

A NEW LEADERSHIP RECRUITING POSTER

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For much of our professional lives we worked as congregational and community organizers. We had an axiom in that work: “Whatever the problem, whatever the solution, do leadership development!”

That maxim reflects an understanding that the current leadership is often working itself into an early organizational grave, because it’s typically a miniscule group of maximum workers, doing everything for everybody. And no matter what challenges an organization is facing, the answer to the question, “What would it mean to have a surplus of committed, competent leaders?” is *always* positive.

But invariably the one thing that falls through the cracks is leadership development, the strategy and tactics necessary to swell or even maintain the ranks of leadership.

When existing leaders acknowledge this simple principle, they tend to leap to the question of leadership recruitment: “How can we recruit many more people into leadership roles?” they ask. And then, ironically, the leadership development process seems to falter for lack of an effective recruiting strategy and workable tactics because, as they say, “We’ve tried everything and nothing works—people here are just too apathetic.”

What’s wrong with this picture?

The focus is on methods of recruiting instead of the substance of leadership roles. We’re usually trying to figure out how to find people who will fill positions that often if not invariably entail onerous burdens in the form of endless time-consuming drudgery or serving as the lightning rod for organizational tension and conflict.

It’s not exactly the ideal recruiting poster for congregational leadership!

What we’re *not* offering potential leaders is an inspiring vision of what we can be and do as a congregational community. What we’re not offering potential leaders is the opportunity to *lead* rather than simply occupy a formal office that saps one’s time and spirit. What we’re not offering potential leaders is the opportunity to be a model of a life well-lived, not only for oneself and one’s family, but for one’s congregational community, country, and people.

Where do we begin to change that leadership-recruiting poster?

One place to begin is by getting a better understanding of what leadership has meant in our tradition. In *parasha* (weekly Torah reading) Mikeitz we can learn a great deal about leadership from Joseph.

Joseph is a *chacham* (חכם), a man of abiding wisdom. He has more than facts, information, and

knowledge at his command. He has the eternal verities of the Abrahamic tradition to call upon. So despite the extraordinarily punishing events of his life—being sold into slavery and imprisoned—he isn’t pushed from pillar to post. He understands where he comes from, who he is, and his mission in life. He sees things not only as they are, but also as they should be, according to the Creator’s purpose. He not only has *chochma* (חכמה), but *binah* (בינה) and *da’at* (דעת)—not only wisdom, but also deductive intellect and empirical knowledge.

Joseph, as a high public official in Egypt, understands the importance of having a wife and family. With limited options, he marries Asnat, the daughter of a priest of an idolatrous cult. However, he brings up his children with such commitment to his own tradition that to this day we bless our children in their names, Menashe and Efraim. Moreover, Joseph is willing to be openly and visibly a Hebrew, choosing to separate himself from the Egyptians when eating. (Genesis 43:32)

Joseph is sufficiently attuned to the possibility of Divine Providence in the events of his life that, despite the pain he endures, he is free of petty vindictiveness and martyrdom. Despite the irony that his brothers got rid of him to avoid the possibility that their father’s favorite son would ever be able to lord it over them, threatening to undermine their family, which brought about the possibility of that very result, Joseph nonetheless harbored no bitterness. He sought only to ensure that they were cured of their erroneous ideas about him and posed no threat to his father’s youngest son, Benjamin. Although in a position to lord it over them when they came down to Egypt, he did no such thing.

What’s the basis of Joseph’s behavior?

He sees the larger purpose of his life—beyond his own comfort and convenience—to serve God. So Joseph has more than *yichus* (יחוס), family lineage—he has the *character* that such an inheritance potentially affords.

As viceroy over Egypt, Joseph understands himself as a lord, but not as we usually think of that term in English. His brothers, reporting back to their father of their encounter with him, describe him as *adonei ha-aretz* (אדני הארץ), the lord of the land. (Genesis 42:30) But the Hebrew word *adon*, lord, is from the root א-ד-ן, which implies not mastery over another, but serving as a pillar or bearer, emphasizing the supporting quality of responsibility over the mastering quality of authority. Joseph as a leader seeks not primarily to dominate, but to support and defend the interests and well being of the people.

What confirmation do we have of Joseph's character?

- He recognizes that sexual relations with Potiphar's wife would be a sin against her, her husband, and God: It could destroy their marriage, family, and personal well being. And it would undermine one small piece of the social fabric that sustains a world of justice and kindness in the image of God.
- He fails to let his father know he is alive and viceroy of Egypt, undoubtedly causing deep pain to himself, to avoid the inevitable shattering of his family that would have resulted had his brothers' evil deed been revealed to their father. (S.R. Hirsch on Genesis 42:9)
- He acts to prevent speculative buying of food during the famine, selling only retail to each family, not profiting personally or allowing

anyone else to do so on the backs of the people. (Genesis 41:56-57)

- And in the final analysis, his father, Jacob, appoints him to be head of the family after he dies. (Genesis 48:22)

All this comes to teach us that our leadership-recruiting poster has to have a new picture. It has to convey a vision of the congregation as an instrument of Divine Providence, uplifting and fulfilling the lives of the people. It has to be a picture that holds out the opportunity to contribute inspired and inspiring leadership *l'shem shamayim*, for the sake of heaven rather than personal aggrandizement. And it has to be a picture that invites as potential leaders those who know or are coming to know and practice the wisdom tradition of our people.

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