



Leadership Matters

By Steve Freedman

I have always been intrigued with how leaders affect change and bring people along in the process. I have studied leadership, written about it and have applied what I have learned in my profession as an educational leader. Important academic thinkers and business leaders on this topic have influenced me, but none more so than the Jewish perspective. As a person who aspires to make daily and long term decisions through a Jewish lens, what Judaism has to say about leadership matters deeply to me.

Interestingly, some of the prominently accepted ideas about leadership in the professional world have their roots in Judaism. One style of leadership that captures the Jewish approach is known as servant leadership.

Moses is a prime example of a true servant leader, as he was aptly honored to be called “*eved Hashem*,” God’s servant. He not only served God, but through his deeds, words and teachings, he served the Israelite nation. He led by example and left his people with a clear vision of how to build a Jewish nation in the promised land predicated on justice and compassion. He ultimately earned the title “*Moshe Rabbeinu*,” Moses our teacher, for he led by being an influencer not one who led by fear or coercion. According to Judasim, great leaders serve for the sake of the greater good and help their followers to grow by setting an example and providing the conditions so that each person can live in freedom with dignity.

Judaism’s ambivalence towards a monarchy reinforces the belief that leadership is not about ruling, nor is it about power, which our tradition teaches should be limited; rather it is about serving. A king is commanded “not to consider himself better than his fellow Israelites nor turn from the law to the right or to the left” (*Deut. 17: 20*). It is not about power, rather character, vision, humility, and a willingness to learn and teach. Perhaps to emphasize the dangers of power and how power corrupts, the Torah highlights the abusive, narcissistic nature of the Pharaoh.

The Pharaoh, who ruled over the most powerful nation at the time, chose consistently to put himself before the greater good of his people. Even as Moses attempted to

negotiate and even though God sent plague after plague against the Pharaoh's own people, the Pharaoh was hardened by his own passions and ego. He seemed to see the conflict between God and himself as personal. He was king – he was a god. Vanity, power, ego, and narcissism overtook any rational, compassionate, or empathetic thought. It mattered little to him that his people were suffering and dying from plagues and that he was about to destroy his entire army. He clearly put his own desires and ego ahead of his people. It didn't end well for the Egyptians or their army. Power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely. Judaism has always rejected that style of power and leadership.

In more recent times, Rav Avraham Yitzchak HaCohen Kook z"l, the founding Chief Rabbi of the pre-state of Israel, viewed himself as a servant leader. This was evident by the way he would sign his letters. After his name, he would write – “a servant of the Holy People in the Holy Land.” Through his words and actions, his leadership as first Chief Rabbi was marked by his ability to be a significant influencer. He made a lasting impact on the evolution of the State of Israel and the relationship between the State and *Torah*. He is widely considered the father of religious Zionism.

Sadly though, history is filled with an endless list – of leaders who either took power for corrupt, selfish, or bad intentions, causing great harm, and it is also filled with leaders who may have begun with idealism and a desire to serve, but allowed that service to transform into greed, lust for maintaining power and other selfish motives. Too often we observe leaders who lose touch with the people they were entrusted to serve only to serve themselves and their “cronies.”

Our Jewish tradition is clear about what it means to be a leader and the sacred responsibility that comes along with it. To be a servant leader requires sustained humility, empathy, and an understanding that you lead in order to serve. It means putting the mission and ideals before ourselves and seeing ourselves as servants for the greater good. This is the style of the leadership I strive to emulate daily as we collectively navigate these uncharted times. Though there are moments that I will undoubtedly fall short, my mission is always for the betterment and welfare of our sacred *Kehillah*.

Steve Freedman is Head of School, Solomon Schechter Day School of Bergen County

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