PINECHAS: Parenting and the Power of Empathy

By Rabbanit Coty Bitton

THE QUALITIES OF A JEWISH LEADER

When Moshe learns that his life is coming to an end, he begs HaShem to appoint the right successor to lead the people of Israel. And he says (Bamidbar 27:16): “Eloqe haruchot lekhol basar” (God, You who know the spirit of every living being). The Midrash explains that Moshe implored HaShem to appoint a leader with that very quality: a man “asher ruach bo,” capable of knowing the spirit of every living being. This means: a man who understands the character of each individual. The ideal leader of Israel must be patient, open-minded, and prepared to deal with different types of personalities. With those who need a firm hand, and with those who need a more sensitive approach. With those who can listen to a different opinion, and with those who are more resistant to change. Or with those who require additional explanations, or an unconventional strategy of persuasion.

THE MASTER

HaShem then appoints Yehoshua as Moshe’s successor. Yehoshua was a “master” of empathy. He understood that there are different types of intelligence and that when it comes to communication, a leader must adapt to others. The future Jewish leader, before reacting and getting angry, must take the time to understand the reasons behind the other person’s opinion. Yehoshua was able to put himself in the other person’s place and understand not only what his interlocutor was saying but also what he was trying to say. In ALL human relationships we need empathy: the ability to accept that, although we all come from the same ancestors, Adam and Chava,

we are all very different. As our Sages said: "*keshem shepartsufehem shonot…*," just as no two people have identical faces, no two people think or communicate in the same way (Berakhot 58a).

IS NEARSIGHTEDNESS CONTAGIOUS?

Empathy is fundamental in a leader. By empathy I mean the ability to perceive the feelings of another person and internalize them, without denying them or ignoring them. It is the ability to suspend, for a moment, our own point of view, and not judge the behavior of others according to the way "I" feel or behave. I cannot get upset with my husband if his taste in food is different from mine. I cannot tell my teenage daughter that it is ridiculous to be afraid of a roller coaster at an amusement park just because I am not afraid of heights. We have different temperaments, different ways of perceiving life, different fears, tastes, and sensitivities. Everyone has lived through different experiences that have shaped their personalities. My eyeglasses are custom-made. They help me read better and see better. But my glasses are useless to everyone else! In fact, if someone else puts on my glasses, they won't be able to see!

PARENTING AND EMPATHY

In our role as parents, empathy is absolutely necessary. Any parent with more than one child knows that children are very different from one another, even when they were raised in the same home by the same parents. We parents must pay close attention and understand each of our children according to their personality and individuality in order to be empathetic to their needs and to know the best approach for each one in particular. Let's start by convincing ourselves that our children are different. Each one has a different spirit!

In Hebrew we call preschool "Gan Yeladim," literally "a garden of children." But have you ever asked yourself why it is

called a “garden”? Because, in order to give little ones the right foundation at the beginning of their education, you have to be like a gardener, who knows that each of his plants has different needs. Some plants need water once a day. Others, ironically, will wilt if we water them daily. Some plants need plenty of sun; others, shade. Like plants, all our children need attention. But that attention must be personalized. Adapted to each of our children in particular.

We have to be for our children what Yehoshua was for the people of Israel: to understand that each of them has a mental universe of their own.