

Good Leadership is Good Learning: The Nursing Father

Rabbi Louis Polisson
Congregation Or Atid of Wayland, MA
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Four Jewish friends were once sitting in a restaurant in Moscow. For a long time, they sat in silence. Nobody said a word. Finally, one man groaned, “*Oy*.” “*Oy vey*,” said a second man. “*Nu*,” said the third. At this, the fourth man got up from his chair and said, “Listen, if you fellows don’t stop talking politics, I’m leaving!”

This joke reflects a Jewish strain of pessimism about politics, an attitude often borne out by history. And yet politics are unavoidable, especially during election season. This morning, as we gather virtually, with the backdrop of an especially vulnerable and volatile world, I want to take some time to reflect on what good political leadership looks like.

Rabbinic texts are ambivalent and skeptical about political leaders. The earliest rabbis lived under an oppressive, often brutal imperial Roman regime and knew that power tends to corrupt. And yet some of their observations seem timeless and relevant.

The historical experience of Jews living in a democracy is relatively recent. Thus, when it comes to leadership, many ancient Jewish texts speak of emperors or kings and queens. In one text¹, I found a strikingly shallow yet realistic description of the qualities of a king, focusing on the material wealth of a king rather than on ideological values or even personality traits. The list starts with silver and gold, wives and slaves, houses and horses, and goes on like that for a while.

¹ *Kallah Rabbati* 8:17

The list then ends with a pleasant surprise, mentioning justice and righteousness. So even if kings are expected to be acquisitive, we can apparently also hope that they are righteous and just.

Rabbinic tradition says that “Torah is greater than kingship” and goes on to list forty eight qualities through which one acquires Torah, according to the *Mishnah*². I’d like to highlight some of them:

Torah is acquired through study, attentive listening, proper speech, and an understanding heart... through humility and joy ... through clear thinking... and through generosity. [Torah is also acquired by people] who recognize their place, who are happy with their lot in life, who are careful with their words, and who don’t take credit for themselves... people who love God, and who love [their fellow] creatures; people who love justice, and constructive criticism, and integrity. [Torah is acquired by] those who shun honors, those who are not arrogant, and those who share in the bearing of a burden with their friends and colleagues.”

There’s more, but I’ll skip to the last one on the list: those who quote something “in the name of the one who originally said it.” In other words, giving credit where credit is due, and not taking credit for the wisdom of others. This long list is constructed around qualities and values, like “justice,” “integrity,” and “learning”. The trait of humility, to which we will return, is there as well.

If we only looked at this morning’s Torah reading, we might have thought that the key to true wisdom and good leadership is a willingness to self-sacrifice. Specifically, the idea of sacrifice to God as ultimate leadership, which many call an *Akeidah* or “Binding of Isaac” theology, remains prevalent in certain strains of Jewish thought to this day. But Abraham, a

² *Pirkei Avot* 6:6

leader with no boundaries, was not the greatest leader of the Jewish People. According to rabbinic texts, and according to the Torah itself, the greatest leader in Jewish history is the one who received the Torah and who taught it to the people while himself learning and re-learning how to lead. In rabbinic texts, Moses is not called Moses the Prophet, Moses the Strong, Moses the Wise, or Moses the Righteous. He is called *Mosheh Rabbeinu*, Moses our Teacher. What made Moses such a great leader?

The late American Jewish political scientist Aaron Wildavsky wrote a book titled *The Nursing Father: Moses as Political Leader*. The title alone gives us much food for thought: what does it mean to lead others like a nursing father? Clearly an ethics of care and relationship is at the center of such a conception of leadership.

The book makes a fascinating and compelling argument: that Moses did not have any unique or special traits that made him a great leader, other than the fact that he was able to learn and change and grow and teach. Through his actions, and primarily through his ability to learn and to teach, Moses was able to lead the Israelites through several regime changes, from slavery to anarchy and ultimately to a state of stability in an equitable hierarchy.

Wildavsky points out that “the few direct characterizations of Moses in the Bible are elusive.”³ The one sentence in the whole Torah that directly describes any of Moses's traits says “Moses was very humble, more than any person on the face of the earth.”⁴ Reading the story of Moses in the Torah, he seems no better or worse than anyone else in most regards: “long-suffering... but also quick to anger; patient, but also rash; wise... yet often wrong.”⁵ But

³ Wildavsky, Aaron, *Moses as Political Leader*, p. 199

⁴ Numbers 12:3

⁵ Wildavsky, p. 199

when you follow Moses's growth as a leader, it's truly astounding how much he learned and changed. As a prince of Egypt, some internal ethical force compelled him to kill an Egyptian taskmaster he saw beating an Israelite slave. He then reconnected to his Israelite roots and led the Israelites out of Egypt from bondage to freedom.

Moses was able to transition himself and his people from a regime of slavery to anarchy, but soon realized that he needed to create a new leadership structure if they were going to make it through the desert and to the Promised Land. Moses didn't get too attached to any one leadership style, recognizing the ever-changing needs of his people. He reacted swiftly and strongly when events like the building and worship of the Golden Calf or the rebellion of his cousin Korah threatened the Israelites' stability and survival. But Moses was also cooperative and flexible, appointing judges to deal with minor conflicts and supporting the leadership roles of his brother Aaron, his sister Miriam, and all of the leaders of the Twelve Tribes of Israel. And as he approached the end of his life, Moses dedicated time and energy to finding a trustworthy and responsible person to be his successor.

But what is most astounding to me about Moses is that we hardly know any details about his background before the Exodus, and we still know he was a great leader! The Torah doesn't say "Moses was president of his high school's debate team, was a leader in the Israelite Liberation Party from his time in college, and had a charismatic, charming personality."

What we do know is that Moses was the opposite of Pharaoh. Pharaoh demanded to be treated like a god, while Moses very clearly knew that he was not God. According to prophetic and rabbinic sources, Pharaoh viewed himself as self-made, claiming that he himself created the

Nile River.⁶ Moses, on the other hand, is humble from the start. At first, Moses avoided leadership, viewing himself as unworthy due to a speech impediment⁷. God responded by telling Moses that he would have help from his siblings and from God. Moses welcomed this support with gratitude even as he remained uncertain of himself. From the very beginning, Moses was a collaborative leader who asked for and accepted help.

We live in a political culture that prizes “gotcha” moments, seizing on mistakes or positions from the past to discredit people in the present. We seem to think that leaders must have perfect track records going all the way back to high school. We should, of course, insist that those who hold the highest offices model the highest moral standards. At the very least we should demand basic decency from our leaders. At the same time, we must recognize that no one is perfect.

Human imperfection is made painfully obvious in a two-party system, which requires so many of us to engage in “lesser-evil voting,” pressuring many of us to choose a candidate with whom we may never fully align. Some people feel it’s best to abstain from voting altogether - thus, less than 60% of those eligible voted in the last election. I believe that, even in an imperfect democracy, we are obligated to vote, to take hold of this right that was denied to so many in the past, a right that is still denied or made inaccessible to many who live in this country.

If you are eligible, I urge you to vote and to encourage others to vote as well. And as you prepare to vote, I ask you to keep in mind the key traits of Moses: his humility, his commitment to learning and growing, and his desire to help and to teach others.

⁶ Ezekiel 29:3 et al.

⁷ Exodus 4:10

Moses is a paragon of what we might call *teshuvah*-centered leadership. He makes mistakes, but he tries to fix them. Moses is always returning to and clarifying his own core values through the vicissitudes of his own experiences.

In the end, Moses was able to reconcile himself to the fact that, as Aaron Wildavsky puts it, “mature politics requires the assumption of ultimate responsibility, and yet without the benefit of ultimate power.”⁸ In other words, the wisest and most responsible leaders understand that they must take full responsibility for the well-being of their people while accepting limits on their power.

Moses recognized that his ultimate goal was to transition out of leadership, teaching his people to survive without him by learning to lead themselves.⁹ This teaches us that the empowerment of others is the final stage and highest level of leadership. Moses passed the torch on to the next generation and bequeathed to every generation after him an imperfect yet instructive legacy from which we can always learn.

May we help our leaders to be more like Moses: humble and willing - to learn, to change for the better, to teach, and ultimately, to empower others to lead. *Shanah tovah*.

⁸ Yoram Hazony in the Foreword to Aaron Wildavsky's *Moses as Political Leader*, p. xix

⁹ Wildavsky, p. 3