greatest effect. What was that curse that would outdo all the others, that would devastate *Klal Yisrael's* chance for survival? It was the one that pronounced an end to the authority of the *zekeinim*, elders, and *talmidei chachamim*, *Torah* scholars. We cannot survive without their leadership.

Why is this? Why is *Klal Yisrael* so unique that it cannot exist without the institution of elders? Rabbi Akiva compares us to a bird. Just as a bird cannot fly without its wings, so, too is *Klal Yisrael* helpless without its elders. A bird uses its wings to go higher and to remain airborne. Otherwise, it will fall to the ground, a helpless broken bird. Without its leadership, *Klal Yisrael* will not only not go forward; it will actually fall and cease to exist. A generation's greatest disgrace is demonstrated when the people do not show respect to their *gedolim*, leaders. How shameful is it when people refer to *gedolei haTorah* in the most pedestrian terms? The arrogance of the

common Jew, his self-declared scholarship, provokes *chutzpah* towards our leaders. One cannot accept leadership from another if he is filled with himself.

The **Satmar Rebbe, zl**, once set forth criteria for a *gadol* to be accepted. He must first be a *talmid chacham*, totally proficient in all areas of *Torah* erudition. Secondly, he must be a *yarei Shomayim*, G-d fearing person, who will not adapt his *psak*, *halachic* decision, as a result of outside pressures or personal vested interests. Third, he must have special, common sense. He must possess an acute ability to understand and deal with all people. He should be able to ferret out those who would undermine the *Torah* way of life. A *gadol* is the embodiment of *Torah*; he reflects it in his total demeanor. To respect a *gadol* is to respect the *Torah*. To deny a *Torah* leader the respect he deserves is to challenge the *Torah* itself.