

COVENANT & Conversation

A STUDY OF LEADERSHIP IN THE PARSHA WITH RABBI SACKS

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Lessons of a Leader

Pinchas - 12 July 2014 / 14 Tammuz 5774

Pinchas contains a mini-essay on leadership, as Moses confronts his own mortality and asks God to appoint a successor. The great leaders care about succession. In Chayei Sarah we see Abraham instruct his servant to find a wife for Isaac so that the family of the covenant will continue. David chooses Solomon. Elijah, at God's bidding, appoints Elisha to carry on his work.

“The great leaders - like Moses in this week's parsha - care about succession.”

In the case of Moses, the sages sensed a certain sadness at his realisation that he would not be succeeded by either of his sons, Gershom or Eliezer.¹ Such is the case with *keter Torah*, the invisible crown of Torah worn by the prophets and the sages. Unlike the crowns of priesthood and kingship, it does not pass dynastically from father to son. Charisma rarely does. What is instructive, though, is the language Moses uses in framing his request:

“May the Lord, God of the spirits of all flesh, choose a man over the congregation who will go out before them and come in before them, who will lead them out and bring them in, so that the congregation of the Lord will not be like sheep without a shepherd.” (Num. 27: 16)

There are three basic leadership lessons to be learned from this choice of words.

The first, noted by Rashi, is implicit in the unusually long description of God as “the Lord, God of the spirits of all flesh.” This means, he says, “Master of the universe, the character of each person is revealed to you, and no two are alike. Appoint over them a leader who will bear with each person according to his individual character.”²

¹ That is the implication of the statement that “Moses long to die as did Aaron,” Sifrei, Pinchas, 136, s.v. *vayomer*.

² Rashi to Num. 27: 16, based on Tanhuma, Pinchas, 11.

Maimonides in *The Guide for the Perplexed* says that this is a basic feature of the human condition. Homo sapiens is the most diverse of all life forms. Therefore co-operation is essential – because we are different, others are strong where we are weak and vice versa – but it is also difficult, because we respond to challenges in different ways. That is what makes leadership necessary, but also demanding:

This great variety and the necessity of social life are essential elements in man's nature. But the well-being of society demands that there should be a leader able to regulate the actions of man; he must complete every shortcoming, remove every excess, and prescribe for the conduct of all, so that the natural variety should be counterbalanced by the uniformity of legislation, and the order of society be well established.³

Leaders respect differences but, like the conductor of an orchestra, integrate them, ensuring that the many different instruments play their part in harmony with the rest. True leaders do not seek to impose uniformity. They honour diversity.

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The second hint is contained in the word *ish*, “a man” over the congregation, to which God responds, “Take for yourself Joshua, a man [*ish*] of spirit (v. 18). The word *ish* here indicates something other than gender. What this is, is to be found in the two places in the Torah where we found the phrase *ha-ish Moshe*, “the man Moses”:

One is in Exodus:

The man Moses was highly respected [*gadol me'od*, literally “very great”] in the land of Egypt, in the eyes of Pharaoh’s servants and the people. (Ex. 11: 3)

The second is in Numbers:

Now the man Moses was very humble [*anav me'od*], more so than anyone else on the face of the earth (Num. 12: 3)

Note the two characteristics, seemingly opposed – great and humble – both of which Moses had in high degree (*me'od*, “very”). This is the combination of attributes Rabbi Yohanan attributed to God himself: “Wherever you find God’s greatness, there you find his humility.”⁴ Here is one of his prooftexts: “For the Lord your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great God, mighty and awesome, who shows no partiality and accepts no bribes. He defends the cause of the fatherless and the widow, and loves the stranger residing among you, giving them food and clothing” (Deut. 10: 17-18).

³ Maimonides, *The Guide for the Perplexed*, book 2 chapter 40.

⁴ From the liturgy on Saturday night. The source is *Pesikta Zutreta*, Ekev.

An *ish* in the context of leadership is not a male but rather, someone who is a *mensch*, a person whose greatness is lightly worn, who cares about the people others often ignore, “the fatherless, the widow and the stranger,” who spends as much time with the people at the margins of society as with the elites, who is courteous to everyone equally and who receives respect because he or she gives respect.

The real puzzlement, however, lies in the third clause: “Choose a man over the congregation *who will go out before them and come in before them, who will lead them out and bring them in.*” This sounds like saying the same thing twice, which the Torah tends not to do. What does it mean?

The Torah is hinting here at one of the most challenging aspects of leadership, namely timing and pace. The first phrase is simple: “who will go out before them and come in before them.” This means that a leader must lead from the front. He cannot be like the apocryphal remark of one British politician: “Of course I follow the party. After all, I am their leader.”⁵

It is the second phrase that is vital: “who will lead them out and bring them in.” This means: a leader must lead from the front, but he or she must not be so far out in front that when they turn around, they find that no one is following. Pace is of the essence. Sometimes a leader can go too fast. That is when tragedies occur.

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To take two very different examples: when Margaret Thatcher was prime minister she knew she was going to have to confront the miners’ union in a long and bitter struggle. In 1981 they went on strike for a pay rise. Mrs Thatcher immediately made enquiries about the size of coal stocks. She wanted to know how long the country could survive without new supplies of coal. As soon as she discovered that stocks were low, she in effect conceded victory to the miners. She then, very quietly, arranged for coal to be stockpiled. The result was that when the miners went on strike again in 1983, she resisted their demands. There was a prolonged strike, and this time it was the miners who conceded defeat. A battle she could not win in 1981 she was able to win in 1983.

The very different example was that of Yitzhak Rabin. The peace process he engaged with the Palestinians between 1993 and 1995 in was deeply controversial, in Israel and outside. There was some support but also much opposition. The tension mounted in 1995. In September of that year I wrote an article in the press giving him my own personal support. At the same time, however, I wrote to him privately saying that I was deeply worried about internal opposition to the plan, and urged him to spend as much time negotiating with his fellow Israeli citizens – specifically the religious Zionists – as with the Palestinians. I did not receive a reply.

⁵ The phrase has been attributed to Disraeli and Baldwin.

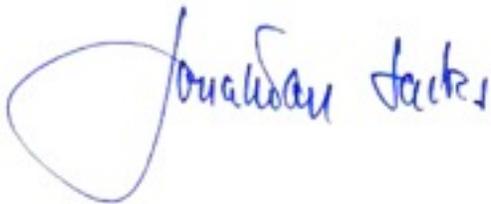
On Motsei Shabbat, 4 November 1995, the world heard the news that Prime Minister Rabin had been assassinated at a peace rally by a young religious Zionist. I attended the funeral in Jerusalem. Returning the next day, I went straight from the airport to the Israeli ambassador to tell him about the funeral, which he had not been able to attend having had to stay in London to deal with the media.

As I entered his office, he handed me an envelope. “This has just arrived for you in the diplomatic bag.” It was Yitzhak Rabin’s reply to my letter – perhaps one of the last letters he wrote. It was a moving re-affirmation of his faith but by the time it was delivered he was no longer alive. He had pursued peace, as we are commanded to do, but he had gone too fast.

Moses knew this himself from the episode of the spies. As Maimonides says in *The Guide*,⁶ the task of fighting battles and conquering the land was just too much for a generation born into slavery. It could only be done by their children, born in freedom. Sometimes a journey that seems small on the map takes forty years.

Respect for diversity, care for the lowly and powerless as well as the powerful and great, and a willingness to go no faster than people can bear: these are three essential attributes of a leader, as Moses knew from experience, and as Joshua learned through long apprenticeship to the great man himself.

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⁶ The Guide for the Perplexed, book 3, chapter 32.