

Yom Kippur 2016

Leadership

In our prayers this morning we speak of God as our shepherd and refer to ourselves as His flock. But let's be honest: can Jews really see themselves as dutiful sheep, quietly following their leader? Chaim Weizmann, Israel's first President, famously said that he was head of a nation of a million presidents! One of my favorite jokes is about the difficulty we seem to have when it comes to *following* rather than *leading*. I've told this joke once or twice before but now, as Boston prepares to host the Head of the Charles, my joke is finally "in season."

It's about Yeshiva University's crew team, which somehow, loses race after race. The team practices for hours every day, but never manages to come in any better than dead last. Desperate to do something about this, the coach decides to send Yankel to spy on the Harvard team. So, Yankel *shlepps* off to Cambridge and hides in the bulrushes off the Charles River, from where he carefully watches the Harvard team as they practice. Yankel returns to his team and announces his findings. "I've figured out their secret," he says. "They have eight guys rowing and only one guy shouting!"

We are a people eager to speak out and lead the way! And today, more than at any other time during the year, we need to think about how and where we want to leave our mark. Because Yom Kippur - the day when God grants us atonement - is also the day when, according to our tradition, we became partners with the Divine in the work of creation. The rabbis tell us that it's on Yom Kippur that Moses comes down from Mt. Sinai with the *second and final* set of tablets. Having smashed the first set after seeing the Israelites worshipping the golden calf, Moses is instructed to carve a *second* set; but this second set is different. We read in Torah that while the first set was written entirely by God, this final set is the work of Moses *and* God -it's a partnership.

And so, today when we examine our shortfalls, we *also* need to remember this partnership and to hold on to these two truths: we are flawed *and* we're capable of great things. In fact, the Torah shows us -time and time again, that flawed individuals can make great leaders. And what better time than now - as we think about our choices on Election Day *and* as we consider the leadership roles we *ourselves* want to assume in our personal and civic lives - to highlight this paradox and to reflect on what our tradition has to say about leadership.

You know, right here in our sanctuary we have a visual reminder of what leadership means in our tradition. Take a look at the two side walls. The back wall has the same image – it's a menorah. How different from the towers of Babylonia or the pyramids of Egypt! Unlike the hierarchical structures of our ancient neighbors, the menorah is an inverted pyramid of sorts: broad at the top, narrow at the base. The menorah represents a revolt against the social order of the Ancient Near East. Our story is about how a people enslaved for generations becomes a society in which *all* members are called upon to take responsibility. Remember Moses' response to those who warned him that others were prophesying and taking the mantle of leadership? He says: "would that all the Lord's people were prophets!" (Numb 11:29).

But the thing is this: when the "going gets tough" there is a strong natural tendency towards dependency and authority. We see this in our own foundational story. The Israelites challenge Moses and clamor to go back to Egypt – to a place of enslavement, rather than deal with the difficulties they face in the wilderness. Professor Ron Heifetz, who teaches about leadership at the Harvard Kennedy School, warns us against this widespread phenomenon towards dependency and authority during difficult times. He says, instead of looking for "saviors" – for someone who can make hard problems simple – we should be looking for leadership that will challenge *us* to face the problems for which there are no simple, painless solutions. Problems like climate change, poverty, gender equality and terrorism, says Heifetz, have no easy solution and can only be solved by *all* of us.

In fact when we look at Torah and our ancient leaders we see flawed individuals – people like you and me, gifted in some ways and imperfect in others. The stories of our ancestors – of people like Sarah, Moses and King David, encourage us to jump into the fray because they help us appreciate that regular people can make a difference; that leadership doesn't require perfection.

King David, for example, was an outstanding military leader and psalmist, but his personal life was in shambles. Among the awful things he did was to call for the murder of several family members and arrange to have Batsheva's husband killed in battle so that he could marry her. David died a hero in public and is our most lauded king, but his private life was quite the moral quagmire.

And Moses, whom the Rabbis later called “our teacher” *rabbenu*, had significant flaws of his own. Besides having anger management problems – remember he hits the rock when told to speak to it – the Torah implies that he was neither a good father nor a good husband. Today we might say that he failed miserably at balancing work and family. According to the rabbis, when Miriam speaks out against Moses and is punished, what she is actually doing is reprimanding him for paying little attention to his wife and children. Moses was on call for God 24/7 – or maybe it was 24/6, and it seems that his marriage and his children, who are rarely mentioned, suffered the consequences.

The women in Torah don’t fare any better – starting with our first matriarch, Sarah, whom the rabbis criticize for insisting that Abraham banish Hagar and her son Ishmael. Later commentators even accuse her of physically abusing Hagar.

Our ancient leaders were far from being perfect. The Torah seems to be saying that it is unrealistic to expect moral perfection from our leaders. And so, the question we need to ask ourselves is this: what are the *essential* traits we should expect from our leaders?

Lord Jonathan Sacks, former Chief Rabbi of Britain, published a book last year, titled, *Lessons in Leadership*, in which he shares what he learned during twenty two years of Jewish leadership. He distills seven principles of leadership from a Jewish perspective. One of the principles he mentions takes us back to the image of the Menorah – and to the idea that leadership is not about hierarchy – about standing above others, but about *service to others*. He reminds us that the highest accolade given to Moses is that he was “the servant of the Lord.”

Today, this type of leadership has a name. It’s called “servant leadership” and it’s characterized by the leader’s ability to listen, to empathize, to persuade and to build community. I used to think that the theory of Servant Leadership - which became popular in the 1970’s – was a 20th century invention. But, its roots go all the way back to Torah and to Moses. Despite the many times that the Israelites challenge Moses he sticks by them. Moses does - at times - “lose it,” calling the Israelites a “stiff-necked” people. They are indeed a difficult bunch, but he doesn’t give up being their leader, despite never wanting this job in the first place!

Remember that Moses tries hard to dissuade God from sending him to Pharaoh! He thinks he is inadequate. So why does he take on the mantle of

leadership? In responding to this question, Rabbi Sacks offers us a second leadership principle. Great leaders lead because there is work to be done: because there are people in need, problems to be solved and challenges ahead. It's not about power or ego. They take on the mantle of leadership because they *stand for something greater than themselves*.

To lead is also to have faith in the people one serves, says Rabbi Sacks, noting that the easiest thing in the world is to become a leader by mobilizing the forces of hate. But great leaders make people better, kinder than they would otherwise be.

Another quality that Sacks highlights is the *ability to assume responsibility*, which means taking responsibility for past mistakes and having the courage to move forward decisively so that we can contribute and make a difference.

This principle – the *ability to assume responsibility*, brings the discussion back to our own lives and to the essence of Yom Kippur: a day when we confront our past mistakes but, hopefully, move forward with confidence that we can change course *and* contribute in important ways. There is a beautiful teaching in *Pirke Avot* -the Ethics of the Fathers, a second-century guide, that speaks to this. Hillel the Elder teaches: *B'makom she'ein anashim, hish'tadel l'hiyot ish*. Loosely translated, this means: in a situation where nobody is being a mensch - try to be a mensch! When something needs to be done, rather than waiting for someone else to do it, be the one who takes responsibility.

We are *all* summoned to the task. Each of us is blessed with strengths that can contribute to the greater good. Leadership means that we don't stand on the sidelines and watch events unfold from a distance. In our personal lives and in our civic lives, we are all called upon to fulfill our potential, to become engaged, not to sit back, resigned, defeated, not to wait for the right time or for the right candidate, but to show up and make a choice.

Showing up and making a choice is the subject of a newly released book by Alan Dershowitz titled, *Electile Dysfunction: A Guide for the Unaroused Voter*. Quite the catchy title, right? He argues that polling is incapable of predicting the outcome of elections like the one we're currently facing. The reason is that many voters are angry, resentful, emotional, negative and frightened and many won't vote at all or will vote for a third-party candidate. Dershowitz compares the current presidential election to the Brexit vote, when virtually all polls got it wrong. His conclusion is really an appeal to make our voices heard: He says: "it

would be a real tragedy and an insult to democracy if the election were decided by those who fail to vote.”

Things have changed since his book came out in September and they will probably continue to change until the very last minute before the election. But even if new revelations confound us and even if we are not enamored with the choices before us, we cannot stand on the sidelines, watching events unfold.

And once the election is over, we can't afford to stand on the sidelines either. We will need to confront the resentment and divisiveness that has surfaced during these months and do something about it. And so, let us draw inspiration from the partnership that Moses established long ago. Let us do our part - striving for high ideals and remembering that each of us is summoned to the task.

May we lead ourselves to a more blessed place and may the leaders for whom we cast our ballots during this election bring true blessing upon our country, upon Israel, and upon the world.