

Fables from the Jewish Tradition  
By Rabbi Manes Kogan

(30)

**The Serpent's Tail**  
Deuteronomy Rabbah 1:10



**Background to the Fable "The Serpent's Tail"**

**Leadership**

- ?** Why do we need leaders?
- ?** What are the qualities a communal leader should have?
- ?** What has to be said in favor of democracy?
- ?** What has to be said in detriment of democracy?
- ?** What has to be said in favor of monarchy?
- ?** What has to be said in detriment of monarchy?
- ?** Why is important sometimes to have leaders make a final decision?

**The Snake and the Tail, by Aesop**

Once upon a time the tail of the snake decided that she would no longer follow the head which crept along in front. 'It's my turn to be the leader!' said the tail. The other parts of the snake's body said to the tail, 'You wretched creature, why can't you just keep quiet? How are you going to be our leader when you don't have eyes or a nose, the things that guide the limbs of animals when they move?' But the tail did not listen to the other members of the snake's body, and thus the rational was defeated by the irrational. The back now ruled the front and the tail took the lead, blindly trailing the whole body behind her. Finally the tail led the body into a deep stony hole, scraping its spine against the rocks. Then the stubborn thing began to fawn and beg, 'O head, my leader, please save us if you will! I have provoked a harmful quarrel with harmful results. If you will just put me back down where I was before, I will behave myself, so that you won't have to worry about me getting you into trouble ever again.'

**?** Do you agree with the moral? Why? Why not?

**?** Can you think on another moral to apply to the same fable?

### Deuteronomy 1:9-17

9. And I spoke to you at that time, saying, I am not able to bear you myself alone;  
10. The Lord your God has multiplied you, and, behold, you are this day as the stars of heaven for multitude.

11. The Lord God of your fathers make you a thousand times so many more as you are, and bless you, as he has promised you!

12. How can I myself alone bear your weight, and your burden, and your strife?

13. Choose wise and understanding men, known among your tribes, and I will make them rulers over you.

14. And you answered me, and said, The thing that you have spoken is good for us to do.

15. So I took the chiefs of your tribes, wise men, and known, and made them chiefs over you, captains over thousands, and captains over hundreds, and captains over fifties, and captains over tens, and officers among your tribes.

16. And I charged your judges at that time, saying, Hear the causes between your brothers, and judge righteously between every man and his brother, and the stranger who is with him.

17. You shall not respect persons in judgment; but you shall hear the small as well as the great; you shall not be afraid of the face of man; for the judgment is God's; and the cause that is too hard for you, bring it to me, and I will hear it.

**?** According to our verses, what are the pre-conditions for a leader/ruler to be in charge?

**?** Where do we see the democratic aspect of Moses' delegation of power/empowering plan?

**?** Where do we see the autocratic aspect of Moses' delegation of power/empowering plan?

### The Serpent's Tail Deuteronomy Rabbah 1:10

מדרש רבה דברים פרשה א סימן י

רבנין אמרי בוא וראה בשעה שנתמנה משה על ישראל אמר להן איני יכול לישא את משאכם לעצמי אלא מנו לכם דיינים שיהיו דנין אתכם שנא' הבו לכם אנשים, אמר רבי ברכיה בשם רבי חנינא צריכין הדיינין שיהא בהן שבע מדות ואלו הן חכמים ונבונים וידועים, וארבע כמה שכתב להלן (שמות יח) ואתה תחזה מכל העם וגו' הרי שבע, ולמה לא נכתבו שבע כאחת שאם לא נמצאו משבע מביא מארבע ואם לא נמצאו מארבע מביא מג' ואם לא נמצאו מג' מביא מאחד, שכך כתיב (משלי לא) אשת חיל מי ימצא, ואשימם בראשיכם ואשמם כ', אר"י בן לוי אמר להן משה אם אי אתם נשמעים להם אשמה תלוי בראשיכם, למה הדבר דומה לנחש הזה שאמר הזנב לראש עד מתי אתה מתהלך תחלה אני אלך תחלה אמר לו לך הלך ומצא גומא של מים והשליכו לתוכה מצא אש והשליכו לתוכו מצא קוצים והשליכו לתוכו, מי גרם לו על שהלך הראש אחר

A serpent's tail said to its head, "How much longer will you go before me? From now on, I will go before you."

The head replied, "You may go before me."

So the tail went before the head. It fell into a well. It went through fire. It crawled over thorns. Why did this happen to the serpent? Because it allowed its head to follow its tail!

Deuteronomy Rabbah 1:10

### **Comprehension and Analysis Questions**

**?** Why did the serpent's tail complain to the head: "How much longer will you go before me?"

**?** Why did the head reply to the tail "You may go before me"?

**?** What is the lesson the serpent's tail needs to learn?

**?** What is the lesson the serpents' head needs to learn?

**?** What is the original definition of "head" that the reader gets at beginning of our fable?

**?** What is the new definition of "head" that the reader gets at the end of our fable?

### **More Comprehension and Analysis Questions**

**?** How does our fable apply to the ruling of a country?

**?** How does our fable apply to the ruling of a congregation?

**?** How does our fable apply to the ruling of a family?

### **Marcelo Ferder's Drawing**

**?** How does the serpent's tail look in Marcelo Ferder's drawing?

**?** How does the serpent's head look in Marcelo Ferder's drawing?

### **Note on "The Serpent's Tail"**

When Moses named leaders to preside over Israel, he said that the people of Israel should abide by their judgments. Rabbi Joshua ben Levi said, "Moses said (to the Children of Israel): 'If you do not heed what they say, the fault will be yours, as it was with the tail of the serpent, that for not wanting to follow after the head, had all

the disgraces mentioned in our fable befall him.” Rabbi Joshua ben Levi’s teaching, concludes, “When the inexperienced listen to the wise, the wise entreat God and God answers their prayers, but if the wise follow the inexperienced, they all trip and fall.”

**?** Why do you think was a need for Moses to warn the people to follow their appointed leaders?

**?** Why do you think the “wise” might follow the inexperienced?

### Let’s Explore Other Sources

- Sanhedrin 8a
- Bava Kamma 52a
- Ramban on Numbers 27: 19
- Ma’iana Shel Torah on Numbers 27:16-18
- Vayikra Rabbah 5:6
- Torah Gems (Yituri Torah) on Numbers 27:6
- Sifre Deuteronomy, 16. (Quoted in the Book of Legends)

### Wrapping Up

**!** If you are not a leader, let the leaders lead and be a good follower!

**!** If you are a leader, then be in charge!

### Bibliography

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### Discussion Ideas from Rabbi Dorit Edut

#### K-3<sup>rd</sup> GRADES:

1)

What did the tail of the serpent want to do?

2)

What happened to the serpent when the tail led it? Why do you think the tail was not as good a leader as the head?

3)

When you choose to follow someone else, what do you need to know or believe about them? Who are the people whose words or ideas you usually follow?

**4<sup>th</sup>- 6<sup>th</sup> GRADES:**

1)

What do you think this fable is trying to teach us?

2)

Why do we sometimes follow people who are not really good leaders?

3)

In your opinion, what makes someone a good leader, someone you are willing to listen to and follow? Are you a leader in any circumstances? Which ones, and who follows you?

**7<sup>th</sup>- 12<sup>th</sup> GRADES:**

1)

Being a positive leader requires certain important qualities. What would you say those are and who do you identify as a good leader?

2)

Many people are not such good leaders—even powerfully bad ones. Why do you think people follow such leaders? Give examples of such leaders in our day.

3)

In the context of the midrash from which this fable comes, what is it that Moses is really concerned about and why? What do you think about Rabbi Joshua ben Levi's concluding remarks about the elders following their children, especially in our days? What do you think it means that God complies when the elders give orders?

## **Language Arts Strategies from Dr. M. Patricia Cavanaugh**

### **Post Reading Strategy: Usage**

Make a list of popular expressions. Discuss their literal meaning and their usage. Write an example of a short fable/story using one as a base.

That's the cart leading the horse.

That's the kettle calling the pot black.

That's biting off more than one can chew.

That's by the skin of one's teeth.

That'll cost an arm and a leg.

Let's keep his nose to the grindstone.

Let's let sleeping dogs lie.

That's making a mountain out of a molehill.

He's made his bed; now let him lie in it.

You can't go home again.