

**Leading By Example, Following By Emulation
RH Morn 5777**

If you think searching for super heroes is merely fodder for comic books or blockbuster films, try sitting on a rabbinic selection committee. Even the most practical and down-to-earth folks suddenly bring all of their hopes, dreams and baggage regarding synagogues and Judaism to the table. They look for: someone who can roll around on the floor with pre-school kids as effortlessly as sharing a gentle moment with a lonely elder; someone who excels at those intimate one-on-one discussions while stunning the throngs with bima oratory that would put Cicero and Lincoln to shame; someone with the insight of a PhD economist when it comes to

budgets and fundraising, yet possessing an indifference to money that is almost monastic; a creative and inspiring teacher and spiritually elevating worship leader with a hint of Baptist preacher. In essence, search committees want some hybrid of Jesus, Moses and Buddha, with a little Steve Jobs and Tony Robbins thrown in for good measure.

Often the criteria for choosing a leader of a congregation or a polity like the United States of America romanticizes and idealizes the notion of leadership. Mere mortals of flesh and blood fall short of the visions and aspirations we project on them. When read closely, even Jesus, Moses and Buddha failed to live up to the hype.

As we reach the climax of what many call this “silly season” of a presidential election, we look to many standards and graft myriad desires upon who we want to lead the most powerful democracy in human history. Ideally, our choice is based on more than one litmus test issue or solely upon self-interest.

We are overwhelmed by a constant barrage of advice seeking to sway us, from the substantive to the manipulative. But as Jews, it is important that we also look to our well-spring of ethical and spiritual counsel. Our tradition provides ample accounts of leadership, and the qualities, abilities and principles embodied in our most cherished models.

A clear caveat before I continue: I am not endorsing any candidate! But as a rabbi, I course familiar and appropriate waters when sharing the Jewish values that, for most modern and moderate Western citizens, are the basis of our nation's founding principles.

Abraham, Moses and David provide both positive and negative object lessons for inspired, caring leadership leavened with realistic expectations of the human. As with so much in Judaism, the qualities of effective leadership are often counter-cultural to wider standards of success.

The first official Jewish tribal chief was Abraham. Much of his behavior and character provide the basis for *mitzvot* and the

requirements of *menschlikeit*—of being a decent person. But we learn three key virtues from Abraham: Self-sacrifice, hospitality and an unwavering pursuit of justice.

All leaders have or say they have a vision. Few are willing to risk everything for it. When Abraham heard God's call *Lech Lecha*, to go forth, he heard a challenge to leave family, homeland, status and possessions, and to go to a place that God would show him along the way. *He barely knew this God*, its ability to fulfill promise, and whether his call would be proven authentic. Yet he left everything behind, embracing a virtual death sentence in the ancient world, to pursue a mission that transcended him, and thus was worthy of the ultimate sacrifice.

Later, after recovering from the first, and thus, a self-inflicted circumcision, Abraham sat in his tent in the heat of the day, recuperating, I would imagine. Yet, he still scanned the horizon for weary travellers. In the ancient world, hospitality was more than mere Martha Stewart manners. In the brutally hot and dry wilderness, it could mean the difference between life and death.

When guests do arrive, Abraham rushes out to greet them, washes their feet, feeds them, and attends to their needs. Though they would later reveal themselves as messengers from God, he didn't know that upon greeting them. Kind of puts a new twist on welcoming guests into our home...*you never know.*

And later, Abraham embraces God's teaching of the foundational need for justice so well, that he even holds God to account. When confronted at Sodom and Gommorah with the prospect that the few innocent might perish with the majority of the guilty, he challenges God with the famous retort: "*Shall not the Judge of all the earth do justly?*" Again, he didn't know God very well. If our God had been like the other Mediterranean deities, a flash of lightening would have ended the story then and there. But God respected Abraham's unwavering commitment to principle, even in the face of ultimate criticism from the ultimate patron. And in doing so, Abraham enshrined justice as not only the core Jewish value, but as the cornerstone of all human need.

A willingness to sacrifice, an unqualified hospitality for strangers, and a singular commitment to justice---worthy traits that helped to build our fledgling community.

Moses accepted the mantle of leadership as our people transitioned from tribe to nation. His courage, humility and forgiveness sustained our people in trying times, and dramatically offered a potent alternative to the arrogance of pharaohs, emperors and god-kings.

Moses' courage is renowned in our tradition. As the leader of a rag-tag collection of downtrodden slaves, his status paled in comparison to the divinely chosen Pharaoh Ramses. Yet imbued with a confidence borne of both God's sanction and the righteousness of his

cause in freeing a suffering people, Moses confronted Pharaoh as equals. He never backed down, and never gave in, despite a speech impediment that rendered his formal pronouncements awkward.

And while typical courage and heroism is often accompanied by arrogance, this was not so for Moses, and in this lies perhaps one of Judaism's greatest lessons. When God first calls Moses for this clearly superhuman task, Moses pleads: *Who am I?* Who am I to be invested with so important a mission, so noble a pursuit, so daunting a task, especially for one who is "heavy of speech and tongue." God assures him that he is chosen for a reason, for those inner qualities that are often overlooked in anyone, but

especially in a leader---qualities that far transcend mere charisma, charm and eloquence.

Later still, when the wilderness journey turned ugly and the faithless former slaves rebelled and mocked one even so clearly backed by God, Moses was betrayed by those closest to him: his siblings Miriam and Aaron. They sought to undermine and supplant him as leader, attacking him and his wife with the cudgel of fear and racism. Before God responds, the Torah tells us that: *Moses was the most humble man on earth*. God shuts down the challenge, but the message is clear: Moses does not counter-attack personally or directly because this is not about him. The mission and task at hand is for God, for the people, for the received wisdom of Torah, and

**for a destiny of which we are all beneficiaries.
How many of us could withstand such a test of
ego and will? How many of today's leaders could
pass such a test?**

**In that same passage, God punishes Miriam
with leprosy. It is here that Moses chooses to
speak up. He begs God for mercy, clearly having
forgiven his sister's life-threatening attack and
beseeching God to do the same. Again, Moses
transcends his individual feelings of slight and
vengeance, keeping his gaze fixed upon the larger
and more enduring need. Perhaps he even
understood and empathized with Miriam's
jealousy and weakness, seeking an opportunity
for her to embrace *teshuvah*.**

Courage, humility and forgiveness---a critical and unique example of leadership that forged a battered cohort into an exalted nation bearing an ethical system that guides us to this day.

David transformed a loose confederation of tribes, plagued and overrun by the rapacious Philistines, into a kingdom verging on empire, the most expansive in our history. And his ability to defy the odds, to ambitiously take tough decisions and to astutely wield the levers of power made him the right leader at the right time.

The famous story of David and Goliath has become an iconic metaphor in our culture. The notion of a skinny teenage shepherd-boy having the chutzpah to confront the greatest warrior of his time in the classic one-on-one battle defies

credulity. *But that's the point.* David was willing to confront overwhelming odds, and through moxie, skill and a well-placed rock to the cranium, he defeated a key enemy and sparked a legend that would carry him to the throne. David's miraculous victory also became an empowering metaphor for Israel, a nation small in number and limited in power, but possessing a wisdom, a cleverness and a faith to overcome and outlive the greatest empires on earth.

David also reflected the necessary ambition to take the tough decisions and to contend with the necessary evils that confront a righteous leader in a morally dubious world. David engaged in near constant warfare throughout his reign, expanding the kingdom's borders, defeating

Israel's enemies, and giving the burgeoning people the breathing room and reputation to endure in a tough Near Eastern neighborhood during a brutal era in human history.

And David developed, through intuition and experience, the political savvy and mastery of statecraft to unite and secure his people. In defeating the Philistines and returning the Ark to Jerusalem as a new capital, David united disparate and often warring tribes under a national, religious and cultural entity. He worked alliances and isolated enemies. He forged the people of Israel into a nation to be regarded like other nations of the time.

Defying incredible odds, an ambitious securing of his people through tough decisions,

and the cultivation of political power to higher purpose—these are reasons why David is considered by our tradition to be the forbearer of the messiah.

And yet, our biblical exemplars *are not saints*—they are very much human. We learn as much from their failings and transgressions as we do from their virtues and success. In his seeming willingness to sacrifice his son Isaac at God's command, Abraham reflects the slippery slope that can lead to religious extremism. For his striking of the rock to quench the thirst of the whining Israelites instead of speaking to it as commanded, Moses is punished for his unchecked anger and ascription of that miracle to his efforts rather than to God's. He is unable to

complete his life's work of bringing the Israelites into the Promised Land. And David...*don't even get me started.* His ceaseless prosecution of war precluded his right to build the Temple in Jerusalem. And his concession to lust in taking Bathsheba, and lack of conscience in sending her husband to certain death, exposed an abuse of power that would return to him exponentially for his remaining days, a lifetime of family dysfunction and tragedy.

But these foibles and hubris are what makes Judaism relevant and useful. *Who can emulate a saint? And if unable, why even try?* Our biblical leaders possessed feet of clay, but they also ascended to heights but a little lower than the angels. If we are susceptible to their faults, then

surely we also capable of their greatness? The ultimate success of a leader lies in the integration of model and message in a genuine reflection of what it is to be human.

Chris Lowney is a successful corporate executive, but he wasn't always so. He spent his early years as a member of the Jesuits. He blended these two experiences, gleaned remarkable insight from 5 centuries of Jesuit accomplishment to inspire and guide corporate culture. His book, *Heroic Leadership*, is a unique and thoughtful contribution to the growing genre of business self-help.

One of Lowney's most important insights is that we all have the ability to be leaders every day of our lives—perhaps not as dramatically as on

the world stage—but impactful, inspiring leaders nonetheless. And the key to bringing out the leader within you: *self-reflection*—an honest assessment of failings and talents, desires and convictions, knowing how best to render leadership as service to others.

We Jews have a phrase for that: *Heshbon nefesh*...an accounting of the soul. And we have a process for that: *Teshuvah*...the sincere desire to admit mistakes and commit to change. And we have a time to take on this task: *This day*, the 10 that follow it, and the year to come.

As we consider what we want in the next president to lead us in uncertain times, we should start by asking ourselves how we might more fully realize *our* capacity to lead. Maybe...*you are the*

***leader we've been waiting for!* And what you do today and moving forward will determine *your* future as much as it will the future of our nation, our people, and our world. Amen.**