**EREV ROSH HASHANAH 2020**

**Congregation Beth Shalom of Napa Valley**

**Rabbi Niles Goldstein**

*Shabbat Shalom,* and *Shanah Tovah u’Metukah—*

a happy, sweet, & healthy new year

to each & every one of you,

whether you are here in Napa

or watching this Erev Rosh Hashanah service

from somewhere on the other side of the country

or the other side of the world.//

These are very unusual & challenging times;

but the silver lining

of a *virtual* High Holy Days experience

is that we can gather together in community

in ways that weren’t possible before the pandemic.//

This is not only a unique moment in human history—

it is also a very *anxious* one.//

If worries about Covid-19,

the loneliness of social distancing,

a crippled economy, widespread unemployment,

& the tedium & frustration of remote learning

weren’t bad enough,

we’ve also had to contend this year with wildfires,

rolling power blackouts,

& the polarization & uncertainty

related to the presidential election on November 3rd.//

The issue of *leadership* is on the minds of most of us

these days.//

Who can best guide us through this pandemic?

Who can restore our jobs & our economy?

Who can unite our deeply divided nation?//

Rather than focusing on any specific policy stance,

the Jewish tradition suggests

that what is ultimately the most important calculus

in choosing a leader, is an individual’s *ability* to lead.//

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From its biblical origins,

Judaism has always maintained a certain *distrust*

of human leaders.//

From the Torah to the Talmud,

our tradition has recognized

that there is a direct correlation between high office

& the likelihood of *abusing* the power of that office.//

As a result, limits & restrictions were placed

on those who held positions of authority,

from kings & judges to rabbis & philanthropists.//

Judaism understood that power is a dangerous allure, that to lead effectively one must avoid getting trapped

by its temptations.//

A genuine leader will possess the character & ability

to resist the seductions of prominence

& sycophantic praise;

a true leader will embrace the opportunity, & the gift,

of sharing power with others.//

The Jewish community has always sought to protect

against leadership abuses

by insisting that power be *shared*, not hoarded.//

Over the centuries,

Jewish communities have been governed

by a system of checks & balances,

where religious, political, & business leaders

have shared responsibility for the welfare of others.//

When a singular individual arises

& claims to have all the answers,

who insists on amassing & consolidating power,

he (or she) is viewed with suspicion & disdain.//

Far from glorifying the model of a charismatic leader

who addresses problems unilaterally,

Judaism recognizes the slippery, & dangerous, slope

toward despotism.//

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Classical Judaism suggests

that successful leaders function, not as rulers,

but as *servants*.//

Leadership isn’t about how tough you are,

about being the “alpha,” dominant & overbearing—

it is about serving the needs of the community.//

The Talmud states:

“One who is appointed over a community

becomes the servant of that community.”//

A true leader doesn’t try to impose his will

on others, or coerce them to do his bidding.//

An authentic leader isn’t focused on ego

or personal gain,

but on serving the needs of their followers

by empowering them, motivating them,

improving their lives,

while also developing the ability to lead in others.//

That is why,

ever since Moses transferred the mantle of leadership

to Joshua before he died,

Judaism has taught that effective leadership

must include the identification, preparation,

& training of the next generation—*la dor vador*.//

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Another attribute of authentic, successful leadership

is *humility*.//

While many of our so-called leaders today

think that by projecting an image of self-assurance,

bravado, & certainty they will be seen as strong,

the truth is actually the *opposite*—

they are weak, insecure,

& uncomfortable with their humanity.//

Humility, the recognition of one’s *limitations*

regardless of position,

is a natural consequence of Judaism’s worldview

that only God has absolute authority,

that human leaders, however powerful,

can never be above the law.//

Maimonides claims that it is only when a king

 is able to “cultivate a humble and lowly spirit. . .

and deal graciously and compassionately

with the small and the great”

that his leadership would be successful.//

Humility is a mark of strength, not weakness;

as it did with Moses, whom the rabbis thought

was not only the most effective of all leaders,

but also the most self-effacing,

humility is the quality that generates, & drives,

vision, tenacity, & decisiveness.//

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The Hebrew word for leadership is *manhigut*—

it derives from the root of the word for “behavior.”//

In Jewish thought,

leadership is not about position or resume;

it is about behavior & action,

& the moral character that serves as their anchor

& animating force.//

As we face the election of our own national leader,

let’s remember that it is *ability*,

not policy or personality,

that should ultimately guide this important decision.//

Does the candidate think of himself as a servant

of the people,

or is he an egocentric ruler, focused on attention

& personal gain?//

Does the candidate understand

that power must be restrained and shared,

lest it be abused?//

& does the candidate possess humility & maturity,

the ability to empower others, train successors,

& accept responsibility for his own shortcomings?//

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While each & every one of us will have to answer

these questions for him/herself,

our tradition offers us a clear set of guidelines

to help us with our decision.//

May we choose wisely, & well, on November 3rd.//

Ken Yehi Ratzon – May it be God’s will