

JEWISH LEADERS AND JEWISH LEADERSHIP

by Rabbi Dr. Nachum Amsel | January 29, 2019

This essay is from the book, “The Encyclopedia of Jewish Values” published by Urim, or the upcoming books, “The Encyclopedia of Jewish Values: Man to Man” or “The Encyclopedia of Jewish Values: Man to G-d” to be published in the future.

Before discussing the concepts of Jewish leadership, the first question that must be asked is: what is leadership? There have been many definitions of this term, but the most common is: “A process of social influence in which one person can enlist the aid and support of others in the accomplishment of a common task.” Another definition of this word is: “Organizing a group of people to achieve a common goal.” A leader may or may not have any formal authority, but we all know a leader when we see one. Why is it, then, so difficult to find a true leader today? The crisis of leadership in both the Jewish and non-Jewish world is at an all-time high. Many who we thought were leaders turn out to be self-centered individuals only out for self-gain, both in the Jewish and non-Jewish worlds. By examining the Jewish definition of leadership through the sources, and some Jewish examples of true leaders, we may be able to answer some of these important questions, and possibly discover better leaders.

JEWISH LEADERSHIP MODELS OF JEWISH LEADERS IN THE TORAH

Unlike a hero who may carry out one act to earn this “title,” a great leader must act repeatedly to demonstrate some type of heroism or leadership over a period of time. A leader often has an official position over the people he or she is meant to supervise and guide. Otherwise, any community that looks to a certain person for direction and support in times of need, then this person is their leader. What characteristics make a person a Jewish leader, other than being Jewish and a leader? Are there any qualities of leadership that are unique to Judaism or that are stressed more than other qualities in other cultures?

Rather than list those characteristics that depict Jewish leadership or bring numerous sources showing what Jewish leadership is all about, it will be more beneficial to analyze the character traits of some of the role models in the Torah (but not all), and show which characteristics made each a successful Jewish leader. Each of these personalities showed unique leadership qualities, but, as we will see, some qualities are shared by all leaders. In order to highlight the uniqueness of each individual and role model in the Torah, it will be advantageous to present the leaders in pairs in order to compare and contrast the qualities of each.

Noah and Abraham

Noah was the only righteous person in his generation, according to the Torah verse.¹ The only human beings saved from the Flood that killed all the people in the world who sinned were Noah and his family. It is clear from the verse² that they were saved only because of Noah, not because they deserved to be spared in their own right. (As they entered the Ark to be saved, they are described as Noah’s wife, and children, not even by name, showing that it was not through their own merit.) Thus, Noah was the only man who was righteous in the entire world. How difficult it must have been to stand up to the peer pressure of everyone who made fun of his “strange” behavior. But Noah used his inner strength to continue to do the right thing, despite the taunts he surely received from those around him, especially as he was building the Ark day after day.

Although one opinion praises Noah for his ability to remain righteous when everyone else was corrupt, another opinion says Noah was lacking in true righteousness, especially in comparison to Abraham, and only appeared righteous in comparison to everyone else, who was so evil.³ What qualities did Noah lack but Abraham possessed (which made Abraham so special)?

¹ Genesis 6:9

² Genesis 7:7

³ Rashi commentary on Genesis 6:9

Noah seemed to have a flaw in one aspect of his leadership: he lacked one necessary quality that Abraham possessed and used a great deal, in contrast. The Midrash⁴ tells us that Noah was instructed to build the Ark for 120 years. Why did G-d want Noah to take all that time to plant the trees and cut the wood? Aside from G-d's will to do miracles in the Torah as naturally as possible (see chapter about "Miracles" and "G-d's Involvement in the World"), the Midrash says that G-d indeed desired that people should ask Noah what he was doing. Then Noah would be able to engage them in conversation and possibly succeed in urging them to cease their evil behavior. In this way, he might have prevented the devastating flood. Despite the plan, throughout the entire period of 120 years Noah was unsuccessful in convincing even one person to stop sinning and become righteous. Only Noah's family entered the Ark and even they, as mentioned above, were not righteous themselves, but were allowed in only because of Noah. Thus, Noah failed utterly to reach out and influence others. He was righteous himself but had no impact on anyone else. Abraham, on the other hand, succeeded in this area beyond anyone's expectations as he was not only the first but probably the most successful *kiruv*-outreach professional in Jewish history.

The Torah says that Abram (later Abraham) took with him to the Land of Canaan-Israel the "People he had made in Charan." The Midrash explains that these people were "converted" to Judaism by Abraham to follow his ideas and beliefs, as Abram (later Abraham) converted the men and Sarai (later Sara) converted the women, by bringing everyone into their tent, feeding them and engaging them until they asked about Abraham's and Sara's beliefs, and eventually wanted to follow Abraham and G-d's ways.⁵ Thus, we see that both Abraham and Sara were successful in actively convincing people to follow the path of Jewish values. This is one aspect of a Jewish leader. When Jews are enjoined to open their homes to others, the commentaries say that Jews today are to emulate the home/tent of Abraham, which was open on four sides, in order to invite strangers in from all directions.⁶ What were other unique aspects of his personality that caused G-d to select Abraham to begin the Jewish people, whose mission was to change the world by being a moral example to all?

Since the Torah only begins to tell us the narrative of Abraham's life from the age of 75 (Genesis 12), the Midrash fills in some of the prior details. One Midrash in particular⁷ demonstrates three special characteristics of Abraham. As a boy, when Abraham realized that the idols in his father's idol store were mere statues and not gods, he did not keep his beliefs to himself, but exposed the folly of the false belief in the power of the statues to potential customers. This shows that even at an early age Abraham was not afraid to oppose his family and entire environment because he was convinced that his stance was morally right. This is one mark of a true leader – not to be swayed by the public and popular sentiment, but rather to do what is right, even when everyone else is on the opposite side. Second, this Midrash records that Abraham was the first person who, through pure logic, independently arrived at the idea of one G-d creating and controlling the entire world. Until then, everyone who believed in the concept of a deity thought that a different G-d was responsible for each aspect of nature. This shows that Abraham was a deep thinker and the only man in history to be able to come to belief in G-d through logic alone. (No one before him had thought of this idea, and everyone afterwards already had heard about it from Abraham and the Jews). Thus, he was a philosopher in pursuit of truth and knowledge. Finally, when the evil King Nimrod challenged Abraham to either back down from his beliefs or be thrown into the fiery furnace and be killed, Abraham went into the furnace rather than renounce his faith, and he miraculously emerged unscathed. The willingness to perish for his monotheistic beliefs demonstrates Abraham's deep and ultimate commitment to the truth and his core beliefs. In another incident, we see Abraham's concern and caring for other people, all people, even the most immoral and those he had never met. When G-d informed Abraham that He was about to demolish Sodom and four other cities because their actions were completely evil, Abraham was not afraid to challenge G-d and try to save these people. He even "bargained" with G-d and convinced Him to save all five cities if only 10 righteous people lived there.⁸ Alas, there were no such people in those cities, and Abraham's pleas went for naught. However, Abraham's deep commitment to save the lives of anyone, even evil people, is

⁴ Midrash, Beraishit Rabbah 30:7

⁵ Genesis 12:5, Midrash Beraishit Rabbah 84:4

⁶ Mishna Avot 12:5 with commentary of Rabbi Ovadiah MeBartenura

⁷ Midrash, Beraishit Rabbah 38:13

⁸ Genesis 13:13, 18:20-26,

the mark of a true leader. Another leadership characteristic of Abraham's is that he understood the importance of and was able to pass down these special Jewish values to his children.⁹ Thus, while there might have been righteous people before him, none were capable of transmitting their values to the next generation. Abraham's legacy has been passed down from generation to generation and lasts until today.

Abraham was not just a leader who was a thinker and philosopher, he was also a doer. When he heard that his nephew Lot had been taken hostage, Abraham led his 318 men to free Lot and defeated the Four Kings singlehandedly,¹⁰ something that the Five Kings had not been able to do for thirteen years. Abraham thus shows us that a Jewish leader must be a person of action and not only of thought, and must lead the charge by doing something himself, not only by commanding others. Abraham was also not an insular Jewish leader who concentrated only on his personal interests or family, but was friendly to any stranger, as we saw above. Thus, Abraham realized that his mission and the mission of the Jewish people was a universal one. He carried the dual mission of establishing a unique nation and, at the same time, brought the universal message of Judaism to the nations of the world,¹¹ who praised him as the founder of monotheism.

Finally, in his greatest challenge and the last of his ten trials, Abraham is commanded by G-d to sacrifice his beloved son Isaac to G-d, which Abraham complies with readily¹². What exactly was this test and which quality of Jewish leadership did it demonstrate? It was not merely a test to see if Abraham was willing to give up what was so dear to him because of his faith. We mentioned that years before, Abraham was already willing to give up even his own life in that furnace rather than betray his beliefs. So what was this trial really about? Abraham had been specifically promised by G-d, not long before, that Isaac would live on after Abraham to pass down Jewish values and continue the propagation of a nation.¹³ Thus, Abraham, the man of logic (as seen above), knew that Isaac must certainly live. But his faith told him to obey G-d without questioning Him. This dilemma, posing his logic against his faith, was the ultimate test for Abraham. Which quality was stronger? Which would prevail? The answer comes in Abraham's actions. He did not hesitate, he did not question G-d's logic and promise, but even got up early (Genesis 22:2) to fulfill G-d's commandment. That is why after Abraham "passed the test" G-d tells Abraham, "Now I know that you are man who fears (i.e., has ultimate faith) in G-d."¹⁴ Later on, in describing Abraham's legacy, Nehemiah does not say that Abraham was a man of logic and philosophy. Rather, Abraham is known as the man of faith.¹⁵ This test of faith vs. logic has been repeated many times throughout Jewish history. But not all Jewish leaders understood, like Abraham, that faith must prevail over logic in such situations.

Joseph and Judah

Joseph was born with great leadership qualities. Every time he was faced with a seemingly overwhelming challenge, he succeeded and rose quickly through the ranks, even while he was a slave. He felt that G-d was with him, and the Torah tells us that Joseph had a quality that every modern leader desperately desires — charisma (*Chen*).¹⁶ In addition, as a Jewish leader, he gave credit and attributed all his successes not to himself, but to G-d, even when he was a prisoner explaining the dream of the King.¹⁷ Yet, with all these qualities and despite being the favorite son, Joseph was not given the ultimate mantle of leadership of the Jewish people by his father Jacob. Instead, Jacob gave this role to Joseph's brother Judah,¹⁸ and it remains the seat of Jewish leadership (kingship) throughout history until the time of Messiah. What quality did Judah possess that Joseph lacked? What made Judah worthy of supreme leadership of the Jewish people?

⁹ Genesis 18:19

¹⁰ Genesis 14:12-16

¹¹ Genesis 18:18

¹² Genesis 22:1-3

¹³ Genesis 21:14

¹⁴ Genesis 22:12

¹⁵ Nehemiah 9:7-8

¹⁶ Genesis 39:2-4, 21-22

¹⁷ Genesis 41:16

¹⁸ Genesis 49:9-10

Judah's first attempts at leadership fail. Although Judah saves Joseph from death, he suggests his brothers sell Joseph as a slave, rather than just allow him to return home unscathed.¹⁹ Judah subsequently undergoes a metamorphosis of leadership, taught to him by his daughter-in-law Tamar.²⁰ Originally Judah is selfish, trying to protect only himself and his sons, and he refuses to let Tamar marry his third son, after her previous two husbands – Judah's son's – died (which is mandatory in Jewish law for childless widows). In a ruse, Tamar poses as a prostitute and Judah himself becomes the levirate father to her child. But in the process, the disguised Tamar asks Judah to give her the symbols of leadership (his signet, bracelet and staff) as an *Eiravon* – surety for payment. Later on, Judah realizes it was Tamar who was disguised as the prostitute when she returns these symbols of leadership, and it is at that moment that Tamar, another leader, taught Judah not to be selfish and worry only about himself and his own needs. If he acts properly, he must sacrifice himself (his reputation and position) in order to assist others (Tamar and the twin embryos she was carrying). After Judah internalizes this lesson and this Jewish leadership value, he is the only brother who offers to sacrifice himself in order to save his younger brother Benjamin from being held hostage in Egypt. And he uses the same word in volunteering that Tamar used: Judah will be Benjamin's *Eiravon* (surety).²¹ This is the true mark of Jewish leadership which Judah (and his descendants) possessed more than any other tribe, and which Joseph did not possess as much as Judah did. This, then, is a key quality of Jewish leadership – being willing to sacrifice oneself, one's needs and desires for the sake of others.

Joseph indeed did achieve some important aspects of leadership in his tenure as the second in command during the famine in Egypt, as evidenced by the concern he demonstrated towards his brethren, the Jewish people. Joseph was always the ruler who took care of the economic and national needs of the Jews.²² The rivalry for leadership between the descendants of Judah and Joseph continued throughout the generations (see the Chapter, "Judaism: Religion or Nationality" for a more in-depth discussion of this rivalry). Joseph did receive some form of recognition for his unique contribution from his father Jacob, as he was given the double portion of the first born by having two tribes – Ephraim and Menashe – both in the number of tribes and in the Land of Israel, instead of one. (Jacob wanted to marry only Rachel, and Joseph was her first born.) He also was given the city of Shechem as an inheritance.²³

The rivalry of leadership between Judah and Joseph continued when the monarchy in Eretz Yisroel split apart. After the unity during the kingships of Judah, David and Solomon, while the Davidic dynasty (descended from Judah) continued in one part of the Land of Israel, the evil Yerovam, a descendant of Joseph (from the tribe of Joseph's son, Ephraim) reigned as king of Israel in the city of Shechem, Joseph's portion.²⁴ It is only when both leaders will combine forces in the future that the ultimate redemption of the Jewish people can be achieved²⁵. Thus, it says²⁶ that G-d tried to unite Yerovam with the descendant of David, and together with G-d, they would walk in the Garden of Eden. But Yerovam insisted on being at the head, and the potential three-way partnership dissolved. When both of their leaderships unite in the future, the Jews will see not one Messiah, but two Messiahs – the Messiah of Joseph and then the Messiah of Judah. They will complement each other, with each representing two opposite poles of Jewish leadership, symbolized by the two New Years in the Jewish calendar, Tishrei and Nisan, and all the values that each represents.²⁷ Thus, the combined strengths and values of each leader are needed to achieve the Final Redemption.²⁸

¹⁹ Genesis 37:26-27

²⁰ Genesis 38:8, 16-18, 24-26

²¹ Genesis 43:8-9

²² Genesis 47:12, 41:57

²³ Genesis 48:5, 22

²⁴ I Kings 12:25

²⁵ Rashi commentary on Isaiah 11:13

²⁶ Sanhedrin 102a

²⁷ Bnai Yissachar, Chodesh Elul 1

²⁸ Shem MisShmuel, Vayigash 785

Moses and Joshua

Moses is acknowledged as the ultimate leader of the Jewish people, never equaled, who came closer to G-d than anyone else as he could converse with G-d face to face.²⁹ Which qualities made Moses so special, so unique? We will see that some of Moses' leadership attributes were also possessed by other Jewish leaders, but some were uniquely his own.

Common sense tells us that a great leader must have a great command of speech and a charismatic manner when speaking to people. Yet, the greatest leader of all, Moses, is described as someone who had a speech impediment in that either he stuttered, lisped or both, a trait that Moses was embarrassed and self-conscious about.³⁰ How and why could the greatest of Jewish leaders succeed with a major speech defect? The Torah is telling us that the success of a great leader like Moses is not specifically how he or she speaks, but rather, success is based only upon the content of that speech. G-d intentionally chose Moses, in order to show that it was only the substance and values that Moses spoke about that attracted the people and resonated with them.³¹ Thus, Jewish leadership does not require a great and charismatic speaker, but, rather, a person who says the right words and has a personality imbued with the right ideas and values. If so, what is it about the character of Moses that made him unique?

We do know that he was the most modest person in the Torah.³² But what exactly is this characteristic and how does it relate to leadership? This trait of exceeding humility cannot signify that Moses thought he was a "nobody" – or an unworthy person. Moses knew that only he was selected by G-d to lead the Jewish people, and therefore knew that he was special. It is not anyone who can speak directly with G-d and go to Mount Sinai for forty days to receive the Torah, without eating or drinking for that duration of time. So Moses was aware of his greatness. What, then, made him so modest? It is specifically that Moses ascribed all his greatness and outstanding personality not to himself but to G-d. He understood that G-d gave him everything that allowed him to achieve the specialness that made him Moses. That is Jewish modesty, which, sadly, most leaders in history, even Jewish leaders, lack, especially today.

Almost nothing is written about Moses' youth. There is nothing in the Torah about Moses growing up in the royal palace or about his personality. But we can see from three incidents as he becomes an adult, written one after another in the Torah,³³ what made Moses so extraordinary. After growing up in Pharaoh's palace, away from his people, Moses goes out one day and sees an Egyptian beating a Jewish slave to death. He immediately feels an affinity for his people and identifies with the slave and not the Egyptian, which would have been more logical and safe, given his upbringing. Somehow, Moses' Jewish identity emerged and was more important to him than his Egyptian identity. Moses also sided with the Jew because he was the underdog. Moses had to stop the beating, although he realized that any action against the Egyptian would risk his future position in Egyptian royalty. Nevertheless, he felt he had to do the "right thing" and he saved the Jewish slave by killing the Egyptian taskmaster, despite the price he would have to pay.

The next day he saw two Jews arguing, with one Jew about to strike the other. Though he had no relationship with either of these people and it would have been easier to merely look away, he once again could not tolerate the injustice about to be committed. Therefore, he castigated the Jew who was about to strike his fellow Jew. What was his "reward" for this noble act? The Jew yelled at Moses for getting involved in something that should not concern him, and then he carried out his threat to tell the authorities that Moses had killed the Egyptian the day before. Moses was therefore forced to leave the palace, leave Egypt and run for his life. Moses should have learned the lesson after these two incidents: "Do not get involved when you see an injustice between people you do not know. You did it twice and you lost your standing, your home and could have lost your life." But after Moses wound up in Midian as a shepherd, he saw seven women being taunted by Midianite shepherds, who

²⁹ Deuteronomy 34:10

³⁰ Exodus 3:2, 10-11, 4:10, 6:12

³¹ Drashot Rabbeinu Nisim, Drash 5

³² Numbers 12:3

³³ Exodus 2:11-19

prevented them from giving water to their sheep. Moses should have remembered what he had learned: Do not get involved! Unlike the previous two incidents, no Jew was involved here at all. These were all total strangers and it was not a life and death situation. But when Moses saw an injustice, he could not help himself, and he had to step in in order to help the underdog, the person being victimized or wronged. So Moses chased away the Midianite shepherds singlehandedly and gave water to the sheep of the seven women (one of whom, Tzipora, he would later marry).

These three incidents show us the character of Moses. He could not stay away and ignore any injustice. He pitied the downtrodden individual, the person being mistreated, and immediately acted to remedy the situation, willing to sacrifice his own needs for the needs of others. The characteristic of kindness, of caring about the person in need without worrying about the consequences to himself, is a leadership quality that made Moses the quintessential leader and person who he was. It was no accident that Moses and almost all the leaders in the Torah were shepherds, says the Midrash.³⁴ A good shepherd cares about each sheep in the flock, and this was a quality that Moses the shepherd clearly possessed. He once carried an injured sheep on his shoulders to safety a great distance. G-d says that if a shepherd can care so much about an animal, this person is truly worthy of leadership. This quality of caring more about others than oneself was further demonstrated after the Sin of the Golden Calf, when G-d wanted to destroy the entire Jewish people and begin again with Moses alone. Moses defended the people even though he knew they were guilty. He asked G-d to take his life instead if He would only let the Jewish people live.³⁵ The next day, he went to G-d and prayed for 80 days on Mount Sinai until he received atonement for their sin. This, then, is a true Jewish leader, one who cares much more about the people he leads than his own needs.

The successor of Moses as leader of the Jewish people was Joshua, who had one advantage over Moses. Joshua had a mentor to learn from. Having grown up in the luxury of the Egyptian palace, Moses had not been exposed to the hardships that leadership of the Jewish people entailed. Though no one taught him and he had no one to imitate, he possessed leadership qualities deep within him, as has been discussed. In the same verse that the Torah informs us that Moses could speak to G-d "face to face" (making him greater than any other prophet), it also says that Joshua never left the tent of Moses, and it was mainly in this merit that he received the mantle of leadership after Moses.³⁶ He studied and learned from Moses for forty years, day and night. Thus, when he became leader, Joshua had all the experience he gleaned from Moses, from the inside. This is an important aspect of Jewish leadership: whenever possible, it is important to learn up close from a great leader and become trained, in order to know what to do later on your own. Later in Jewish history, the Talmud³⁷ explains that Rabbi Akiva actually followed Rabbi Joshua (his teacher, not to be confused with Joshua the successor of Moses) into the bathroom to observe proper Jewish conduct in that place. When questioned how he could do such a disrespectful act, Rabbi Akiva replied that "This also is part of Torah and I must learn it," thereby justifying his actions. Ben Azzai learned the same thing from Rabbi Akiva. He even hid while Rabbi Akiva was engaged in marital relations with his wife, in order to learn the proper behavior in this situation as well. Thus, we see that part of leadership means studying each and every detail from another great leader.

What other qualities did Joshua possess that made him uniquely worthy of leadership? First and foremost, Joshua was a military general, who personally led the Jewish people to battle as they defeated Amalek.³⁸ When he had been selected to be one of the twelve spies in the Land of Israel, only he and Kalev resisted the peer pressure of the other ten spies and the entire people, and they rent their clothes in mourning when the people believed the negative reports of the ten spies.³⁹ This act once again demonstrates that Jewish leaders have to stand up for the truth and what they believe, no matter how unpopular that may be. Before he died, Moses asked G-d to name a replacement, and in a very public ceremony G-d told Moses to anoint Joshua as

³⁴ Midrash, Shemot Rabbah 2:2

³⁵ Exodus 32:31-32

³⁶ Exodus 33:11 and Rashi commentary on Numbers 27:16

³⁷ Berachot 62a

³⁸ Exodus 17:9-10, 13

³⁹ Exodus 14:6-7

the new leader and transfer leadership to him, so there would not be any doubt about succession after Moses died.⁴⁰ This, too, is a lesson in leadership: preparing in advance for the future, proper transfer of leadership, etc. But in these verses where Moses asks for a new leader, we can see through Rashi's commentary what was special about Joshua's ability to lead the people.

Rashi explains in detail the qualities Moses was looking for in his successor.⁴¹ Moses says to G-d that it is known that each Jew is different, with different ideas. It is important to appoint a leader who can speak and relate to each person differently and "tolerate" these differences. Joshua had this special ability to care about each person and address each person's need and desires in a unique manner. Then Rashi describes a characteristic within Joshua that has been adopted by today's Israeli army. Unlike most armies in the world, where the general stays behind the front lines viewing the larger picture of the overall situation and then giving orders, the Jewish leader has to be at the forefront of every battle, setting an example for others by his personal actions. Joshua had this quality, and, to this day, the ratio of casualties of officers to enlisted men is significantly higher in the Israeli army than any other army in the world for the same reason – because their motto was always "*Acharai – After me*". This is an important difference between management and leadership. Managers tell others what to do; they delegate responsibility. Good leaders show by example. This is a quality of Jewish leadership that Joshua possessed.

A modern Israeli Rabbi, Rabbi Shlomo Riskin, differentiates between the leadership styles of Moses and Joshua by highlighting that each generation had different needs. Moses led the people as their Rabbi, or Rav, while Joshua led the people as a Rebbe. What is the difference? It has often been said that the difference between a Rav and a Rebbe is that when a Rav chastises, everyone thinks he is speaking to their neighbor, whereas when a Rebbe chastises, everyone feels that he is speaking personally to them. In addition, a Rav speaks with the voice of tradition and conveys the words of G-d to the entire nation, giving a message which expresses the vision of our eternal Torah for all generations. A Rebbe speaks personally to every individual, taking the eternal message of G-d and making it relevant to their needs. The Rav speaks to the generation, while the Rebbe speaks to the individual in each generation. The implication is that Moses, the "Rabbi" or "Rav", could not have succeeded as a leader in Joshua's generation, and Joshua, the "Rebbe," would have been an ineffective leader forty years earlier. Each generation requires a leader and leadership style appropriate for its time.

This point was brought home by Rabbi Chaim Shmuelovitz (1901-1978), Rosh Yeshiva of Mir Yeshiva, in his understanding of the Talmudic personage, Choni. Choni was a great leader of his generation, so special and great that in a year of drought he "forced" G-d to make it rain.⁴² Then, Choni fell asleep for seventy years. (The folklore about Rip Van Winkle might have its origins here.) When he wakes up, Choni returns to the Beit Midrash-House of Learning and he hears the rabbis complaining that they lack the clarity in their studies that they had in the time that Choni was with them, for Choni was able to answer all their questions. At this point, Choni reveals his identity. "I'm Choni. I'm still here," he says. But he is not believed, and he leaves disheartened and depressed.⁴³ Rabbi Shmuelovitz (Sichot Mussar 5731, no. 19) asks: Why didn't Choni tell them to ask him a question so that they would discern by his response that he answered as Choni did in the past? Would not this prove that he really was Choni? He answers that a leader or rabbi from a previous generation would not be able to rule on contemporary problems, and should not be asked about contemporary issues. Such problems may only be addressed to leaders and rabbis in one's own era in order to receive a proper response. It should be noted that according to some historians, during those seventy years that Choni slept, the Temple was destroyed. Thus, it was a new time, without a Temple, a time that needed new leadership and rabbis who understood the new mentality of the Jewish people without a Temple.

⁴⁰ Numbers 27:15-23

⁴¹ Rashi commentary to Numbers 27:16-128

⁴² Taanit 23a

⁴³ Taanit 23a

The Elders and Eldad & Medad

When Moses asked for seventy (new) Elders to help him rule, G-d told him to select the seventy whom Moses already knew were worthy, who had been “policemen” of the Jewish people.⁴⁴ Who were these people and what leadership qualities did they possess that made them worthy of leadership? Rashi answers that when Pharaoh increased the workload on the Jewish slaves in Egypt (by requiring the same amount of bricks for daily production, but forcing the Jews to find their own straw), many Jewish slaves could not meet their quota. When the Egyptian taskmasters went to the Jews who supervised the labor, these supervisors or “policemen” refused to blame individual Jews for falling short of the quota and took the beatings themselves. Because they suffered in place of their fellow Jews, this made them worthy for leadership as the Elders of the Jewish people.⁴⁵ Once again, Jewish leadership is demonstrated by the ability of individuals to put their own needs aside in order to satisfy the needs of others.

When Moses selected these seventy Elders, the Torah tells us that there were two individuals, Eldad and Medad, who were left behind and who “were in the writings.” They stayed behind in the camp, but they also prophesied. Joshua was upset that these people were prophesying, but Moses calmed him down by saying that he was happy that they were given prophecy and that he wished every Jew would have this gift.⁴⁶ Who were Eldad and Medad? What were these “writings”? Why were they given prophecy? Why was Joshua upset and Moses calm when they prophesied?

The Talmud explains⁴⁷ that in order to satisfy the people, Moses, the astute politician, understood that he could not simply select these people as Elders just because G-d told him to do so. He was worried about the competition among the tribes. If one tribe received one more Elder than another tribe, the second tribe would be jealous. But 70 Elders cannot be divided evenly among twelve tribes. So Moses took 72 pieces of paper, six of which were to be given to each tribe. On 70, the word “Elder” appeared, and two were blank. When the 72 “candidates” would draw lots, the ones with the blank pieces would not become Elders. Eldad and Medad said “we are not worthy,” allowing the two people not selected to become Elders. For this sacrifice, they were rewarded with “extra prophecy,” more than the other Elders.

The great quality of leadership of Eldad and Medad, showed, once again, was that they were willing to give up their esteemed leadership positions to others who would not have become Elders otherwise. Rashi explains that this decision occurred after the lots were drawn and Eldad and Medad had been designated to be Elders. According to Bechor Shor, however, Eldad and Medad showed even greater sensitivity and leadership. They “dropped out” saying they were not worthy before the lots were taken, thus negating the need for lots at all. In this way, no one had to be embarrassed by selecting an empty paper.⁴⁸ This tremendous sensitivity and sacrifice by Eldad and Medad made them indeed worthy of “extra” prophecy, and greater leadership recognition than the other Elders.

What about Joshua and his reaction to their prophecy? Joshua believed that all prophecy and all leadership had to originate only with Moses, the one leader. That is why Moses had to give from his “spirit” to the seventy new Elders. When Eldad and Medad prophesied in the camp without the blessing and “spirit” of Moses, Joshua believed that this was blasphemy. Everyone had to connect to G-d only through Moses. However, Moses taught Joshua that in Judaism, everything does not have to go through the leader, and that each Jew can have his or her own personal relationship with G-d. Moses was happy that they connected directly to G-d and wished each Jew could do so. Only a true leader who is not only modest but is also comfortable that all power need not reside with him can exude this feeling. Interestingly, many years later, the Catholic Church adopted the original position of Joshua, and believes (to this day) that each Christian can connect to their god only through the priest or through the Pope, their god’s physical representative, but not to their god directly.

⁴⁴ Numbers 11:16

⁴⁵ Rashi commentary on Numbers 11:16

⁴⁶ Numbers 11:24-29

⁴⁷ Sanhedrin 17a

⁴⁸ Rashi and Bechor Shor commentaries on Numbers 11:26

The Women in the Book of Exodus

There are a number of women in the book of Exodus who demonstrated qualities of leadership far greater than any of the men. Without their leadership, the Jewish people would not have been redeemed and would not have survived in the desert. The first two women who demonstrated leadership were the midwives Shifra and Puah (thought to be Yocheved and Miriam, the mother and sister of Moses, respectively). When Pharaoh forced the midwives to kill all male Jewish babies, they refused⁴⁹, knowing that they would be punished (they were put in jail according to Rashbam's commentary) and possibly killed. Thus, their civil disobedience in risking their lives because they feared G-d showed true leadership in putting the needs of Jewish babies above their personal needs and lives. Rashi explains⁵⁰ that since it says in the verse that they "did not kill" and also "they let the infants live" it signifies that they not only did not kill the babies but actually provided water and food to help the mothers and babies survive, thus defying Pharaoh even more.

And then we have Miriam, the sister of Moses. When her parents split up because they were afraid to have a baby since Pharaoh might eventually kill the child, it was their five-year old daughter Miriam who convinced them to reunite, arguing that since Pharaoh had decreed only against boys, by splitting up they were preventing even girls from being born.⁵¹ They indeed got back together, and Moses was born as a result. When the parents could no longer hide the infant, they put him in a basket on the Nile, and Miriam risked her life by watching what was happening to her brother. And after Pharaoh's daughter picked up the baby and could not find a nurse for him, it was Moses' sister Miriam who suggested a Jewish nursemaid – Yocheved, Moses' mother, who nursed him and brought him up in the palace of Pharaoh.⁵² All these actions demonstrated great courage and leadership on the part of this little girl.

As an adult, Miriam continued her leadership role. After the men sang following the Splitting of the Sea of Reeds, it was Miriam who led the women in singing and dancing.⁵³ But the verse says that she played musical instruments. Where, Rashi asks, did Miriam get musical instruments in the desert? He answers⁵⁴ that while everyone was running around packing food and gold and silver as they were about to leave Egypt, Miriam foresaw the day when the Jewish people would sing and dance, and she made sure to take along musical instruments for the occasion. The true mark of leadership is not only preparing for the future, but having the optimism that Miriam did. For her actions (helping her infant brother), the Jewish people gave her respect by not traveling for the seven days she had to leave the camp.⁵⁵ In addition, it was only because of Miriam that the Jewish people drank water for forty years in the desert at all, through that miraculous well that sustained them. As soon as Miriam died, the well disappeared and the people complained that they needed water.⁵⁶

Forty days after G-d appeared to all the Jews at Mount Sinai, the people wanted something to worship when Moses did not return on time (according to their calculations). Aaron asked them to donate their wives' jewelry, figuring the women would not want to part with them. But the women did refuse to give their jewelry to build an idol and only the mixed multitude did so, which resulted in the creation of the Golden Calf.⁵⁷ After that sin (according to most commentaries), G-d wanted the people to have a legitimate physical structure to come close to G-d, and thus ordered the building of the Tabernacle. It was the women who took the leadership role and came forth first to volunteer and donate their jewelry for this legitimate purpose, and the men followed after them sheepishly.⁵⁸

⁴⁹ Exodus 1:15-22

⁵⁰ Rashi commentary on Exodus 1:17

⁵¹ Rashi commentary on Exodus 2:1

⁵² Exodus 2:1-9

⁵³ Exodus 15:20-21

⁵⁴ Rashi commentary on Exodus 15:20

⁵⁵ Numbers 12:16-17 and Rashi commentary there

⁵⁶ Numbers 20:1-2 and Rashi commentary there

⁵⁷ Exodus 32:2-3 with commentary of Siftai Chachamim

⁵⁸ Exodus 35:21-22 with Nachmanides commentary

When the women wanted to donate the copper mirrors that they had used to beautify themselves in Egypt, Moses at first refused to receive such a gift as it would not be appropriate to use in the Tabernacle, until G-d told him to accept this gift. Why? Rashi explains⁵⁹ that these mirrors had been used to beautify these women for a holy purpose. When the men returned home after slaving all day, they had no interest in being with their wives or in fathering children. The women used these mirrors to beautify themselves and entice their husbands to be with them in order to have children. When G-d saw that these courageous women wanted to donate these mirrors, which could have been used for prurient purposes but instead were used for holiness, G-d said, "This is the best donation of all" for the Tabernacle. This is similar to the Talmudic passage that says that it is in the merit of these women that the redemption occurred.⁶⁰ Not only did they beautify themselves at night for their husbands, they also went out to the fields and brought them food and drink to sustain them during the day.

MODELS OF NON-LEADERS IN THE TORAH

In addition to following the examples of leaders and leadership in the Torah, another way to learn what to do in each situation is to see what the non-leaders did, and do the opposite. There are several personalities in the Torah who did not demonstrate leadership qualities when they should have, and reacted poorly during times when they should have stepped up. By examining these situations, we can also learn about Jewish leadership.

After the first sin in the Torah occurred when Adam and Eve ate the forbidden fruit (not an apple), G-d then asked Adam, "Where are you?" This was an existential question (G-d obviously knew where Adam was physically) that Adam never answered. If he had said that he was guilty of the sin and wanted to repent and continue the relationship with G-d, it would have shown leadership and taking responsibility for his actions. Rather, he blamed G-d for the sin, claiming that it was the woman who G-d gave him who was at fault, not him.⁶¹ In a similar manner, G-d asked Cain, "Where is (your brother) Abel?" This was another existential question, as G-d knew that Cain had killed Abel and buried him. Cain also refused to take responsibility for his actions (and responsibility for his brother),⁶² for which he was punished.

The new Elders were discussed above and their specific leadership qualities were described. But where were the "old" Elders who were appointed by Pharaoh in Egypt? These people demonstrated several examples of non-leadership, as they are people who ran away from leadership and responsibility. First, G-d asked Moses to go to Pharaoh's palace with the (Pharaoh appointed) Elders. Moses asked them to come with him after they agreed to do so, but it seems they never showed up.⁶³ Rashi explains⁶⁴ that they started out behind Moses and Aaron, but then they disappeared two by two from the group, until no one was left. They were afraid to face Pharaoh and also afraid to tell Moses they did not want to go. When these same Elders were invited to join Moses on Mount Sinai, instead of appreciating the holiness of the moment, they partied as they ate and drank.⁶⁵ It is clear that these individuals cared only about themselves, were afraid for their safety and wanted to have a good time, which are all clearly not the qualities of leadership. It was for this reason that these Elders were killed with many other sinners in the fire of Tavaira (Numbers 11:1-3) so as not to call attention to their demise, and that is why Moses had to ask for new Elders who were more worthy.⁶⁶

During the era of Prophecy and Judges, two other figures who showed a lack of leadership were Machlon and Chilyon. At the beginning of the Book of Ruth, Avimelech and his two adult sons, Machlon and Chilyon, moved from Bethlehem to the arch-enemy territory of Moab. For this act, they were all punished and died.⁶⁷ What did they do that was so wrong? The Talmud and Maimonides explain⁶⁸ that these individuals from the tribe

⁵⁹ Exodus 38:8 with Rashi commentary

⁶⁰ Sotah 11b

⁶¹ Genesis 3:6-12

⁶² Genesis 4:8-10

⁶³ Exodus 3:16, 29, 5:1

⁶⁴ Rashi commentary on Exodus 5:1

⁶⁵ Exodus 25:11 with Rashi commentary

⁶⁶ Numbers 11:16 and Rashi commentary

⁶⁷ Ruth 1:1-5

⁶⁸ Bava Batra 91a, Maimonides, Hilchot Melachim 5:9

of Judah were the leaders of the generation. In fact, at that time, the entire tribe of Judah was already considered the leaders, and these leaders lived in Bethlehem. When a famine came, everyone was looking to these individuals in Bethlehem for guidance and help. What did these three do instead? They simply left the Land of Israel and abdicated their leadership. For this sin they were killed, says Maimonides. Thus, we see that sometimes not doing something one is supposed to do, or doing nothing, is a culpable act in Judaism. By doing nothing to help the Jewish people when they could and should have, Machlon and Chilyon were killed.

This concept is reflected elsewhere as well. In the time of David, Abner, a supposed leader, was killed because he could have prevented evil from occurring but he did not.⁶⁹ This idea, doing nothing and not protesting when something wrong is taking place, is a sin for the Jews, but even more so for people in positions of authority. The Talmud indicates⁷⁰ that if a person could have protested a sin that took place in his home, in his city and even in the entire world but did not object, he is guilty of that sin himself. In a similar incident involving leaders, the Talmud continues⁷¹ and says that G-d never promises something good will happen and then reneges (though He may renege from a promise of an evil action if the people repent), except for one time in history. That one time occurred when the leaders and righteous people could have protested evil and did not.

The evil Korach rebelled against Moses and claimed that since all Jews are holy, no leadership is necessary.⁷² What Korach really desired was to be the High Priest, according to most commentaries. Where did Korach err? There are many different answers, but one explanation is that Korach believed that leadership was a status, something to covet and look up to. He was jealous of the status of Moses and desired a high position for himself. But Korach was mistaken. Jewish leadership is actually a function, not a status. In fact in the Talmud, when Rabban Gamliel appointed Rabbi Elazar ben Chimsa and Rabbi Yochanan ben Gudgada as leaders, he said to them: "You think I am giving you authority. The reality is that Jewish leadership is a form of servitude."⁷³ Moses, the greatest leader, was called in Scripture⁷⁴ a servant of G-d, eighteen times in all.

OTHER MODELS OF JEWISH LEADERSHIP

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, Chief Rabbi of England, distinguishes between leadership derived by power and leadership derived by influence. While at first glance these seem to be related – i.e., a person with power automatically has influence – these are indeed two forms of leadership and leadership style. The leader with power is symbolized by a king, president or commander-in-chief. He controls soldiers, money or other goods which give him power and leads people. When his power is gone, his leadership ends. But there is another kind of leader that is symbolized by the prophet. He commands no armies, no treasury and no judges. A prophet spoke G-d's word but had no means of enforcing it. All he had was influence – but what influence! To this day, Elijah's fight against corruption, Amos' call to social justice and Isaiah's vision of the end of days are still capable of moving people by the sheer force of their inspiration. Who, today, is swayed by the lives of King Ahab or Jehoshaphat or Jehu? When a king dies or abdicates, his power ends. When a prophet dies, his influence continues. There are some Jewish leaders today who can only lead because of their power, while other, more effective leaders, take charge by influence.

There is another possible division of leadership in the Jewish community, based on the Mishna in Avot. The Mishna⁷⁵ says that there are three kinds of crowns, one of Torah, one of *Kehuna*-Priesthood and one of Kingship. The leader of the community who leads through his Torah knowledge, like a contemporary rabbi, represents one kind of Jewish leader. A leader who is holy (and symbolizes perfection) and leads by piety is represented by the Kohen Gadol-High Priest, and some spiritual Jewish leaders of today also lead in this manner.

⁶⁹ Sanhedrin 20a

⁷⁰ Shabbat 54b

⁷¹ Shabbat 55a

⁷² Numbers 16:1-3

⁷³ Horayot 10a

⁷⁴ Deuteronomy 34:5, Joshua 1:1, 13 and many more references

⁷⁵ Mishna Avot 4:13

And the king is the political leader of the Jewish community, the Jewish leader who is in charge and directs Jewish organizations.

JEWISH LEADERSHIP TODAY

While each of the role models of leadership in the Torah discussed above is quite different, two main characteristics emerge again and again in all great Jewish leaders. All legitimate leaders stand up for what is right, no matter what the consequences to them personally. In addition, a Jewish leader puts his or her personal needs behind the needs of others. This is true of Abraham, who protested about the fate of strangers in Sodom but not about his own son when it seemed he was about to be killed. It is true of Judah, the midwives, Miriam, Moses, the New Elders, Eldad and Medad, and every leader who was a shepherd. This is the essence of legitimate Jewish leadership, then and today – doing for others and not for personal gain. It is unfortunate that too many of today's leaders put their own interests first. That is not Jewish leadership.

Thus, real Jewish leadership is quite difficult. The sources, however, guarantee great reward for real Jewish leaders. Therefore, the Tosefta⁷⁶ says that if one leads for the sake of Heaven, that person will receive a blessing. The Mishna⁷⁷ promises these leaders great reward and that all the leaders who came before them will also help them towards success. Jewish law also records⁷⁸ that a leader is obligated to lead with the intentions for G-d and put others first.

The truth is that today, each and every Jew could and should be a leader in his or her own way. The Talmud already knew of times where there were not enough leaders, and admonished each Jew to step up and become a leader when true Jewish leadership is lacking.⁷⁹ And if we think about it, every Jew is already commanded to act with leadership qualities in his or her daily life, as each Jew is commanded to reach out and help anyone in need.⁸⁰ This is a form of leadership. A Jew is forbidden from abdicating responsibility and walking away from a lost object.⁸¹ Thus, simply fulfilling daily commandments turns every Jew into a Jewish leader through the obligation of acting with responsibility. In a similar manner, every Jew is instructed to feel responsible for every other Jew in the world.⁸²

Finally, the name Jew itself places the mantle of leadership upon anyone with that designation. The first person called a Jew in the Bible was Mordechai, even though he was from the tribe of Benjamin.⁸³ Rashi explains⁸⁴ that until that time, a Jew meant a person who came from the tribe of Judah, but with the exile that primarily came from the tribe of Judah, all people who descended from Abraham were now called Jews. Now that all those previously referred to as Hebrews are called Jews, each person has a special obligation to uphold the name and become like a person from the tribe of Judah. Just as Judah was given the mantle of leadership and demonstrated the idea of sacrificing oneself for the good of another person, all Jews should emulate their namesake and follow this pattern of behavior. All Jews, then, should try to become like Judah and be leaders.

Rabbi Dr. Nachum Amsel currently works with Rabbi Berel Wein and the Destiny Foundation as the Director of Education, whose mission is "to bring Jewish history to life in an exciting, entertaining and interactive way." Rabbi Amsel has also served as a teacher, a school principal, and an adjunct professor. He has also taught over 2000 educators how to teach more effectively. Rabbi Amsel has worked in all areas of formal and informal Jewish education and has developed numerous curricula including a methodology how to teach Jewish Values using mass media. Recently, he founded the STARS Program (Student Torah Alliance for Russian Speakers), where more than

⁷⁶ Tosefta Bikurim 2:10

⁷⁷ Mishna Avot 2:2

⁷⁸ Shulchan Aruch, Choshen Mishpat 2:1

⁷⁹ Mishna Avot 2:5

⁸⁰ Leviticus 19:16

⁸¹ Deuteronomy 22:1-4

⁸² Shavuot 39a

⁸³ Esther 2:5

⁸⁴ Rashi commentary on Esther 2:5

3000 students in 12 Russian speaking countries learn about their Jewish heritage for five hours weekly. Rabbi Amsel previously served as the Educational Director of Hillel in the Former Soviet Union. He lives Jerusalem with his wife and has four children and three grandchildren.