

Come Saturday: The Leadership of the Leviim
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The people storm out of the Evangelical megachurch Higher Dimensions in Tulsa, Oklahoma. Higher Dimensions went from having 6,000 members to less than 1,000 in a span of less than 2 years.

WBEZ Chicago produced a breathtaking documentary film about this church and its preacher, Carlton Pearson, called *Come Sunday*. Through watching news reports of the Rwandan Genocide and reckoning with gay members of his congregation, Pearson abandoned traditional Evangelical theology overnight, got up one Sunday, and preached that one does not need to be Christian and follow Christian Evangelical doctrine in order to go to Heaven. His sudden theological shift stunned people, and led to the eventual shuttering of his church.

As someone entering the field of religious leadership, I learned two important lessons from this film:

1) It is ok to reconsider things. While Pearson believed one thing while he was in seminary, when confronted with new events in the world and people's stories, he re-evaluated his positions. Altering one's position or beliefs can often come at great loss — in religion and politics we praise people who are consistent and condemn "flip-flopers", but real leadership requires the ability to re-evaluate. Religious teachings need to be responsive to reality.

2) I shouldn't radically change my own theology overnight. New ideas, especially when it comes to theology, need to resonate with the people. While Pearson was able to say his bit, by the end he was talking to nobody. One theme the film actually explores is the *hurt, betrayal, and confusion* people felt when they were told that the *one* thing they thought was true in life is not so. While Pearson's sincerity is remarkable, because he was talking *at* them and not *with* them, it ultimately hurt the people in his congregation.

Preaching at people but not talking with people is ultimately narcissistic, not admirable.

In Parshat Bemidbar God tells Moshe:

"I hereby take the Levites from among the Israelites *in place* of all the first-born, the first issue of the womb among the Israelites: the Levites shall be Mine."

The Midrash, cited in Rashi, explains that originally the Bechors (first born males) were supposed to be the caretakers of the Mishkan — they were supposed to be the priests — but since they participated in Chet Haegel, the sin of the golden calf, they were ousted from their position and their duties were transferred over to the Leviim. In Shemot, Exodus, 32:26 Moshe descends from Har Sinai, Mt. Sinai, and is shocked to find the people worshipping a golden calf. When he proclaims "whoever is with God, come to me!" the torah states that the entire tribe of Levi came to him. The Leviim did not participate in the Golden Calf and therefore they replaced the Bechors as the caretakers of the temple, priests, and leaders of the people.

If we look back to the text of the Chet Haegel we are told that the impetus for the sin was Moshe's tarrying on Har Sinai. The people, including the Bechors, lacked patience. They

panicked, and resorted to a radical new theology — that of the leader of Israel being a Golden Calf, not Moshe.

The one exception was Shevet Levi. Levi knew Moshe on a personal level — he was one of them, after all, and trusted that Moshe will be back down with the Torah soon. They had patience and did not panic, qualities befitting of leadership. The swiftness with which the rest of the people, led by the Bechors, were willing to cast Moshe aside cast doubt in God's eyes upon their abilities to be leaders.

The Leviim, the tribe of Moshe, represent a different paradigm. Moshe is a leader who is responsive to the people, and willing to re-examine things, yet promotes inclusion in a way that resonates with the people.

I can think of two episodes that illustrate this:

1. When the people who were Tameh (impure) on Passover and thus unable to bring the Pesach offering came to Moshe despondent over their being excluded, crying out “lamah nigara!” (“why should we be excluded!”), Moshe consulted God and Pesach Sheni, a make-up Pesach, was established and accepted.

And 2. When the daughters of Tzlofchad came to Moshe to point out the inequity of a system in which a man who has daughters but no sons will lose all of his land when his daughters marry, Moshe was again responsive to the women who came to him, consulted God, and the law was established and accepted such that the women can keep their father's land.

In both cases, Moshe was responsive to the people's complaints of exclusion, yet carefully considered his words, consulted God, and emerged with a solution that people accepted. In both cases Moshe engaged in a dialogue, both with the people and with God, before emerging with new solutions.

The Torah, and our leaders, must be responsive to new realities in life and real people's stories. However it must be done so in a way that mimics the leadership of Moshe — after consultation with God; or in more pragmatic parlance, with deep religious conviction and measured sophistication. The Torah must be a conversation between the people and the tradition, a dialogue.

Torah in the tradition promulgated by Moshe and Leviim talks *with* people, not at them. Torah values both the ability to take risks and re-evaluate, and also values the conversation, patience and understanding

As we embark on the holiday of Shavuot together, I bless us that we all recognize that everyone here has a role in the conversation between tradition and reality. We all are a part of the Torah's conversation and should feel empowered in contributing our voices.

And I pray that we cultivate leadership that is always responsive to these realities and willing to take risks, while always remaining in dialogue with all of us.