

# A little less charisma, please

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The high-profile crises currently plaguing governments, businesses, and religious groups across the globe have resulted in renewed calls for a return to strong leadership. In the face of crises, people look to leaders to solve their problems and mitigate their misfortune. Not just any leaders, but charismatic leaders, those strong personalities believed to have extraordinary capabilities. In return for such leaders, followers are willing to extend total fealty and absolute trust, confident that the leader will solve their problems.

This desire to find the singular leader who knows how to resolve crises and set things right manifests itself in a variety of settings. Voters of every political stripe seek charismatic candidates and bemoan their fates when none can be found. Investors yearn for CEOs with personal charisma, believing that only they can reverse the company's faltering fortunes. Religious adherents crave the guidance and direction of a charismatic who will lead them down the path to salvation.

Despite the widespread popularity of this assertion, those who believe that things will get better only with charismatic leaders fail to understand the dangers inherent in such a vision. In this regard, classical Jewish sources have a great deal to teach about models of effective leadership.

It is not that Jews have been immune to charismatic leaders. We, too, have had our share of mystics, messiahs, and autocrats.

But there are at least four reasons why, according to Jewish teachings, charismatic leadership should be shunned.

To begin with, Judaism has always maintained that only God has absolute authority. Any attempt to centralize and aggregate power in a single human being was viewed as a usurpation of the Divine. Jewish thinkers understood that even limited power is intoxicating, and for that reason human authority must be circumscribed. Moses himself, who at various times in his career served as priest, prophet, and sovereign, was ultimately required, according to rabbinic commentary, to limit his powers lest he acquire too much control over his followers.

Thus, even while recognizing the potential accomplishments of charismatic leadership, Judaism consistently prefers power-

sharing to power-hording. In pre-modern Jewish communities, the functions of leadership were consistently divided between scholarly, religious, and political authorities, precisely to avoid the perils of autocracy.

The monarch, the very embodiment of despotic leadership in the ancient world, could not, in Jewish tradition, be anointed absent the combined imprimatur of the priest, the prophet, and the people-at-large. The ancient rabbinical sages, whose powers were often considered all-encompassing, were proscribed against enacting any measures unless the majority of the community could follow them.

In medieval Jewish communities, where wealthy trustees (*parnasim*) might technically have had the legal rights to issue edicts of excommunication (*herem*), they rarely did so without the concurrence of the local rabbi.

Throughout Jewish history, then, the power to lead was shared among and between communal officials. However talented and impressive individual leaders may be, they are not gods nor are they to be worshiped as such.

A SECOND reason that Judaism disdains charismatic leadership pertains to the way such leaders view their followers. Charismatics, and their circle of confidantes, are adept at manipulating believers in order to "prove" their claims and elicit widespread agreement. Adherents are expected to abandon their individual identities and judgments. Because a charismatic leader is believed to be endowed with extraordinary abilities, he is judged to be better qualified to make decisions on behalf of his followers.

In sharp contrast, the Torah describes the Jewish people as *mamleket kohanim* – a kingdom of priests; that is, an entire nation of individuals who are capable, at any point in time, of leading and resolving problems. Effective leadership, in this view, involves empowering followers to make decisions for themselves, not dictating from the top down. The concept of *mamleket kohanim* is a reminder that leadership belongs to the people.

Thirdly, the personal attributes associated with charismatics are precisely the opposite of those that Judaism considers optimal for leadership. Studies of charismatic leaders show that they are prone to exaggerated self-descriptions and claims of grandiosity. Charismatics are consumed with their missions, often with callous disregard for their followers. Their movements

are obsessed with personal monument-building. This is a far cry from Judaism's teachings that a deep sense of humility, combined with a commitment to serving not ruling, are the metrics by which effective leadership is evaluated.

Finally, the essence of an authentic leader in Jewish tradition is the individual who is always in search of his or her replacement. Unlike charismatic leadership, which is linked directly and exclusively to a single individual, Judaism holds that the true test of success is the long-term continuity of an idea or movement. When the goals of an enterprise are so deeply intertwined with the fate of one person, when followers are so dependent upon a single individual that orderly transitions are unthinkable, the result is idolatry not leadership.

The Hebrew word for leadership, *manhigut*, is linguistically related to the word for behavior. Truly effective leadership involves a set of behaviors – humility, power-sharing, serving and empowering others, and identifying future leadership. It is not about magical powers, blind obedience, or the desire to have others solve problems for us.

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