

What's Jewish About Jewish Leadership?

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By Dr. Hal M. Lewis

The story is told about Abraham Lincoln who was said to have challenged an interlocutor with the riddle, "If you call a tail a leg how many legs does a dog have?" "Five," he replied. "Wrong," said Lincoln, "simply calling a tail a leg does not make it so!"

I think about this "tale" every time I contemplate the explosion of offerings in our community purporting to be about Jewish leadership. Indeed, in this post-Passover season of counting, most of us can no longer count how many such programs exist. Legacy organizations, start-ups, foundations, synagogue movements, the innovation sector, everyone, it seems, is in the business of Jewish leadership. What is far less certain, however, is what it means to create meaningful leadership programming, or, as was asked of me not too long ago by a group of extremely thoughtful young Jewish leaders, "What's Jewish about Jewish leadership?"

The vast majority of leadership programs in American Jewish life today fall into one of two broad categories. (Spoiler alert, I am an advocate for a third approach, which I will describe shortly.) The first, involves providing those who run Jewish groups with insights into effective leadership as expounded in academic literature and corporate best practices. Here, "Jewish" is a demographic term describing the mission of the organizations and the ethnic/religious background of their employees and volunteers who participate in these training programs. The second category provides those who run Jewish organizations with an intensive educational experience that focuses on what can most appropriately be referred to as Jewish literacy: history, rituals, value concepts, philosophy, and the like. Here "Jewish" refers to the study of Judaism, Jewish life, and Jewish practice by those who hold titled positions within Jewish groups.

In my estimation, either of these approaches has value, but neither answers the question, "What's Jewish about Jewish leadership." The first category involves the study of effective leadership practices drawn from academe and industry by people who happen to be Jewish or happen to work in a Jewish organizational context. The second represents high quality adult Jewish learning that could (and arguably should) be pursued by anyone interested in the academic study of the Jewish experience, Jewish institutional leader or not.

As Lincoln might have cautioned, simply calling a program “Jewish leadership,” does not make it so. Having said all of this, however, I would suggest that the term Jewish leadership really does have meaning, though it is qualitatively different from either Jewish studies or leadership studies. In this third approach, Jewish leadership represents its own discrete discipline that has a great deal to teach those who serve in leadership capacities within and beyond the Jewish organizational world.

In contemplating the question, “What’s Jewish about Jewish leadership,” ask yourself a similar question about, say, social justice or medical ethics or environmentalism. What’s Jewish about Jewish social justice? Or Jewish environmentalism? Or Jewish medical ethics? When evaluated through this lens, one immediately comes to understand that the answer to the question involves an exploration of the extensive body of literature and great repository of classical Jewish sources that address these questions. The same is true about Jewish leadership. Millennia of classical writings, the product of Jewish life in a multiplicity of venues across an array of historical epochs, have produced rich insights and potent lessons into effective leadership. The term “Jewish leadership” then means something. It is not the same as general Judaica for leaders or leadership best practices for Jews.

There are far too many examples to review in this brief space, but consider two identifiably Jewish sources that have something to teach about leadership.

If after you have entered the land ... you decide, “I will set a king over me...,” you shall be free to set a king over yourself, one chosen by the Lord your God. Be sure to set as king over yourself one of your own people ... he shall not keep many horses or send people back to Egypt ... to add to his horses ... And he shall not have many wives ... nor shall he amass silver and gold to excess ... When he is seated on his royal throne, he shall have a copy of this Teaching (Torah) written for him ... Let it remain with him and let him read in it all his life, so that he may learn to revere the Lord his God ... Thus he will not act haughtily toward his fellows ... (emphasis added – Exodus 17: 14-20)

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One should not appoint anyone administrator of a community, unless he carries a basket of reptiles on his back [something reprehensible in his background], so that if he becomes arrogant, one could tell him, “Turn around.” (Yoma 22b)

Ask yourself: (1) What are the leadership principles to be found in each of these texts? (2) What relevance does each text have to my own work as a leader in 2018? In the first text, for example, we may be struck by the importance of the king being humble and not acquiring too much power, and in the second it might be that we are reminded that perfection is an unreasonable expectation for any leader.

However one interprets these sources, they are Jewish sources on leadership and for that reason alone they have a place in any program purporting to be about Jewish leadership. But cherry-picking sources is not the goal here. Jewish leadership programs must be willing to plumb the depths of Jewish texts in search of meaningful insights into effective leadership that resonate across the millennia. These sources, and hundreds more like them, in concert with contemporary leadership studies, begin to answer the question, “What’s Jewish about Jewish leadership.”

But that is not all. There is another answer to this question that goes beyond the leadership insights found in classical Jewish literature. For generations, Jewish communities, regardless of historical timeframe or country of residence, organized themselves into religious, educational, and political structures that shared similar principles and values. First explored by the late political scientist, Daniel Elazar, this system, known as the *ketarim* or crowns of leadership, has much to teach contemporary Jewish leaders about shared power, collaboration, and interdependent leadership models. As was true when discussing classical Jewish sources on leadership, this is far too extensive to examine in a brief article. But it represents another important component of the study of Jewish leadership, and it is an invaluable part of the answer to the question “What’s Jewish about Jewish leadership.”

Between these two factors – what Jewish sources have to say about effective leadership and how Jewish communities have organized their leadership structures over the centuries – there is a great deal to learn about the unique components of “Jewish leadership.” In the aggregate they add up to much more than Jewish literacy or leadership best practices alone.

The point is not to make the study of Jewish leadership inaccessible to those who lead Jewish groups. Nor is it desirable to offer a program of leadership training that is “too tribal.” On the contrary, the point is to offer today’s Jewish leaders programs of substance and of deep personal meaning, and not to insult them by calling a tail a leg when they know better.

I believe the time has come to re-conceptualize programs of Jewish leadership training – not to eliminate extant offerings or to invade anyone’s turf. Rather, by insisting that every program claiming to

be about Jewish leadership be able to answer the question, “What’s Jewish about Jewish leadership” (besides the mission or membership of the sponsoring group), then we can begin to maximize the potential of these programs to really transform a new generation of Jewish leaders and empower them to respond to a new generation of Jewish challenges.

To be clear, this is not about the imposition of some arbitrary “religious” test. This is about enabling aspiring Jewish leaders, whether they serve the Jewish community or not, to refract their work – the decisions they make, the power they wield, the ethical standards they model – through the prism of classical Jewish teachings and communal practices. In so doing, those who participate in these programs will be able to proclaim from the highest heights that Jewish leadership means something and that simply calling a tail a leg does not make it so.

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