The Politics of Spiritual Leadership

Our matriarch Sarah’s name, שָׂרָה (literally a female officer), hints she was far more than an excellent wife and mother. She was a leader in her own right. The other name attributed to her, יִסְכָּֽה (see Bereishit 11:29 with Rashi), may also be connected to the word נְסִיכָה (princess). However, let us focus on a different type of position of power, as seen in the haftarah of Chayei Sarah.

While we are familiar with the title kohen, we might not be aware of its implication of authority. Indeed, the verse that says “the sons of David were kohanim” (Shmuel II:8:18) refers to positions of power, as they were not descendants of Aharon.

Actually, the kohanim in the Beit HaMikdash had authority, all the more so the Kohen Gadol, who was in charge of a huge operation in the Temple. While this included great spiritual responsibility, it also included control over a tremendous budget, which was independent of the king’s control and had a built-in system for raising funds. The Kohan Gadol was also in charge of a limited judicial system, known as beit din shel kohanim (see Mishna Ketubot 1:5).

At times, this system led to severe corruption, such as at the time of the sons of Eli or of the bribe-paying candidates for the job during Second Temple times.

In our haftarah, we are witness to a power struggle of a different kind between two prominent kohanim.

Toward the end of David’s reign, it was clear to most citizens that his successor would be Adoniya, his wife Chagit’s oldest son. Nevertheless, Batsheva held David to his promise that her son Shlomo would ascend to the crown. Two Kohanim Gedolim who shared the post arose on the two sides of this dispute. Tzadok, who represented the house of Aharon’s son Elazar, stood behind Shlomo, whereas Evyatar, who represented the house of Itamar, threw his support behind Adoniya. At the end of the process, Evyatar and his family were banished to their village of Anatot and removed from prominence (Melachim I:2:26), and Tzadok became the sole leader of the tribe.

Why was Tzadok’s involvement in the dispute deemed proper while Evyatar’s was not? What was wrong with supporting Adoniya? From these verses, perhaps we can learn when it is right for religious leaders to get involved in political debate. Adoniya is described as approaching Evyatar, who agreed to support him (ibid. 7). Adoniya should have acted with humility and waited for David to decide who would succeed him, after consultation with the prophet. Evyatar’s involvement in this political maneuvering is an example of an improper attempt to decide matters and perhaps also an attempt to ensure his position of power under the new regime. Tzadok, in contrast, did not take a stand but brought the matter to David to decide, only after which did he add his blessing to the decision.

The prophets, while also holy people like the kohanim, did have a role that made it appropriate for them to become involved in political matters. After all, their job was not to determine halachic policy for the generations but to educate the people as to what to do in the present, which might include “political” steps.