

The Auteur Synagogue

The American Film Institute lists, as the two greatest movies ever made, *Casablanca* and *Citizen Kane*. But the methods by which they were produced could not have been more different from each other. *Casablanca* was made in the classic Hollywood studio system. The big studios would finance movies, hiring all the people needed to put the films together. There was no overall creative vision: for *Casablanca*, seven different writers worked on the screenplay at different times and it went through different iterations. Until the very end of shooting, it wasn't even clear whether Ilsa would end up with Rick or with Laszlo! The director was just a hired hand and had no control or even input in the casting. Ingrid Bergman was the third choice for the role of Ilsa, and only landed the part because she was less expensive than Hedy Lamarr would have been. Different decisions were made by different parties who had little to do with each other.

Citizen Kane, on the other hand, was the brainchild of Orson Welles. He produced, wrote, directed, and starred in it. Many see it as the forerunner of what in the 1950s became known as the *Auteur Theory* in cinema. In films that subscribe to this theory, the director has a hand in the screenplay (either he writes it himself, or he commissions it, or oversees its writing), he casts, directs, oversees all the technical aspects of the film, the cinematography, the editing, and so on. All of the participants in the process of making the film work to carry out the director's vision. These films have the mark of their filmmaker, and they're identifiable as one particular filmmaker's movie, for the content and themes, but also for the look, the style, and the pace. Some examples of auteur filmmakers are Ingmar Bergman and Federico Fellini abroad, and Martin Scorsese, Quentin Tarantino, and Woody Allen here. A true auteur filmmaker oversees both the initial stages and the final product of the film, and as a result, the film is cohesive and each aspect of the film is a manifestation of the director's creative vision.

The two paradigms of filmmaking, the collaborative studio system on the one hand and the auteur system on the other, are also found in the Torah's models of institutional leadership. The studio system is quite similar to the way our *parasha* (*Beha'alotchah*) and the few that preceded it describe the *Mishkan*. In the tabernacle, there was one group that dealt with the core of worship, the sacrifices, the incense, and the libations: they were the *Kohanim*. Those who managed the operations of the *mishkan* were the *Leviim*.

A couple of weeks ago, in *Parashat B'midbar*, we read about the role of the *Leviim*:

וְאַתָּה הַפְקֵד אֶת הַלְוִיִּם עַל מִשְׁכַּן הָעֵדוּת וְעַל כָּל כְּלָיו... וּבְנִסְעַת מִשְׁכַּן יוֹרִידוּ אֹתוֹ הַלְוִיִּם וּבְחִנּוּת הַמִּשְׁכָּן יִקְיִמוּ
אֹתוֹ הַלְוִיִּם

You shall appoint the Levites over the Tabernacle of the Testimony, over all its vessels and over all that belong to it...When the Tabernacle is set to travel, the Levites shall dismantle it; and when the Tabernacle camps, the Levites shall erect it.

While of the role of the *Leviim* is described in detail in *Sefer B'midbar*, which deals with our people's travels through the wilderness, the role of the *Kohanim* is described throughout *Sefer Vayikra*, and it is not limited to sacrifices. *Kohanim* are also responsible for the education of *B'nei Yisrael*; they are judges and they are teachers.

Our Torah Reading from this morning illustrates another distinction between the *Kohanim* and the *Leviim*, beyond just their jobs. It's the way in which they are appointed for the position.

וְהִקְרַבְתָּ אֶת הַלְוִיִּם לְפָנַי יְהוָה וְסִמְכוּ בְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶת יְדֵיהֶם עַל הַלְוִיִּם:

You shall bring the Levites before the Lord, and the children of Israel shall lay their hands upon the Levites.

The *Leviim* are officially appointed for their positions by all of *Klal Yisrael*. Their authority is granted by the people. The *Kohanim*, on the other hand, are anointed with oil by Moshe, as we read in *Parashat Tetzaveh*:

וְאֵת אַהֲרֹן וְאֵת בְּנָיו תִּמְלֹּחַ וְקִדַּשְׁתָּ אֹתָם לְכַהֵן לִי:

And with it you shall anoint Aaron and his sons and sanctify them to serve Me

The *Kohanim* are sanctified – *kidashta otam*. That's why there are so many rules regarding where they can go, who they can marry, and so on. The authority of the *Kohanim* is granted by God.

The two roles, *Kohen* and *Levi*, are also present in the rabbinate and in the synagogue. There are rabbis who are primarily spiritual guides, *pos'kim* and *dayanim*, public speakers, *talmidei chachamim*; they are role models of holiness, the *Kohanim* of rabbis. On the other hand, there are rabbis whose focus is on the *Levi*-like duties: conceiving and executing programming, fundraising, organizing weddings, bar mitzvahs, and funerals; they are public servants. This distinction is most pronounced in Israel, where there are *Rashei Yeshiva* who are the thought leaders of the religious community, the *kohanim* of the rabbinate; rabbis of the local *rabbanuts*, leaving aside their aptitude for this role, are the *Leviim* kind of rabbi, performing the functions necessary for religious services to be administered in Israel.

Synagogues in the United States ultimately require both roles filled as well. In most synagogues, rabbis serve in the function of the *kohanim*, whereas the functions of the *leviim* are performed by the board, lay leadership, and executive directors.

But there is another model of communal leadership in the Torah: that of Moshe. Moshe is, so to speak, the auteur of the *B'nei Yisrael* community. He is the spiritual leader: he speaks to God and relays God's message and laws to the people. And he is the political leader: when it comes time to negotiate with Pharaoh, Moshe executes that negotiation. He has Aharon by his side, but it's Moshe's responsibility. Were it not for his father-in-law's advice, Moshe would have judged every little case among the people, and once *Yitro* suggests setting up a court system, Moshe organizes it (and he remains at the top, ultimately responsible for all the decisions). Moshe's authority is granted by God, but he campaigns to gain the favor of the people as well. When *B'nei Yisrael* complained, as they did in our Torah reading this morning, Moshe dealt with their problems and tried to find solutions.

In my letter to the congregation earlier this week, I expressed my gratitude to Rabbi Lookstein's mentorship, and noted that I am humbled to be the last in a long history of KJ Assistant Rabbis or rabbinic interns to have trained under him. For my own notes, I made a list of what I learned from Rabbi Lookstein; what I found in the process was that his guidance was

not limited to those functions parallel to the duties of the *kohanim* in the *Mishkan*. He has given me very helpful critiques for my sermons, helping me to make them more relevant. He taught me how to speak with people who have only just lost a loved one, and how to compose a meaningful eulogy for them. He taught me to choose good tunes when I lead *davening* and how to make it inspiring. On the *levi* side, he taught me how to organize and run a service that keeps moving and maintains decorum. Before the High Holidays each year, we would meet to discuss how the service should run, to the detail of what page numbers ought to be announced so as to be helpful but not become a nuisance. At one Friday night KJ Shabbaton dinner, he called over Atilla from Foremost to tell him that dessert should be brought out early. He then took me aside and said, “Roy, that’s the rabbi’s job. To make sure the meal moves at a decent pace for everyone’s sake.”

Unlike most synagogues which follow the *Mishkan* or Hollywood studio model, Rabbi Lookstein has followed Moshe’s model. Or, as I’ve liked to say it since I first came here, KJ is an *Auteur* Synagogue. Rabbi Lookstein has a vision: a vision for the synagogue, for the community, and for Judaism. And every aspect of his rabbinate is a manifestation of that vision. It is a Judaism which is dignified, decorous, stately, and elegant, and at the same time friendly, social, *heimisch*, and dedicated to *mentschlichkeit*. In fact, when I first met Rabbi Lookstein four years ago in the homiletics class at Yeshiva, what struck me most was his ability to simultaneously embody both of those almost contradictory dispositions: formal and rabbinic on the one hand, amicable and *heimish* with a sense of humor on the other.

KJ is carefully planned, it is cohesive, it all makes sense and works together: the davening, the programming, the fundraising, the administration, and the lifecycle events. You can tell when it’s a KJ sermon, a KJ wedding, a KJ appeal. It all has that recognizable mark. And that method has been successful at actualizing Rabbi Lookstein’s vision. I remember vividly the first KJ wedding I attended: black tie, in the most elegant and formal of spaces, with tuxedos and evening gowns, but the *simcha* dancing was as spirited and *leibedik* as at any Hasidic wedding in Brooklyn. The same is true for bar mitzvahs, Shabbat dinners, and our various events and ceremonies.

Rabbi Lookstein and KJ were ahead of their time in running a synagogue on this model; others are just catching on now. Earlier this week, one of the leaders in the United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism wrote an essay suggesting that synagogues would do better if driven by vision and mission rather than by the need to provide services to members. You can read that essay [here](#). And the UJA-Federation of New York has a division that consults for synagogues, helping to strengthen their operations. I wasn’t quite sure I understood what they do, so when I met with the director, I asked her. She responded, “that’s because you’re at KJ. We try to help synagogues run more like KJ does.”

Of all the gin joints, in all the towns, in all the worlds, I walked into this one. I could not have asked for a better place to learn the ropes, so to speak, and I will forever be grateful to this institution and what I learned here. I thank you, the KJ community, for opening your homes to us and for being supportive of a young rabbi early in his career. Thank you, rabbis and staff, and especially Rabbi Lookstein, for the mentorship I received here. Here’s lookin’ at you, KJ.