

## **The Character of Leadership**

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A newly hired rabbi arrived to find his congregation in turmoil. One group of congregants insisted that worshippers should stand for the Shema, while another contended with equal passion that they must remain seated. What's more, both sides claimed that theirs was the original practice of the congregation under its founding rabbi, Jacob Ginsberg. One Shabbat, a fistfight actually broke out between the two factions, in front of the ark.

Desperate for a resolution, the rabbi and one representative of each side traveled to the Florida nursing home where Rabbi Ginsberg lived, now 105 years old and very infirm, hoping he could settle the matter. "Rabbi," one disputant said, "Surely you remember that when we founded the congregation we always stood for the Shema." Rabbi Ginsberg slowly shook his head and replied, "I'm sorry. I don't remember that." "Of course you don't!" exclaimed the other guy, "Because we always sat." Again he responded, "I'm sorry. I don't remember that." "Rabbi Ginsberg," the new rabbi pleaded, "You have to remember! They're eating my kishkes out!!" Rabbi Ginsberg looked up and said, "That, I remember."

Now, imagine this, more serious crisis: A turbulent time in which many feel frustrated, anxious, disillusioned, or downright angry, as their expectations

of prosperity go unfulfilled. Seeing a society they no longer recognize, leaders they consider corrupt, and adversaries whom their nation's will may not suffice to defeat, they long for the greener pastures of an idealized past. Some yield to the temptation to blame others for their problems and lash out with words, or worse, encouraged by those who exploit their worst fears and appeal to their basest instincts.

This scenario may sound familiar, but I begin with a more ancient one: The situation Moses faced during the 40 years he led the contentious, stiff-necked Israelites, from bondage they did not deserve to freedom they weren't ready to handle. Sacrificing whatever goals and dreams he once cherished, Moses has dedicated his life, energy, and talents, his every waking thought and, doubtless, many a sleepless night, to the people's survival in an inhospitable desert, surrounded by hostile forces.

All this, Moses has done to obey a Divine plan that even he must often have found inscrutable. His reward: constant carping, base ingratitude, and shameless ridicule, repeated challenges to his leadership by envious rivals, disobedience and rebellion. And in a heartbreaking conclusion, Moses is denied entry to the land God promised to the descendants of Abraham and Sarah, for whom Moses has given, to paraphrase Abraham Lincoln, "the last full measure of devotion."

His pre-eminence, however, was undiminished. Noting the unique nature of Mosaic leadership, the Torah concludes, "Never again did there arise in Israel

a prophet like Moses, whom the Lord singled out, face to face.” In time, Jewish tradition came to remember and revere him as Moshe Rabbenu, Moses, our Teacher, role model and exemplar par excellence. And it called the Torah, our wellspring of faith: Torat Moshe, the Torah of Moses. Thereby, tradition testifies that his greatness as a leader was not confined to his deeds, but was embodied, above all, in his character, and in the values he personified. In the present, hyper-polarized period in this nation’s history, Moses has much to teach us about authentic and worthy leadership.

Our ancient rabbis’ reflection on Moses’ career of national service began with a question: Why did God choose him to liberate and lead our People? With interpretive creativity, our sages supplemented the Torah’s sparse details. The most illuminating insight comes from a rabbinic elaboration on the Book of Exodus. After fleeing Egypt, Moses shepherded his father-in-law’s flock in the wilderness. One hot day, we learn, a lamb ran off and Moses gave chase. When he finally caught up to it, he found it drinking eagerly from a spring. Said Moses, “You ran away because you were thirsty! You must be exhausted. Let me carry you back.” Seeing this, God said, “Since you have such compassion for this lost lamb, I know I can entrust you with My flock – the people of Israel.”

From the Jewish perspective, then, the foundational qualification of a worthy leader is compassion, an innate reservoir of caring, kindness, and empathy, particularly toward those who are vulnerable, lost, bereaved or disadvantaged. Over and over again, the Torah of Moses admonishes us to

support and defend the orphan, the widow, and the stranger, to protect their rights and “take up [their] cause.” Loving our neighbors is mandatory, but insufficient. We must also love strangers as ourselves. Why? Because, as the Torah reiterates some 30 times, “you were strangers in the land of Egypt.” It adds: “The stranger who resides with you shall be to you as one of your own citizens....I am your Eternal God.” And: “You know the feelings of the stranger, having yourselves been strangers in the land of Egypt.” As the head of the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society said recently, “We used to help refugees because they were Jewish. Now we help refugees because we are Jewish.”

In the Jewish world-view, a worthy and authentic leader understands and cares how others feel, citizens and aliens alike, and responds with kindness and concern. Our rabbis considered compassion an essential leadership virtue because the Torah describes God as “compassionate and gracious, abounding in kindness and faithfulness...” Emulating these qualities is how we obey the commandment, *Kedoshim tihyu*, “You shall be holy, for I, your Eternal God, am holy.” It is how we fulfill the imperative of the *v’ahavta*. We love God by loving God’s creatures, all of them.

The Torah’s forceful and frequent expressions of concern for the wellbeing of strangers reflects its understanding of human nature. We have a natural tendency to identify with and favor those who are most like us and, conversely, to be unconcerned, fearful or even hostile, toward those who are outsiders, different, or “other.” Compassion is the capacity to recognize our commonality

with an "other." It is to understand that when the Torah commands, "You shall love [the stranger] kamocho," it means, "Love [the stranger]. S/he is like you."

Ultimately, compassion for others is grounded in the Torah's fundamental teaching that human beings are created in God's image. That means that everyone deserves to be treated, and must treat others, with kindness, consideration, fairness and respect. It means that each person is unique, and possesses inherent dignity and worth, regardless of race, religion, national origin, age, gender, sexual orientation, mental or physical ability or disability, appearance, or any other characteristic. Jewish tradition calls the denigration of others *lashon hara*, the evil tongue. Both specious accusations of misconduct and gratuitous revelations of impropriety are grave sins, especially when committed in public, and the harm they inflict is likened to bloodshed. And when the Torah forbids insulting the deaf and placing a stumbling block before the blind, these are not limited protected categories but illustrative examples. The Torah is emphatic that, bullying, mockery, disparagement, belittling, bigotry, intolerance, and discrimination are abhorrent, whoever the victim, but it reserves a special measure of scorn for cruelty toward those who are ill equipped or unable to defend themselves.

A second key quality distinguishing Moses as a leader was humility. Moses was anything but infatuated with himself. The Torah describes him as "a very humble man, the humblest man on earth." When God calls him to redeem the people from Egypt, Moses hesitates, questions his worthiness, and doubts his

adequacy for that great mission. Later, when the newly-liberated Israelites build and worship a golden calf, God tells Moses, “[L]et Me be...that I may destroy them, and make of you a great nation.” But Moses humbly declines this heady offer and persuades God to retract the awful threat.

God renews it when the people reject the report of Joshua and Caleb, refuse to enter the Promised Land, and rail against Moses and Aaron, weeping and wailing, “If only we had died in the land of Egypt...It would be better for us to head back for Egypt.” “How long,” God asks Moses, “will this people...have no faith in me despite all the signs I have performed in their midst? I will strike them with pestilence and disown them, and I will make of you a nation far more numerous than they.” Once again, Moses pushes back, this time quoting God’s own words, “I pray, let my Lord’s forbearance be great, as You have declared, saying, ‘The Lord! [A]bounding in kindness, forgiving iniquity and transgression.’ ...Pardon, I pray, the iniquity of this people according to Your great kindness....” Again, God relents.

In true humility, Moses understood that his leadership position and authority were not about him, his reputation, ego or personal ambitions. He knew there was a great mission at stake, one in which the flawed people he led and loved had an indispensable role to play, something of which even God needed periodic reminding.

By contrast, Jewish tradition sees Korah, who fomented and led an insurrection to usurp Moses, as an irresponsible, egotistical, self-promoting

demagogue. Cynical, manipulative, contentious, and dishonest, with an exaggerated sense of self-importance and a powerful sense of entitlement, Korah impugned Moses' integrity, ridiculed and embarrassed him in public. Rather than respond to Korah's accusations and demands, Moses left it to God demonstrate who was chosen for leadership. No wonder God chose Moses.

In later millennia, we read of a heated dispute between Beit Hillel and Beit Shammai, the followers of the two famous rabbis. It raged on, unresolved, for three years, with each side utterly convinced they were right. Finally, a bat kol, a voice from heaven, announced that though the views of both sides had merit, "The law follows the rulings of Beit Hillel." The Talmud asks, "What entitled Hillel's followers to have the law determined according to their views? Because they were kindly and modest, they studied their own rulings and those of Shammai's disciples and were even so humble as to mention the others' words of before their own."

To compassion and humility, Jewish tradition adds a third essential leadership characteristic: integrity. As the Psalmist put it, "Who may ascend the mountain of the Eternal? Who may stand in God's holy place? Those with clean hands and a pure heart...who have not sworn deceitfully." In exquisite detail, the Torah describes the design and construction of the Mishkan, the portable sanctuary that accompanied the Israelites throughout their wilderness sojourn. When it is completed, Moses accounts for the gold, silver, and bronze contributed for the sacred purpose, down to the last shekel. The astonished

rabbis ask why such a report was necessary. Surely, no one suspected Moses, God's trusted servant, of dishonesty! Rather, they conclude, Moses was demonstrating the importance of integrity and transparency in financial matters. In the same vein, the Torah prohibits theft, fraud, bribery, and all manner of deception and false dealing. It demands honest weights and measures, paying a worker's wages promptly, honoring one's obligations and keeping one's word. Jewish tradition likewise condemns failing to pay one's debts in a full and timely manner and exploiting one's economic position to take advantage of those less powerful. According to the Talmud, the first question we are asked on high, when called before God in judgment, is, "Did you do business honestly?"

An intrinsic aspect of integrity is truthfulness. The Torah forbids lying, both to and about other persons. The prophet Jeremiah declared, "The Eternal God is Truth." The sage, Rabbi Hanina proclaimed, "The seal of the Holy One is truth." And the Psalmist defines a righteous person as one who "speaks the truth within his heart," who is truthful even when it is to his own disadvantage "and, come what may, does not retract." The Talmud illustrates this with a tale of Rav Safra, who was approached to sell something. The price offered was acceptable, but he was praying and could not stop to express his agreement. Taking Rav Safra's non-response to mean he was rejecting the offer, the prospective buyer kept raising it, but when Rav Safra finished his prayers, he insisted on selling at the original price, to which he had "consented in his heart."

Another Godly attribute the Torah holds vital to leadership being "slow to

anger." While anger is a natural human emotion, and there is such a thing as righteous anger, it can also have a powerful corrosive effect on oneself and others if indulged in too readily, misdirected, or held for too long. Our sages taught that anger leads to sin, because it causes people to lose control, harm relationships, and reject sensible advice. The Talmud comments that the life of people who are constantly angry is "no life at all," and those who are easily angered and hard to pacify are called "wicked." By contrast, being slow to anger and speedily letting it go are exemplary.

The first Lubavitcher rebbe contended that anger stems from arrogance. If so, that may explain how non-defensive Moses was, how seldom he expressed anger or lashed out, and how consistently he ignored provocations. His refusal to stoop to the level of his detractors was as admirable as it was remarkable. Sadly, it was a rare display of anger that brought Moses down. When the people were desperate for water in the desert, and turned again on Moses, God instructed him to speak to a rock to bring forth water. Instead, Moses angrily denounced the complainers and struck the rock twice, seemingly taking credit that belonged to God by making a miracle seem mundane. As a consequence, God directed Moses to pass the mantle of leadership to Joshua, who would lead the Israelites into the Promised Land. Moses was the greatest leader in Jewish history, but when he could no longer control his anger and restrain his tongue, a new leader was needed.

The imperative of being slow to anger and refraining from angry outbursts

is beautifully expressed in the personal prayer of Rav Amram, which now follows the Amidah as a silent prayer, "My God, keep my tongue from evil and my lips from deceitful speech. To those who curse me, let my soul be silent; May my soul be to all like the dust. Open my heart to Your Torah and let my soul pursue Your commandments...'May the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable to You, O God, my Rock and my Redeemer.'" A worthy leader should pray and strive to live by those words, wholeheartedly.

Compassion, humility, integrity, truthfulness, and slowness to anger lead to a further God-like leadership quality: forgiveness. As the High Holy Days remind us, the inability to admit error and the stubborn refusal to apologize are grave shortcomings. The Torah explicitly forbids seeking vengeance or bearing a grudge. To grant forgiveness generously and to seek forgiveness readily are sacred obligations. The occasions when Moses implored and persuaded God to forgive our ancestors are among the Torah's most dramatic and moving moments.

A final quality of worthy, authentic leadership is *derekh eretz*, a Hebrew term that connotes civility and courtesy, as opposed to boorishness and unseemliness. According to a midrash, *derekh eretz* preceded the Torah, which is to say, it is a universal value. *Derekh eretz* is common decency; it's just how decent people behave. In a sense, it encapsulates all the other qualities of character I have described. We know *derekh eretz* when we see it and when we do not, in the conduct of both private persons and public figures. As Army

special counsel, Joseph Welch, once asked the sociopathic Senator Joe McCarthy: "Have you no sense of decency, sir, at long last?" Tragically, *derekh eretz* is increasingly absent from our toxic, paralyzed, divisive civic and political discourse. For every current, aspiring, and future leader, this admonition from the Mishnah is a litmus test of character: "In a place from which humanity is absent, strive to be a mensch." ***In a place from which humanity is absent, strive to be a mensch.***

These, then, according to Jewish tradition, are primary attributes of authentic and worthy leaders: Compassion, humility, integrity, truthfulness, slowness to anger, forgiveness, and *derekh eretz*. They are high priority qualities to seek in elected and appointed officials at every level of government, regardless of political party. The same is true in assessing and selecting business executives, heads of non-profit organizations, athletic coaches, and leaders of all kinds in every field of endeavor, including rabbis.

Where elective office is concerned, we, unlike our ancestors, have the prerogative of choosing our leaders, and a free press and the Internet to help us assess the veracity and character of those who seek our support. As Jews, long oppressed and persecuted, denied the right to citizenship for most of the past two thousand years, we have special cause to be grateful for the blessings of democracy and to take them seriously. Whatever our views, whatever our political affiliation or lack of one, each of us has the sacred privilege and solemn responsibility to be an active, informed and engaged citizen, and to make

decisions on matters of consequence that reflect our most deeply held values.

And let us remember that compassion, humility, integrity, truthfulness, slowness to anger, forgiveness, and *derekh eretz* are obligations incumbent on us all. They are qualities of character we must nurture in ourselves and inculcate in our children, grandchildren and others, by precept and example, year in and out, day by day, moment to cherished moment. That is the ultimate message of the Torah of Moses, and of this sacred season. I pray that we will take it to heart in this New Year and always. *Keyn y'hi l'ratzon* – May this be God's will and our own.