

## Mark of a good leader

Erev RH 2017

General Motors, feeling it was time for a shake-up, hired a new CEO. The new boss was determined to rid the company of all slackers. On a tour of the facilities, the CEO noticed a guy leaning on a wall. The room was full of workers and he wanted to let them know that he meant business. He walked up to the guy leaning against the wall and asked, "How much money do you make in a week?" A little surprised, the young man looked at him and replied, "*I make \$400 a week. Why?*" The CEO then hands the guy \$1,600 in cash and screams, "Here's four weeks' pay, now **GET OUT** and don't come back!" Feeling pretty good about himself, the CEO looked around the room and asked, "Does anyone want to tell me what that bloody slacker did here?" From across the room came a voice: "**Ah, that was the pizza delivery guy from Domino's.**"

There is no doubt there are good and bad bosses and managers. We have all dealt with our fair share. However, when you think of a leader, what comes to mind? Is it a CEO, president, prime minister, congressman/woman, principal, scout leader, superintendent, or teacher? Who are great leaders of history? Are they George Washington, Gandhi, Martin Luther King Jr, Ronald Reagan, or JFK? As we think of great leaders, what personal qualities did they have? What made them great? Is it responsibility, caring for the people or community one serves, taking initiative, enacting lasting change, knowing one's limitations, or having the ability to grow? Most of us would say, at the very least, a leader is someone who has other people following him or her. This can take many different forms. A leader can instruct, direct, compel, or inspire others. For us, leaders can have a significant influence on our lives, our neighborhood, community, and nation.

We are well aware though that just because one is in a lead position that doesn't necessarily mean that she is a good leader. Many of us growing up remember the popular boy or girl who used his/her power to intimidate other students. Other kids wanted to be in their good graces and so assisted them in putting down vulnerable students. I remember a few girls constantly making fun of me in seventh grade homeroom as I tried to concentrate on my school work. They would heckle me from across the classroom and sometimes come close and jeer. This was at a time, when teachers would look the other way unless a physical altercation ensued. I suffered for months, until I fought back, that's another story, and then they left me alone. I realized that girls followed this 'queen bee' until they were challenged. Sadly, I can think of more examples from my childhood of bullies. I hope for you, kids today, this isn't the case. I think most of us would agree that the school tormentor is a bad leader.

I can think of other bad examples. Remember the David Koresh, cult leader of the Branch Davidians in Waco, Texas? He married teenage girls, abused children, amassed weapons, and revolted against the authorities in the 1993 raid on his compound. Yep, this is yet another example of a corrupt leader. And when we look at history, we would all agree that Hitler and the Nazis, abused their positions of power for murder and evil.

These are examples of leadership gone awry. People sometimes follow a person who has charisma or who speaks to their fears or hopes even though they aren't good leaders or even good people. The question that I want to pose to you is what makes someone a good leader?

In Judaism, there is a teaching about the yetzer hara, the evil inclination. This is the part of ourselves that embodies our desires. We are taught that each of us have a yetzer hara but the greater the man, the greater his yetzer hara. In many ways, this makes sense because the more power one has, the greater access he will have to money, influential people, and more. The temptation can be great. As a side note, I believe a woman is just as vulnerable to this as well. Great people swell with their influence and convince themselves that they are above proprieties, laws, and even ethical obligations.

Recently, we have learned about the dean of USC's medical school, Dr. Carmen Puliafito. Oh, he was a million dollar fundraiser for the school and viewed as an assent until reports surfaced describing his rampant drug use, cavorting with young women, and hanging out with criminals. One woman who overdosed in the Pasadena hotel room told the Times, "She met Puliafito in early 2015 while working as a prostitute. She said they were constant companions... and that Puliafito used drugs with her and sometimes brought her and other members of their circle to the USC campus after hours to party. "He would say, 'They love me around here. The medical students think I am God,'" Warren said."<sup>1</sup> There is no doubt that a person with opportunity will have greater temptation but there are other factors that can make a person into a good or poor leader.

There was a kingdom many years ago that had a strange custom that whenever the king died, a royal bird was sent out. Whomever the bird landed on, was instantly proclaimed king. Well, there was a servant who would make people laugh. He would put on his cap of chicken feathers, lamb hoof belt, and beat his drum to the joy of his audience. One night, he had a weird dream of seeds. It was perplexing but the next day when he was getting ready to put on a show at the royal court, he noticed bird seed stuck to his shoe. Scooping them up, he affixed them to his

crown of chicken feathers and strutted into the courtyard. He pretended he was a chicken, he sang, and made jokes but no one laughed. It was only when finished that he learned that the king had died and the people were sad.

The royal bird swooshed through the courtyard and to everyone's shock, landed on the servant. "Get away bird!" he exclaimed as the bird landed on his head. The bird refused to be dislodged and the people around him shouted, "A new king! A new king has been chosen!" They carried the bewildered servant, changed his clothes, and told him that he must not forget that now he was king.

Can you imagine such a change? The new king looked out over his people. The royal garments weighed heavily on his body. "Build me a hut!" he commanded. His people were confused. "Build me hut, right next the palace. It must be rudimentary with no windows and a door that locks," he explained. The servant was king and he must be obeyed. The new king went inside his simple hut and prayed. When he came out, he instituted some new laws. He began by reinstating a law from the Torah that slaves shall only serve for 6 years. Months went by and the king still would go into his hut and sit by himself. And then he made a law stating that every slave shall be paid for his labor. Time went by. And then the king commanded that there should be no more slaves at all.

Some years later, one of his ministers asked him why he kept going into this hut adjacent to the palace. The king said, "Would you like to see?" The minister entered with him, through the wooden door, and smelled the straw, mud, and wood walls. And then he saw in the middle of the dwelling, a chicken feather crown, belt made of lamb hooves, and a small drum. "Why do you have these things?" he inquired. The king turned to his minister and said, "You made me promise not to forget that I was king. Well, I promised God that I would not forget that I was a servant."<sup>2</sup>

I suppose one measure of a good leader is humility and a willingness to remember harder times in one's life in order to be more sympathetic to the suffering of others. The servant refused to forget what it was like to struggle for his living. He made sure to remember others who were in his position. I mentioned about being made fun of in junior high. The one good thing that came of that experience, was a greater compassion for other kids in the same situation. I knew how it felt to be mocked and to feel powerless to change the behavior of others. I forgot about all of that until I was visiting Buffalo in my twenties when a cashier recognized me. I didn't remember who she was but she told me that I was one of the few kids at the high school

who was nice to her. I remember putting my shampoo in my bag and thinking to myself that she gave me a gift. I had no idea that anyone thought of me in that way. I felt good about myself.

Leaders not only have to keep their yetzer hara under control but in order to be good they have to look out for the wellbeing of the people they serve. A good leader is not just interested in his/her personal gain but they must care about making things better for their country, community, synagogue, school, and team. They have to be able to rise above the fray, see the forest as opposed to the individual trees, and in the words of Spock from Star Trek recognize that “the needs of the many outweigh the needs of the few.”

I’m fascinated with a teaching out of Pirkei Avot, Ben Zoma said, Ehzewho chacham?<sup>3</sup> Who is wise? How would you answer that question? Who is wise? We may commonly think of someone with years of experiences, lots of knowledge, a sage. But according to this teaching, it asks, “Who is wise?” The answer is, “One who learns from everyone, as it is said, “From all who teach me, I gained understanding.” (Ps. 119:99) What a simple definition of wisdom! Being open to learning from people, knowing that we don’t have all the answers, is how one can become wise. Let’s take that in for a minute. It can take the form of hearing input from others, seeking advice from those with experience, and in general recognizing there is a lot to know and understand. There is no way that any one person can possess enough knowledge to successfully lead alone. We need others. We need other perspectives and we need knowledge and insights. I believe the best leaders rely on knowledge and input from others in order to make conscientious decisions.

Being a good leader is a lot like being a good person. We all have a lot to learn from books, studies, and from people. Often we think of leadership in big, historical terms but there are opportunities for good leadership in school, work, synagogue, and community groups. I believe it’s about having the right personal characteristics, a willingness to learn, humility and also a sense of responsibility. Good leaders put the well-being of the people they serve above their own personal entitlement. Good leaders try to lift up all the people in their community and give opportunities for change and growth. Good leaders are good people, not perfect, but good. They strive to better their school, work place environment, and neighborhood and they are willing to integrate the views of others.

Sometimes leaders don’t realize the potential they may have. We all know of Moses. The one who became the spokesman for our people, led us out of Egypt and through the wilderness. Are you aware though that he didn’t want to be a leader for the Israelites? At the burning bush,

God commanded him to go before Pharaoh. Moses was terrified. He asked God for help in convincing the people. God showed him how to turn his rod into a snake and skin into leprosy. And then Moses told God that he doesn't speak well and has never been able to speak well. Moses had a speech impediment! Do you know what God said? God said, "Who makes a person blind or deaf??" And then insisted that Moses goes back to Egypt.

Sometimes we are not ready to be a leader but we are needed nevertheless. Leaders are not born they are grown, nurtured, and learn from their mistakes and failures. Even if we think that we are shy, don't want to assert ourselves, or believe that we don't have what it takes, we can be mistaken. I find that many people who have a willingness to learn and grow can become great leaders even in small settings. Each of us can look at how we can make our schools better, our neighborhoods safer, and our country more just, and our work places more collaborative. We can make a difference if we have a willingness to step forward.

We live in a time where we need more good leaders. We need people who are motivated by kindness, compassion, and understanding. People who can keep their yetzer hara under control, who can listen to others, and think before they act. There are opportunities for leadership in our day to day life. Even if we don't strive to change the arc of history or initiate a revolution, we can still make a difference in bringing people together, and helping our community. May our new year be a time for new beginnings. May we be able to make a difference in the lives of others. And may we help raise up a new generation of good, responsible leaders.

#### Notes:

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.latimes.com/local/california/la-me-usc-doctor-20170717-htmstory.html>

<sup>2</sup> Sidrah Stories by Steven Rosman. Page 137. Story attributed to Molly Cone, adapted from "A servant when he reigns," Folktales of Israel

<sup>3</sup>Pirkei Avot 4:1

#### Succah 59 b

Abaye said:... A certain Elder came and taught him: Anyone who is greater than another, his evil inclination is greater than his. Therefore, Abaye should not feel regret, as his realization is a consequence of his greatness.