

COVENANT & Conversation

A STUDY OF LEADERSHIP IN THE PARSHA WITH RABBI SACKS

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Consensus vs. Command?

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What do you say to your successor? What advice do you give him or her? Vayelech is the place to look for the answer, because it is here that Moses finally handed the reins over to Joshua, and he and God both give him a blessing for the future. But they gave different blessings.

Listen to them and they sound almost the same. Moses says “Be strong and of good courage, for you will come [*tavo*] with this people into the land” (Deut. 31: 7). God says, “Be strong and of good courage, for you will bring [*tavi*] the Israelites into the land” (31: 23). *Tavo* or *tavi*, “come with” or “bring.” The words sound and seem similar. But the difference as understood by the sages was total.

Here is how Rashi puts it:

Moses said to Joshua, “Make sure that the elders of the generation are with you. Always act according to their opinion and advice.” However, the Holy One blessed be He said to Joshua, “For you will bring the Israelites into the land I promised them” – meaning, “Bring them even against their will. It all depends on you. If necessary, take a stick and beat them over the head. There is only one leader for a generation, not two.”

These are the two extremes of leadership: consensus or command. Moses advised Joshua to pursue a policy of consultation and conciliation. What he was saying in effect was, “You don’t need to follow the people. You are the leader, not they. But you do need to work with the elders. They too are leaders. They constitute, in effect, your team. They need to feel that they are part of the decision making process. They will not expect you always to agree with them. Often they will not agree with one another. But they do need to feel consulted.”

“If they sense that you are not interested in their opinions, if the impression they have of you is of a person determined to do things his way regardless of everyone else because you know better, they will attempt to sabotage you. They will do you harm. They may not succeed. You may survive. But you will be injured. You will limp. Your standing among the people will be diminished. They will say, how can we respect one who is not respected by the elders?”

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“I speak from experience. The Korach rebellion was serious. It was not just Korach; it was also the Reubenites, and other leaders from the various tribes. And though the rebellion was cut short in the most dramatic way possible, we were all diminished and nothing was quite the same ever again. So: make sure that the elders of the generation are with you. If they are, you will succeed.”

God, according to the sages, took the opposite approach. “The time has come to leave the wilderness, cross the Jordan, conquer the land and build the kind of society that honours the human beings I made in my image instead of enslaving and exploiting them. Don’t look for consensus. You will never find it. People’s interests are different. Their perspectives are not the same. Politics is an arena of conflict. I did not want it to be that way, but having given humanity the gift of freedom, I cannot take it back and impose my will by force. So you must show the people the way.”

“Lead from the front. Be clear. Be consistent. Be strong. The last person who gave the people what they wanted was Aaron and what they wanted was a golden calf. That was nearly the end of the Jewish people. Consensus, in politics or business or even in pursuit of truth, is not leadership but the abdication of leadership. I chose you to be Moses’ successor because I believe in you. Therefore, believe in yourself. Tell the people what they must do, and tell them why.”

“Be respectful of them. By all means listen to them. But at the end of the day the responsibility is yours. Leaders lead. They do not follow. And believe me, though they may criticize you now they will eventually admire you. People want their leaders to know the way, go the way and show the way. They want them to be decisive. Always treat people with the utmost courtesy and respect. But if they do not behave toward you as you do toward them, if they oppose and try to frustrate what you are doing, there may be no choice but to take a stick and hit them on the head. There is only one leader in a generation. If everyone is empowered, there is no music, only noise; no achievement, only an endless committee meeting at which everyone speaks and no one listens.”

Those were, then and now, the two great options. But notice something odd. The person urging consensus is Moses. But Moses never acted by consensus. This is the man who almost had to drag the people out of Egypt, through the sea, and across a howling desert, the man who did things of his own initiative without even asking God.

“Consensus and command: those were, then and now, the two great options for leadership.”

This is the man who broke the tablets of stone hewn and engraved by God himself. When did Moses ever lead by consensus? To be sure he had seventy elders, princes of tribes, and a devolved structure of administration with heads of thousands, hundreds, fifties and tens, but though they helped him, they did not advise him nor did he seek their advice. What suddenly turned Moses into a peace-nik, a lead-by-consensus man?

That is one problem. The other is the advice given by God himself: lead from the front, even against their will. But that is not how God acted, as understood by the sages. This is what they said on the words immediately prior to the creation of humanity, “Let us make man in our image”:

Let us make man: From here we learn the humility of the Holy One, blessed be He. Since man was created in the likeness of the angels, and they would envy him, He consulted them ...

Even though they [the angels] did not assist Him in His creation, and there is an opportunity for the heretics to rebel (to misconstrue the plural as a basis for their heresies), Scripture did not hesitate to teach proper conduct and the trait of humility, that a great person should consult with and receive permission from a smaller one.

The sages, puzzled by the plural, “Let us make man,” interpreted it to mean that God consulted with the angels. Despite the fact that the use of the word “us” was dangerous – it could be read as compromising the pure monotheism of Judaism – nonetheless the principle of consultation is so important that the Torah takes the risk of being open to misinterpretation. God consults, according to the sages. “God does not act tyrannically toward His creatures.”

To be sure, the sages said that at Sinai God suspended the mountain above the Israelites and said, “If you say No, this will be your grave.” But this is not the plain sense of the verse. To the contrary, before he gave the Torah to Israel he commanded Moses to explain to the people what was being proposed (Ex. 19: 4-6). And it was only when the people – “all the people together” (19: 8) “with one voice” (24: 3) – that the covenant was made. That is the biblical basis for the idea, in the American Declaration of Independence, that governments gain their authority from “the consent of the governed.” The very act of giving humans freedom means that God never forces us against our will. As Eisenhower once said, “Hitting people over the head is not leadership: it is assault.” So why was God here, as it were, speaking out of character?

The answer, it seems to me, is this: Both God and Moses wanted Joshua to know that true leadership cannot be a one-sided affair, be it the pursuit of consensus or command-and-control. It must be a deft balance of both. They wanted Joshua to hear this in the most striking way, so each said what they were least expected to say.

Moses, whom everyone associated with strong, decisive leadership, in effect told Joshua, “Don’t forget to strive for consensus. Your task is not what mine was. I had to take people out of slavery. You have to lead them into a land of freedom. Freedom means taking people seriously. The leadership of a free people involves listening, respecting and striving for consensus wherever possible.”

God, who gave humans their freedom and never imposed himself on people against their will, said, “Joshua, I am God; you are not. I have to respect people’s freedom. I have to let them go the way they are determined to go, even if it is wrong and self-destructive. But you are a human among humans and it is your task to show them the way that leads to justice, compassion and the good society. If the people do not agree with you, you have to teach them, persuade them, but ultimately you have to lead them, because if everyone does what is right in his or her own eyes, that is not freedom but chaos.”

In short, leadership is not simple. It is complex because it involves people and people are complex. You have to listen, and you have to lead. You have to strive for consensus but ultimately, if there is none, you must take the risk of deciding. Had they waited for consensus Lincoln would never have ended slavery, Roosevelt and Churchill would never have led the free world to victory, and David ben Gurion would never have proclaimed the State of Israel.

It is not the job of leaders to give people what they want. It is the job of leaders to teach people what they ought to want. But at the same time they must involve people in the decision-making process. Key figures and constituencies must feel that they were consulted. Collaborative,

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consultative, listening leadership is essential in a free society. Otherwise, there is autocracy tempered by assassination.

Leaders must be teachers but also learners. They must be visionaries and yet have time for the details. They must push people but never too far, too fast, or they will fail. They must speak to the better angels of our nature, teaching us to love not hate, forgive not seek revenge. They must always prefer the peaceful solution to the one that involves taking a stick and hitting people on the head, even though they are prepared to do so if there is no alternative. Leaders must be capable of more than one style of leadership. Otherwise, as Abraham Maslow said, “Those who only have a hammer treat every problem as if it were a nail.”

Considering the effort, energy, stress and pain, why anyone should seek to be a leader would remain a mystery, were it not for this luminous truth: that there is no better way to flood life with meaning than to have lifted others and helped them to a greatness they never knew they had; to have together with others righted some of the wrongs of this injured earth and its creatures; to have acted rather than waited for others to act, and to have brought others with you, for the greatest leader on earth or in heaven cannot lead alone.

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These are what make leadership the greatest privilege by which any of us can be blessed. As Moses said to Joshua, “Happy are you to have merited leading the children of God.” The crown of leadership is invisible yet you know who is wearing it and who not. It is there, in front of you, waiting for you to put it on. Wear it with pride and may all you do be blessed.



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