

Jewish Leadership in an Age of Polarization

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We live in a very polarized political moment. And the Jewish community, subject to the same centrifugal forces as the rest of society, is also increasingly divided. A prominent American pollster recently told me that American public opinion on any given controversial policy issue used to look like a bell curve, with the majority of viewpoints falling in the center. Today, it looks like a two humped camel, with strong opinions on both sides and a very weak middle.



When political opinion moves away from the center, bigotry and intolerance on both ends of the political spectrum grows as well, no longer checked by moderating influences. Hence the rise in anti-Semitism on both the right and the left.

What would it take for us to re-build the political center? What would it take for the Jewish community to exemplify such a shift back toward the civil middle, strengthen the bonds of Jewish peoplehood, and serve as a model for the rest of society?

Such a shift would require placing a premium on a different kind of leadership style capable of healing the rifts.

In a recent consultation I participated on the topic of polarized discourse within the Jewish community, a prominent Rabbi spoke of two models of Rabbinic leadership: The prophetic leader and the priestly leader.

The prophetic leader speaks with confidence about the moral direction of the community. He or she claims to have the answers to the big questions and exhorts the community to take the one and only righteous path.

The priestly leader, by contrast, ministers to the emotional health and well being of the community. He or she makes sure every voice is heard and that people feel connected to one another.

In today's polarized environment, we emphasize the virtues of the prophetic leader. The leader who taps into our righteous indignation and channels the energy of the tribe. The leader with an unassailable sense of certainty. We see such leaders as decisive and highly principled.

The prophetic leader is, indeed, an indispensable force. We need people who lead the way, shape our perspectives, and goad us into action. But in today's world, such leaders are in surplus, and it is crucial that we raise up the priestly leader as well, bringing balance back into our political dialogue.

Unfortunately, we often undervalue the priestly leader. The leader who expresses humility and brings people together. The leader who seeks consensus. Such leaders may be viewed as weak or indecisive. But it's this leader's compromising approach that can restore sanity to our politics and the glue that holds community together.

If we truly want to fix our politics, we are going to need to lift up this often-overlooked style of leadership and teach and train for it. Importantly, it is not an either-or proposition. A prophetic leader can embody priestly qualities as a priestly leader can exhibit prophetic voice when the time calls.

What qualities of leadership, specifically, do we want leaders to exemplify?

Be Humble like Hillel

In the famous parable about the ongoing dispute between the House of Hillel and the House of Shamai over matters of Jewish law, God ultimately sides with the more lenient House of Hillel because, unlike the House of Shamai, Hillel cited in its rulings both its arguments and that of its opponent. It gave credence to Shamai's view, demonstrating humility. We need more leaders who have the humility to recognize the other's perspective as legitimate. Leaders who know they can and often are wrong, and thus leave room for other perspectives and approaches to emerge.

Be a Convener

The convener brings together people who may disagree. The convener seeks to create an ecosystem in which disparate points of view can be respectfully heard and agreement can be worked out. A strong convener can also lay down ground rules for engagement, and thereby create a culture of civility and respect.

Be a Facilitator

The facilitator ensures that a wide range of voices around the table is heard. He or she taps the wisdom in the room and listens carefully for the possibility for consensus, understanding and respect. The facilitator brings out the best in people and marginalizes destructive voices.

It is these leadership qualities, alongside the decisiveness and certainty of the prophet, who can lead us to a more civil and sustainable political order inside and outside the Jewish world.

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