

COVENANT & Conversation

A STUDY OF LEADERSHIP IN THE PARSHA WITH RABBI SACKS

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Looking Up

Beshallah - 11 January 2014 / 10 Shevat 5774

The Israelites had crossed the Red Sea. The impossible had happened. The mightiest army in the ancient world – the Egyptians with their horse-drawn chariots – had been defeated and drowned. The people were now free. But the relief proved short-lived. Almost immediately they faced attack by the Amalekites, and they had to fight a battle, this time with no apparent miracles from God. They did so and won. This was a decisive turning point in history, not only for the Israelites but for Moses and his leadership of the people.

The contrast between before and after the Red Sea could not be more complete. Before, facing the approaching Egyptians, Moses said to the people: “Stand still and you will see the deliverance the LORD will bring you today ... The LORD will fight for you; you need only be silent” (Ex. 14: 13). In other words: do nothing. God will do it for you. And He did.

In the case of the Amalekites, however, Moses said to Joshua, “Choose men for us, and prepare for battle against Amalek” (Ex. 17: 9). Joshua did so and the people waged war. This was the great transition from a situation in which the leader (with the help of God) does it for the people, to one in which the leader empowers the people to do it for themselves.

As this was happening, the Torah focuses our attention on one detail. As the battle began Moses climbed to the top of a hill overlooking the battlefield, with a staff in his hand:

As long as Moses held his hands up, the Israelites prevailed, but when he let his hands down, the Amalekites prevailed. When Moses' hands became weary, they took a stone and placed it under him, so that he would be able to sit on it. Aaron and Chur then held his hands, one on each side, and his hands remained steady until sunset. (Ex. 17: 11-12)

“The battle with the Amalekites, fought with no apparent miracles from God, was a decisive turning point in history, not only for the Israelites but for Moses and his leadership of the people.”

What is going on here? The passage could be read in two ways. The staff in Moses hand – with which he had performed miracles in Egypt and at the sea – might be a sign that the Israelites’ victory was a miraculous one. Alternatively, it might simply be a reminder to the Israelites that God was with them, giving them strength.

Very unusually – since the Mishnah in general is a book of law rather than biblical commentary – a Mishnah resolves the question:

Did the hands of Moses make or break [the course of the] war? Rather, the text implies that whenever the Israelites looked up and dedicated their hearts to their father in heaven, they prevailed, but otherwise they fell.¹

The Mishnah is clear. Neither the staff nor Moses’ upraised hands were performing a miracle. They were simply reminding the Israelites to look up to heaven and remember that God was with them. This gave them the confidence and courage to win.

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A fundamental principle of leadership is being taught here. A leader must empower the team. He cannot do the work for them. They must do it for themselves. But he must, at the same time, give them the absolute confidence that they can do it and succeed. He is responsible for their mood and morale. During the battle he must betray no sign of weakness, doubt or fear. That is not always easy. Moses’ hands “became weary.” All leaders have their moments of exhaustion. At such times the leader needs support – even Moses needed the help of Aaron and Hur. In the end, though, his upraised hands were the sign the Israelites needed that God was giving them the strength to prevail, and they did.

In today’s terminology, a leader needs emotional intelligence. Daniel Goleman, best known for his work in this field, argues that one of the most important tasks of a leader is to shape and lift the mood of the team:

Great leaders move us. They ignite our passion and inspire the best in us. When we try to explain why they are so effective, we speak of strategy, vision, or powerful ideas. But the reality is much more primal: Great leadership works through the emotions.²

Groups have an emotional temperature. As individuals they can be happy or sad, agitated or calm, fearful or confident. But when they come together as a group, a process of attunement – “emotional contagion” – takes place, and they begin to share the same feeling. Scientists have shown experimentally how, within fifteen minutes of starting a conversation, two people begin to converge in the physiological markers of mood, such as pulse rate. “When three strangers sit facing each other in silence for a minute or two, the one who is most emotionally expressive transmits his

¹ Mishnah Rosh Hashanah 3: 8.

² Daniel Goleman, *Primal Leadership*, Harvard Business Review Press, 2002, 3.

or her mood to the other two – without speaking a single word.”³ The physiological basis of this process, known as *mirroring*, has been much studied in recent years, and observed even among primates. It is the basis of empathy, through which we enter into and share other people’s feelings.

This is the basis of one of the most important roles of a leader. It is he or she who, more than others, determines the mood of the group. Goleman reports on several scientific studies showing how leaders play a key role in determining the group’s shared emotions:

Leaders typically talked more than anyone else, and what they said was listened to more carefully ... But the impact on emotions goes beyond what a leader says. In these studies, even when leaders were not talking, they were watched more carefully than anyone else in the group. When people raised a question for the group as a whole, they would keep their eyes on the leader to see his or her response. Indeed, group members generally see the leader’s emotional reaction as the most valid response, and so model their own on it – particularly in an ambiguous situation, where various members react differently. In a sense, the leader sets the emotional standard.⁴

When it comes to leadership, even non-verbal cues are important. Leaders, at least in public, must project confidence even if inwardly they are full of doubts and hesitations. If they betray their private fears in word or gesture, they risk demoralizing the group.

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There is no more powerful example of this than the episode in which King David’s son Absalom mounts a coup d’etat against his father, proclaiming himself king in his place. David’s troops put down the rebellion, in the course of which Absalom dies, caught by his hair in a tree, and stabbed to death by Joab, David’s commander-in-chief.

When he hears the news, David is heartbroken. His son may have rebelled against him, but he is still his son and he is devastated by his death, covering his face and crying, “O my son Absalom! O Absalom, my son, my son!” News of David’s grief quickly spreads throughout the army, and they too – by emotional contagion – are overcome by mourning. Joab regards this as disastrous. The army have taken great risks to fight for David against his son. They cannot now start regretting their victory without creating confusion and fatefully undermining their morale:

Then Joab went into the house to the king and said, “Today you have humiliated all your men, who have just saved your life and the lives of your sons and daughters and the lives of your wives and concubines. You love those who hate you and hate those who love you. You have made it clear today that the commanders and their men mean nothing to you. I see that you would be pleased if Absalom were alive today and all of us were dead. Now go out and encourage your men. I swear by the LORD that if you don’t go out, not a man will be left with

³ Ibid., 7.

⁴ Ibid., 8.

you by nightfall. This will be worse for you than all the calamities that have come on you from your youth till now.” (2 Samuel 19: 6-8)

David does as Joab insists. He accepts that there is a time and place for grief, but not now, not here, and above all, not in public. Now is the time to thank the army for their courage in defence of the king.

A leader must sometimes silence his or her private emotions if he is not to demoralize those he or she leads. In the case of the battle against Amalek, the first battle the Israelites had to fight for themselves, Moses had a vital role to perform. He had to give the people confidence by getting them to look up.

In 1875 an amateur archaeologist, Marcelino de Sautuola, began excavating the ground in a cave in Altamira near the north coast of Spain. At first he found little to interest him, but his curiosity was rekindled by a visit to the Paris exhibition of 1878 where a collection of Ice Age implements and art objects was on display. Determined to see whether he could find equally ancient relics, he returned to the cave in 1879.

One day he took his nine-year-old daughter Maria with him. While he was searching through the rubble, she wandered deeper into the cave and to her amazement saw something on the wall above her. “Look, papa, oxen,” she said. They were, in fact, bison. She had made one of the great discoveries of prehistoric art of all time. The magnificent Altamira cave paintings, between 25,000 and 35,000 years old, were so unprecedented a finding that it took twenty-two years for their authenticity to be accepted. For four years Sautoula had been within a few feet of a monumental treasure, but he had missed it for one reason. He had forgotten to look up.

One of the ongoing themes of Tanakh is the need to look up. “Lift up your eyes on high, and see who has created these things,” says Isaiah (Is. 40: 26). “I lift up my eyes to the hills. From there will my help come” said King David in Psalm 121. In Deuteronomy Moses tells the Israelites that the Promised Land will not be like the flat plain of the Nile Delta where water is plentiful and in regular supply. It will be a land of hills and valleys, entirely dependent on unpredictable rain (Deut. 11: 10-11). It will be a landscape that forces its inhabitants to look up. That is what Moses did for the people in their first battle. He taught them to look up.

No political, social or moral achievement is without formidable obstacles. There are vested interests to be confronted, attitudes to be changed, resistances to be overcome. The problems are immediate, the ultimate goal often frustratingly far away. Every collective undertaking is like leading a nation across the wilderness towards a destination that is always more distant than it seems when you look at the map.

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Look down at the difficulties and you can give way to despair. The only way to sustain energies, individual or collective, is to turn our gaze up toward the far horizon of hope. The philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein once said that his aim in philosophy was “to show the fly the way out of the fly-bottle”. The fly is trapped in the bottle. It searches for a way out. Repeatedly it bangs its head against the glass until at last, exhausted, it dies. Yet the bottle has been open all the time. The one thing the fly forgets to do is to look up. So, sometimes, do we.

It is the task of a leader to empower, but it is also his or her task to inspire. That is what Moses did when, at the top of a hill, in full sight of the people, he raised his hands and his staff to heaven. When they saw this, the people knew they could prevail. “Not by might nor by power, but by My spirit,” said the prophet (Zechariah 4: 6). Jewish history is a sustained set of variations on this theme. A small people that, in the face of difficulty, continues to look up will win great victories and achieve great things.

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A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Jonathan Sacks". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, looping initial 'J'.

**RABBI
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