

This Week in Torah V'aera

Back in 1993, the athletic apparel company Nike ran a controversial commercial. Notoriously outspoken Phoenix Suns star Charles Barkley boldly and defiantly declared that he was not a role model and that kids should be taught to emulate their parents, not athletes or celebrities. “Just because I dunk a basketball doesn’t mean I should raise your kids,” Barkley concluded. It came about at the same time that Barkley was viewed as a real brute on the basketball court. He elbowed a far smaller player from Angola in the Olympics. He spit at a racist heckler during a game and hit an 8 year old girl instead. Everyone from sports radio callers, to fellow sports stars, to the national media contributed to a rancorous national debate over whether athletes have a duty to set a good example for the kids who look up to them.

Fascinating is that the debate far preceded this series of incidents and still continues to this day. Is being a role model defined by perfection in conduct and behavior? Are leaders followed because of vision and ideas or because of an aura of cultic personality?

This week’s *parasha* leads the rabbis, biblical commentators and scholars to address these questions as they try to process the question of Moses’ speech impediment. In Hebrew, the phrase is “*Aral s’fateim*”... translated to imply a stutter or challenges in his articulation. But that is too easy an excuse, rather the phrase gives a glimpse to Moses’ leadership style as well as giving a unique perspective of being a role model and/or leader.

Let’s start our discussion with how did Moses get his “*Aral s’fateim*.” In Exodus Rabbah there is a midrash which has baby Moses sitting at a table before Pharaoh. Skeptical of the reasons why this infant was rescued from the Nile, Pharaoh’s advisors were certain that the child was there to steal the crown and Egypt’s wealth. They created a test—2 plates before the infant: one of cool, sparkling gems and the other being hot burning coals. If the child grabs the jewels, the advisors summarized that is the proof they needed to show Moses as a thief. As the test began, baby Moses gravitated toward the cool sparkling stones. As he reached for them, God sent an angel to push his hands away and into the coals. Moses burnt his hand and quickly put his fingers into his mouth for comfort. Thus, he scared his lips. “*Aral s’fateim*”

From this, we see that true leadership should not be based on personal gain. Acquiring wealth and power should not be the pure motivations of leaders and role models.

Leadership should be defined as putting forth a vision and message of how to reach that vision. 14th Century scholar Nisim of Girona commented that Moses’s “*Aral s’fateim*” were designed by God to separate the message from the messenger. He wrote: Moses was extolled in all the virtues of a prophet in order that they would believe that his virtues were Divinely given; but not having pure speech was also seen as a symbol of Divine providence. This was illusive as to make sure people saw the virtues as God given

and not human inspired.” Moses was not God but a prophet. The world was just meeting God on a grand scale and thus the traditional pagan practice was to identify the thought with form. Moses spoke; therefore, he is the god! “*Aral s’fateim*” was a divine gift that helped Moses to transmit the power of God, not a hinderance to that goal.

For us, let us not confuse charisma and ego with a vision of what we seek. Trust in a set of values rather than a persona who may or may not embody it.

The flaw in logic with Rabbi Nisim is that the Israelites were skeptical and the text says that they paid Moses little heed at first. The 19th century Polish Chasidic master known as the *Sefes Emes*, said that this is a children of Israel problem and an Egyptian problem, not a Moses-problem. Prophecy is God given and it needs to be heard. *Sefes Emes* cautioned people not to focus on the flaws of the message but the validity of the message. See the potential in action rather than step back with skepticism when doubting the messenger. Prophecy is God given, but listening to it is up to us.

The message delivered by a leader should not be overshadowed by our personal bias to subjective standards. How the messenger sounds and how they appear are such superficial attributes that could distract us from the essential nature of what is being said. Being a part of the people of Israel we should aspire to hear with subjective judgement as we seek good leaders and role models.

Nearly 30 years ago, Charles Barkley and Nike rekindled a spark for a debate—what is a leader and who should be a role model? Such questions didn’t stop when the ad ceased airing nor did they begin with a basketball player. Such has been the struggle of understanding *Moshe Rabbeni*—Moses our teacher. Thru his example, God’s message supersedes the messenger!