

A Jewish View on Leadership

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Though heads of Jewish organizations are not always familiar with them, classical Jewish sources offer contemporary leaders a variety of sophisticated insights into effective leadership. Many of these premodern texts articulate perspectives that lie at the heart of today's widely accepted best practices. This article highlights three examples of Judaism's teachings on effective leadership that have particular resonance for today's business, political, and communal leaders.

One of the ironies of American Jewish organizational life in the twenty-first century is the widespread tendency for Jewish groups to seek advice on leadership from well-regarded experts *outside* the Jewish community while remaining unaware of the profound insights on these matters found *within* classical Jewish tradition.¹

In recent years it has become de rigeur for North American Jewish philanthropists to invite internationally known leadership thinkers to address their conclaves, and for Jewish organizations to send rising lay and professional stars to study at the great academic and business centers of leadership

training in America. Outside management and leadership consultants are hired to design training programs for Jewish communal officers, and corporate strategists craft processes and metrics for benchmarking achievements in Jewish groups (see Hillel Foundation, 2006; JCCA, n.d.; Siegel, 2005a). Academic programs seek to train the next generation of Jewish communal professionals in principles of effective business and public administration, whereas organizational development experts oversee long-range planning efforts across the Jewish community (Pomerance, 2005a,b; Tigay, 2005). Even those who work with preteens today are encouraged to enhance their leadership capacities by studying with a variety of elite business school faculty (Foundation for Jewish Camping, n.d.).

In and of themselves these pursuits of best practices are not only beneficial but they also comport fully with the advice of the great medieval thinker and legalist, Moses Maimonides, who instructed his readers to "consider the truth regardless of the source" (*Shmoneh Perakim*). Such efforts are ironic, then, not because of their unabashed embrace of external wisdom. In-

¹Throughout this article I discuss leadership in a variety of organizational contexts: synagogues, federations, community relations agencies, JCCs, even corporate and political enterprises. I do so fully cognizant of the fact that major differences exist among such divergent organizations, including important matters of governance, staffing, and funding. Yet, those who lead organizations, whether for-profit or not-for-profit, faith-based or cultural, confront several shared issues (some of which I address in this article), including but not limited to the effective exercise of power, appropriate use of authority, empowerment of leadership in others, succession planning, and team building.

stead, the enchantment with secular expertise seems to bring with it an unspoken assumption that Judaism has little of value to contribute to this discussion. As a result, would-be communal leaders are denied the opportunity to learn about and incorporate challenging and provocative *Jewish* perspectives into their own work. Adding to this irony is the fact that many of the most prominent and progressive leadership theories averred by industry and academe today bear a striking resemblance to Judaism's classical teachings on the subject.² Thus, when lay and professional leaders of Jewish groups learn about leadership from prominent secular theorists, without knowing it, they frequently encounter approaches that have important analogues in premodern classical Jewish texts.

Great Jewish communities have always sought to blend the best of our own tradition with that of others. In the case of leadership, this begins with the recognition that Jewish sources do, indeed, address leadership efficacy, what it means to wield power, and the importance of nurturing leadership in others. Having emerged from a multiplicity of authors living over a great span of years, in a variety of venues, Jewish sources on leadership offer a great variety of perspectives. Although there is no singular or definitive one-size-fits-all Jewish approach to leadership, it is possible to extract certain overarching themes on pivotal leadership issues from Judaism's classical sources. Far from being antiquated vestiges of a bygone era, this material is often astoundingly au-

courant, providing important perspectives for leaders and their followers even in the twenty-first century. At a minimum then, it seems only reasonable that Jewish groups seeking a meaningful program of leadership training would be willing to consider the wisdom of their own traditions on leadership in concert with the latest theories emanating from the halls of American businesses and universities. Doing so will likely make clear that the leadership *Zeitgeist*, embraced so passionately by the American Jewish infrastructure, has roots that are deeply embedded in the soil of classical Judaism.

In my own work as a communal executive and academic I have observed that many Jews, including those who are actively involved in their synagogues and communities, and who serve tirelessly on behalf of the State of Israel and world Jewry, are often surprised to learn how much insight classical Judaism has to offer on the subject of effective leadership. In part, this may be because of the pervasiveness of the myth of Jewish powerlessness. This is the mistaken, yet widespread, notion that because much of premodern history was marked by a lack of Jewish political sovereignty, Jews never had occasion to explore the fine points of effective leadership. Despite its popularity, such a view is baseless, as indicated by the vast amount of classical texts on the subject and the extensive historical record of Jewish communal self-governance throughout the Diaspora.

Another reason why otherwise knowledgeable Jews are often incredulous at the idea that there are authentic Jewish insights on leadership—on power, authority, decision making, and related matters—is that the sources constituting Judaism's perspectives on these issues are not amassed in a singular centralized collection. There is no book of the Torah or tractate of the Talmud wholly devoted to leadership. Instead, this material must be extrapolated by plumbing the depths of diverse texts drawn from

²I discuss this issue in much greater detail in *From Sanctuary to Boardroom: A Jewish Approach to Leadership* (2006). Readers interested in exploring possible areas of convergence might wish to compare (among other examples) classical Jewish sources on humility in leadership with the findings of Jim Collins in *Good to Great: Why Some Companies Make the Leap . . . and Others Don't* (2001); or selected Jewish insights into leadership behavior with Ronald Heifetz's work on authority in *Leadership Without Easy Answers* (1994); or talmudic discussions of serving others with Robert Greenleaf's notion of "servant leadership."

across millennia.³ This article highlights three examples, among many, of Jewish perspectives on effective leadership that are likely to have particular resonance for today's business, political, and communal leaders.

SHARED AND CIRCUMSCRIBED POWER

Reflecting a model first articulated in the Torah itself, Jews throughout history built systems of communal leadership that sought to divide power, rather than allow it to coalesce in a single individual or group. Painfully aware of the scourges of autocracy, many classical Jewish sources suggest that the most effectively run enterprises are those in which power is shared among a diversity of interests—spiritual, political, and educational. Such an approach guarantees that a multiplicity of perspectives are brought to the table of communal discourse and prevents the rise of unilateral leaders whose monopolistic claims on the truth forestall the rise of an engaged followership.

There are numerous examples of power sharing to be found in premodern classical texts. The Torah, for example, relates its importance in the career of Moses when it details the counsel he received from his fa-

ther-in-law, Jethro (see Exodus 18:14–23). Later on, the biblical text stipulates that for King Solomon to assume power properly he had to have the support of both the priest and the prophet (see I Kings 1:38–39). Throughout medieval Europe, Jewish communal rulings often insisted that a ban (*herem*) could only be issued with the joint support of rabbis and wealthy communal trustees. Finally, though not a classical text per se, the tripartite arrangement that characterizes today's religious movements (seminary, professional trade associations for clergy, and umbrella organizations for congregational leaders) is one of several modern examples of the functionally equivalent dynamic.

Further, Jewish authorities have long recognized that for all of its difficulties, power is alluring and enticing. "It is easy to go up to a dais, difficult to come down," taught the sages (*Yalkut, Va'e'tchanan*, 845). The tendency to abuse power is endemic in leadership situations, not because the leaders in question are inherently evil or corrupt, but because the trappings of power are easily misappropriated and exploited. (Remember the story of David and Bathsheba as described in I Kings 11–12?) Rather than condemn strong leadership altogether, however, or advocate a political theory akin to anarchy, seminal Jewish sources acknowledged this reality and went to great lengths to design systems in which a leader's individual powers are circumscribed (see, for example, the constraints on monarchy in Deuteronomy 17:15–20).

In such a model, overall responsibility assumes the form of a matrix in which power is shared, rather than a pyramid in which a single individual exercises absolute authority. To be sure, such an approach to power has its weaknesses. Clarity, unanimity, and the ability to mobilize rapidly are often the first casualties. American Jewish organizational infighting and immobility during the Holocaust represent a sad example (see Bayme, *Understanding Jewish History*, 1997, pp. 391–393). Nonetheless, Jewish communities over time have preferred the

³This is admittedly a tall order for those unfamiliar with the study of classical texts. For this reason specifically, I wrote *From Sanctuary to Boardroom* with the goal of providing readers an accessible presentation of major Jewish sources on leadership. Happily, other works have been published recently that, although different in focus, also attempt to extrapolate principles on leadership from classical Jewish writings. Reading alone, however, will not elucidate these sources. For that, communal professionals, lay leaders, congregational officers, rabbis, and educators must be willing to expend at least the same kinds of energy grappling with these texts as they devote to studying leadership from general sources. If board members, executive committees, and their professional partners are willing to contemplate the significance of this material, to debate its potential applications, and to employ its insights, along with contemporary best practices, their work as effective Jewish leaders will be enhanced materially.

disorganization of shared and limited power to the so-called efficiencies of dictatorial regimes.

Veterans of the Jewish organizational trenches will recognize the manifold real-world applications of a system in which a leader must share power with others who make similar claims. Today's Jewish communities, mirroring their historical antecedents, are consistently marked by internecine tensions between fundraisers and educators, clergy and philanthropists, community relations advocates and academics. In Federations and JCCs, professionals *and* volunteers struggle to navigate the tempestuous waters of their own working relationships, as do congregational rabbis and their boards of trustees. Recognizing that shared power is not only a vital component of the historical Jewish experience but also a desideratum of successful leadership is an important first step in responding to these challenges.

The understanding that truly effective leadership must be limited reverberates not only in organized Jewish life but in politics and business as well. In our own day, the success of "boundary-less" and flattened corporate organizational models suggests that Judaism's insistence on shared and limited power has application well beyond the ancient world. In today's most effectively run enterprises, teamwork is nurtured, information transfer is enhanced, and networking is expanded because of a systemic commitment to shared leadership. So too, systems of shared power incubate creativity across a variety of institutional silos and create invested stakeholders and constituents (Greenberg-Walt & Robertson, 2001; Kerr, 2001). As a variety of high-profile contemporary events, from Abu Ghreib to Enron, make clear, in systems in which power sharing is not a defining feature, the potential for unbridled abuse predominates.

Tempting as it may be to embrace a view of leadership in which a single individual, granted sweeping powers, is called on to "save" or "fix" an organization, a dominant

trend in Judaism has always rejected that approach. (This is not to suggest that individual Jewish communities have not fallen prey to messianic movements on occasion; for more on the leadership of messianic movements in Jewish history see my book, *Models and Meanings in the History of Jewish Leadership*, 2004). Individuals aspiring to greatness as *Jewish* leaders must look carefully at personal leadership styles and the structural design of their organizations to ensure a system of shared and circumscribed power.

REBUKE AND TEAM BUILDING

Jewish groups, accustomed to seeking leadership advice only from secular experts, will be surprised to learn that it may be possible to derive a key lesson in effective team building from an otherwise obscure commandment in the Bible, known as rebuke, or *tokhahah* in Hebrew. To be sure, many are troubled by the injunction to "reprove your neighbor," found in Leviticus 19:17: "You shall not hate your kinsfolk in your heart. Reprove your neighbor, but incur no guilt because of him."⁴ To moderns, the idea of chastising another's behavior (except, perhaps, for that of a minor child's) seems incongruous with the prevailing principle of "minding your own business." How inappropriate it seems to meddle in the affairs of another. Certainly, in a business setting individuals are normally reticent to challenge the behavior of those whom they do not supervise, and in an organizational context, most people are unaccustomed to holding others responsible for their actions as volunteer committee members or trustees.

In point of fact, however, when considered in light of classical commentaries and

⁴In his translation of this verse the biblical scholar, Richard Elliott Friedman, renders the text, "You shall not hate your brother in your heart. You shall criticize your fellow, so you shall not bear sin over him" (emphasis included). See Richard Elliott Friedman, *Commentary on the Torah* (2001, p. 381).

contemporary research, this commandment may have a great deal to teach today's Jewish leaders about building better teams. It is also likely that this precept has much of value to contribute to a discussion of effective supervision, which, although related, is not the same as organizational leadership, and is thus outside the scope of this article. Although it is clear that, on its face, the Torah is not talking about teamwork in an organizational context, rabbinic authorities throughout the ages have interpreted this verse to mean that all members of a society are duty-bound to share responsibility for the errant behavior of its members. To Maimonides, the desired outcome of *tokhahah* is the improvement and regeneration of the individual offender and, by extension, those with whom he or she interacts (*Mishneh Torah, Deot 6:6-7*). Other classical authorities point out that the injunction to rebuke follows the verse, "You shall not hate your kinsfolk." Thus, *not* correcting a colleague is tantamount to despising him or her. Some commentaries even go so far as to argue that failure to correct the behavior of an associate is to, in effect, personally commit and thus repeat the same egregious error (see for example Moses Nahmanides on Leviticus 19:12). In this context then, admonition and chastisement are the logical extensions of communal accountability.

Such accountability, argues Patrick Lencioni (2002), management consultant and author of *The Five Dysfunctions of a Team*, is fundamental to the creation of productive and effective teamwork, which is a central function of all successful leaders. Consider the convergence between the Torah's instructions and Lencioni's own research. "In the context of teamwork," he notes, accountability "refers specifically to the willingness of team members to call their peers on performance or behaviors that might hurt the team." "Members of great teams improve their relationships," he argues, "by holding one another accountable, thus demonstrating that they respect each other and have high expectations for one another's

performance" (Lencioni, 2002, pp. 212-213). Simply stated, Lencioni's findings corroborate ancient Jewish wisdom. The willingness of members to hold each other accountable as individuals and as part of a collective, no matter how difficult or unpleasant, is the key factor in constructing teams that work. Doing so ensures that substandard performers are pressured to improve and that all team members are held to the same superior expectations.

Once again, the application of a sacred Jewish principle in a contemporary organizational context leads to the possibility of vastly improved performance and long-term institutional success. Despite the repeated use of familial metaphors ("Here at Temple XYZ, we're really one big family"), frequent references to a lay-professional "partnership," and the illusion of functioning as "a well-oiled team," the realities of Jewish organizational life (and business in general) are often quite different. It is not enough to simply invoke the well-trod concept of accountability as discussed in the general literature. The biblical command to reproach one's neighbor presupposes a commitment to mutual interdependence that goes well beyond platitudinous expressions of one-for-all-and-all-for-one. In the Torah's view (a view that has been substantiated by contemporary research findings on teams), effective teamwork is not about minimizing differences in search of a false sense of harmony. Boards of trustees that ignore divergent values and perspectives within their ranks because exploring and confronting them are too uncomfortable are not really serving their constituents. Allowing the pursuit of consensus to impede bold decision making out of fear of alienating a major contributor (or customer) is not effective leadership. Tolerating professional incompetence or inappropriate behavior from lay leaders because of a dearth of viable alternatives perpetuates dysfunction throughout the enterprise.

In its teaching about *tokhahah* then, the Torah provides today's Jewish leaders with

an invaluable lesson. Before any progress can be made toward the construction of a sophisticated organizational team, the leader must establish the overarching principle that all members are expected to hold themselves and each other mutually accountable. This means a willingness to challenge, even admonish, the errant behavior of team members as the ultimate sign of respect and confidence.

LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT, SUCCESSION PLANNING AND TRANSITIONING

Recent surveys reveal that in nearly 60% of nonprofit corporations neither the boards nor the upper echelon of professionals have discussed executive transition plans during the past 24 months. This is despite the fact that as many as 40% of current nonprofit CEOs report actually planning to leave their posts within the next two years (Bernthal & Wellins, 2006; *Daring to Lead*, 2006; Edell, 2006). American Jewish groups are certainly no strangers to this reality. For all the business savvy and acumen purported to exist on Jewish boards, there is little empirical evidence to suggest that congregations with long-serving rabbis, Federations and Centers with veteran executives, or educational institutions with tenured senior administrators give the issue of succession serious consideration (for an interesting discussion of the troubling state of transition planning in Jewish day schools, for example, see the article by Barry Dym, "Leadership Transition in Jewish Day Schools," n.d.).

Waiting for a retirement announcement before thinking about next steps or failing to create a pipeline of new leaders to meet the future needs of the organization is antithetical to effective leadership. The situation is often more acute in the lay leadership realm in which short terms, regular rotation of officers and trustees, and considerable turnover among committee chairs only underscore the urgency of articulating

a comprehensive and systematic approach to leadership transition (Windmueller, 1997). Deferring decisions until the eleventh hour and parachuting new individuals into office without serious preparation irreparably compromise an organization's long-term efficacy.

Related to these issues is the widely acknowledged lack of mentoring and coaching available for many aspiring lay and professional leaders in the organized Jewish community (Bronznick, 2000; Olidort, 2005; Siegel, 2005b; Spence, 2006). An as-yet unpublished research project conducted for the Spertus Institute of Jewish Studies (2006) in Chicago on the state of Jewish leadership education interviewed more than 30 volunteer and professional heads of major American Jewish enterprises. Overwhelmingly, respondents pointed to a "real lack" of mentors for both younger professionals and up-and-coming lay leaders. Although some progress is being made in select corners of the organized Jewish community, many lay and professional leaders are routinely elevated to positions of importance without appropriate training and absent the ongoing opportunity for mentoring and coaching.⁵

That any of this should be true in Jewish organizations is particularly troublesome in light of the overarching legacy of Moses, believed by many to be the quintessential Jewish leader. In relating pivotal instances in his life and career, the biblical narrative

⁵There is anecdotal evidence to suggest that rabbis and communal executives are increasingly being encouraged by their boards to seek out executive coaches. Interestingly, several prominent executive coaching firms now include rabbinical and/or Jewish communal professional coaching among their list of advertised services. Human Resource departments of leading Jewish organizations across the country are also beginning to explore the importance of formal coaching and mentoring for both their volunteer and professional leaders. For additional insight into these trends, see, "Guide to Selecting A Coach or Expert" on the Web site of the Partnership for Excellence in Jewish Education (2007) and Jack H. Bloom, *The Rabbi as Symbolic Exemplar* (2002).

describes Moses' unswerving commitment to empowering the leadership of others for the long-term good of the people. In his reaction to the aspiring, albeit unsanctioned, leadership of Eldad and Medad (Numbers 11:24–29), or his insistence (even on what was surely the worst day of his life, having just been denied entrance to the Promised Land) that the people needed a new leader to carry on the mission (Numbers 27:15–17), or the unconditional way in which he embraced Joshua as his successor (Numbers 27:22–23 and Rashi's Commentary), Moses knew that no leader's job is complete unless and until succession plans are fully formulated and underway. Notwithstanding his unparalleled status, Moses (renowned in Jewish sources for his personal humility; see Numbers 12:3) understood that no leader can create a cult of personality and hope to succeed in the long term. Despite being the elect of God, he recognized that the most important job of a leader is cultivating leadership in others.

In view of Moses' uncontested status as the prototypical Jewish leader, those who care deeply about the state of Jewish leadership would do well to study and *apply* his example to their own leadership work. Difficult as it may be for some in today's Jewish world to envision life beyond themselves, as effective leaders that is precisely what they must do. So too, organizational nominating committees must take the long view by planning for more than just the next term. Committees require vice-chairs as well as chairs, and it is not enough to think about who the next president will be six months before the Annual Meeting. And, it must be said: lay people serving on boards of trustees abrogate the great leadership tradition of Moses and are derelict in their duties if they fail to contemplate and address the issue of executive and rabbinic succession long before a crisis has been reached.

As is true with the other examples discussed in this article, the notion that a leader is, above all else, responsible for the identification and nurturing of the next gen-

eration of leadership has been corroborated consistently by contemporary research and best practices. Ram Charan, for example, in *Know-How: The Eight Skills That Separate People Who Perform From Those Who Don't* (2006), points out that truly great leaders aggressively search for people with leadership potential and then create regular opportunities that allow them to grow within the enterprise. Today, the most effective leaders in the most successful companies and organizations invest heavily in the identification, training, and preparation of those who will succeed them (Conger & Benjamin, 1990; Giber, Carter, & Goldmith, 2000). In these enterprises, leadership has become a system-wide capability, not an individual personality trait (O'Toole, 2001). As the examples from the life of Moses suggest, leadership training and development require a substantial personal commitment on the part of the incumbent leader and can only be accomplished over a protracted period of time (Lewis, 2004, 2007).

In a free and open society, no congregation or communal organization is under any obligation to embrace Judaism's classical wisdom on leadership, however insightful. All are free to pursue their quest of the latest theories on how to lead successfully from a variety of sources. As this article has tried to suggest, however, many of what are widely recognized as effective leadership's first principles derive from Judaism's foundational texts. In an era in which so many are turning to Jewish sources for perspective on a panoply of personal spiritual issues, those who seek to don the mantle of Jewish leader should do no less.

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