



FROM THE DESK OF RABBI MOSHE HAUER

OU EXECUTIVE VICE PRESIDENT

**ORTHODOX
UNION**
Enhancing Jewish Life

Moral Leadership in a Dark World

The ethics and morals of leaders are of essential importance.

Pirkei Avot is the best-known section of the Mishna as it is dedicated to articulating the Sages' ethical messages. Surprisingly, according to the Rambam (Introduction to Rambam's Commentary to the Mishna), it was not written for the masses but rather specifically for the leaders and judges of the community, "because if members of the masses are not ethically trained, they only harm themselves, whereas if the judge is not an ethical and well-mannered personality, he loses his way and causes the people to be lost via the harm he causes."

It was corrupt leadership that brought the destruction of the world in the *mabul*, the great flood. "The sons of *elohim* saw that the daughters of man were lovely, and they began to take whomever they chose to be their wives." (Bereishit 6:2) Rashi follows the translation of *Onkelos* and understands that these "sons of *elohim*" were the children of the leaders and judges of the time, leading Ramban to comment that society is doomed when those charged with preserving order and justice in society are themselves openly corrupt.

In this context, we can have a completely different understanding of G-d's instruction to Noach upon his emergence from

the ark: "One who sheds the blood of man - by man shall his blood be shed, for in G-d's image man was made." (Bereishit 9:6) The verse here is introducing the death penalty for the murderer, based apparently on the significance of the life he has destroyed. Yet all indications are that at this point man was further away than ever from reflecting G-d's image. Why is now the time to elevate the significance of the victim and initiate the death penalty for his murder?

In context, however, we understand that the "men in G-d's image" referenced here are not the victims but the judges, those sons of *Elokim* - the gods of the earth - whose being and actions are supposed to reflect the being and actions of the G-d in heaven but often fall short. After the disaster of the flood was brought on by the corruption and failure of the judges and leaders, Hashem turns to man and charges him to lead society towards truth and justice by zealously safeguarding it. "One who sheds the blood of man - by man shall his blood be shed." Leadership cannot sit by and watch impassively as evil is perpetrated; they must respond, "for in G-d's image man was made." Corrupt leaders destroy the world. Those who strive to live up to the Divine image of care and responsibility redeem it.

We are deeply grateful to the many

political leaders who have remained true to their *tzelem Elokim*, remembering the role they have in being beacons of justice in a dark world. We thank them for speaking up on behalf of the Jewish People and the State of Israel. ■

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