

ON JEWISH CONGREGATIONAL LEADERSHIP

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There is a widely acknowledged principle of strengthening and unifying organizations that says, “whatever the problem, whatever the solution, *do leadership development!*” And it’s a verity that in our family life, workplace, congregation, community, and nation, “leadership” is the *sine qua non* of human achievement and fulfillment.

But having said that, we are confronted with the problem of defining *what* constitutes leadership. And when we have that worked out, we face the challenge of determining *who* will make good leaders and *how* that will happen.

Another problem in thinking about leadership development is that such thinking almost always puts us in a bind. On the one hand, if we *all* look to others, beyond ourselves, for leadership, then by definition none of us take the initiatives necessary to assume leadership—so each of us should be considering ourselves as potential leaders. On the other hand, the best leaders potentially are not those individuals who are angling for preference and prestige, but rather those who have the confidence and support of the people.

Thinking about leadership is also often problematic because we confuse leadership with office: *Leadership* entails *action*, doing particular things, which engage followers; while *office* involves *position*, exercising authority to cause things to be done. We’re in the habit of electing people to office and asking that they exercise authority for us rather than empowering them for leadership and emulating their action.

Part of the reason we’re often burdened with leaders who are inadequate or incompetent is that those among us who could do better have abandoned our responsibility. We tend when thinking about leaders to imagine powerful and charismatic individuals, a definition that does not fit the overwhelming majority of us.

Rabbi Bill Lebeau, Vice Chancellor and Dean of the Jewish Theological Seminary, commented indirectly on this a few years ago when he said: “I’m well aware of our dying as a community. We’re awaiting not one giant to lead us but a chorus of courageous leaders who will help us transform the shudder of a dying people [into something new].”

How are we to know if *we* are personally called to lead?

When God calls out to Moses at the Burning Bush, he answers, “*hinneni*.” According to one of our modern commentators, Professor (Rabbi) Nahum M. Sarna (1923-2005), “[The] Hebrew *hinneni* is the standard, spontaneous, unhesitating response to a call.” But Rashi (Rabbi Shlomo ben Yitzchak, 1040-1105) teaches us that it took God seven days to convince Moses to take up the mission to Pharaoh. So we may conclude that while Moses was naturally open to hearing the call of God, he was nonetheless reluctant to take on the mission God would assign to him. (Exodus 3:11)

In effect, that we are reluctant, even resistant, should not disqualify us, but on the contrary, may be a healthy and appropriate first instinct. As to whether we should ignore that instinct, asking ourselves two questions may be helpful in making the decision: (1) Is the “mission” in question for the sake of heaven? (2) Am I willing to struggle with the ways in which I am called to lead?

Generally, we tend to seek out leadership roles when the purposes and tasks are of our own design and when they promise to elevate us in the eyes of others. We tend to avoid leadership responsibility when the purposes and tasks are not of our own making and when they promise hard work without recognition. In the *short term*, becoming a leader in the Jewish tradition is not likely to make us comfortable—seemingly the measure of all goodness in contemporary life—or afford us recognition as public benefactors.

Akeidat Yitzchak (Rabbi Yitzchak ben Moshe Arama, 1420-1494) teaches that, “Moses’ accomplishment in restoring God’s presence to earth made him the intermediary between God and his people. To be a good intermediary requires that the intermediary himself feel in harmony with the objectives and methods of the one who has made him intermediary. Such rapport can exist either naturally, or in spite of one’s natural inclinations.”

But if our initiatives as leaders are not to be of our own design, then what are they to be?

Another way of thinking about that question is to ask, what were the conditions under which exceptional leaders became recognized in the Jewish tradition? There are several: when there were threats to their well-being or that of their family, community, people, or nation; when there were shared beliefs that encouraged them to take the lead; and when there were competent and trust-

worthy leadership models from whom they could observe and learn.

Most crucial for learning about leadership is the presence of competent and trustworthy models—but who are *these* leaders?

Often, whether at home or at work or in our community, there is a dearth of leadership—we are bereft of models. In the Torah reading Shemot, however, we encounter a number of leadership models, from Moses and Pharaoh to the midwives Shifra and Puah, and Pharaoh’s daughter Batya.

In regard to Moses’ personal qualities as a leader, Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook (1865-1935) teaches us that the leader “. . . must have intrinsic purity, feel empathy with the congregation, and be humble. He [or she] must be a visionary, must learn how to delegate tasks and responsibility, and encourage the people to strive for greater heights of their own accord. This is why he involved himself in the quarrel between [two] Jews on the morrow of his having slain the Egyptian thug.”

Akeidat Yitzchak notes, “Moses’ deed [i.e., slaying the Egyptian] was one of the qualifications that fitted him for a role of leadership amongst his people. The second qualification was his urge to see that social justice should prevail.”

Shifra and Puah saved the lives of many male Jewish babies, not only that of Moses. They were not unaffected by Pharaoh’s anger and the possibility of retribution, but they showed—forgive the politically incorrect expression— “. . . manly determination. . . ,” according to Rabbeinu Bachya (Rabbi Bachya ben Asher, 1255-1340).

They had a greater concern about the consequences of ignoring the Divine Plan than the will of Pharaoh.

Mature leaders typically recognize that their most important accomplishments are achieved through one-to-one relationships with a wide variety of people. As Rabbi Kook put it: “The ruler of each generation should attempt to understand each and every individual, and through helping every person, he [or she] will elevate the entire status of the congregation.”

And mature leaders recognize that although practical goals such as fundraising and hiring qualified staff are important, their achievement requires the accomplishment of less tangible objectives, such as building up the confidence, knowledge, and commitment of the people. As Rabbi Kook said, “His [or her] task is then to bring out their natural abilities and spirituality, to develop them so that they can come as close as possible to God.”

The Torah vision for our approach to leadership development is the relationship of Moses and Adonai. This model redefines the role of a leader.

Because if Moses is no longer to comply with Adonai’s charge to carry the people (Numbers 11:14), what *is* his mission as a leader?

The answer is revealed in Moses’ response to the prophesying of Eldad and Medad in the camp. To the report of their unauthorized prophesying, Joshua says to Moses, “Forbid them.” (Numbers 11:28) But Moses responds, “Are you jealous for my sake? Would God that all the Lord’s people were prophets, and that the Lord would put his spirit upon them!”(Numbers 11:29)

Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch (1808-1888) comments on the preceding verse: “. . . Moses’ answer to Joshua remains for all teachers and leaders as the brilliant example they should keep before their eyes . . . to make themselves superfluous, that the people of all classes and ranks reach such a spiritual level that they no longer require teachers and leaders. And indeed the successors of these ‘elders’ have well inherited the spirit of their Moses, have recognized their highest mission to be . . . to make the knowledge of the Torah the broadest foundation of life in the people, and have proclaimed . . . (‘establish many learners’) . . . as the first maxim for all spiritual leaders of their people. With his . . . ‘are you jealous for me?’ our Moses has broken down the dividing wall between ‘intellectuals’ and the ‘lower classes,’ between clergy and laity, for ever in Israel.”

A leader, then, more than anything else, must be one who mentors and develops other leaders.

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