

We need to model good leadership

Rosh Hashanah morning 2025

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The captain of a tall wooden war ship in the 1800s had a special routine when an enemy ship was spotted on the horizon. The captain would say to the ensign, “Get me my red shirt.” On all of these occasions, the ship would fend off the enemy vessel. One night the ensign asked the captain why he always asked for his red shirt. The captain replied, “If I am wounded in battle, the blood will not show and the men will continue to fight.” The ensign was impressed that the ship had such a brave captain. The next morning the lookout shouted as he peered through his telescope, “Ten enemy ships on the horizon!” After a brief pause, the captain said to the ensign, “Get me my brown pants.”¹

Is the captain in this off putting joke a good leader? He’s trying to protect his men from seeing his injury, fear, or indignity. I’ll leave that up to you but I do want to raise the idea of leadership. In this sermon, I will refrain from mentioning any leaders by name, whether they are in the present or even historical, because I believe it will get in the way of exploring this issue.

We are undoubtedly living in tumultuous times where there is a lot of uncertainty, anxiety, and fear. Our society is changing at a rapid pace through technology. When we turn on our devices, we see in seconds, ideas, computer generated images, and videos that blur the line between truth and falsehood. On social media sites, anyone can become an influencer and can post any crazy idea and some of them get liked, retweeted, and reposted.

We are also living in a time of distrust of those in authority and leadership. There is a coarseness we hear from those who lead, while politeness, kindness, and respect seem to be in short supply. And so, I ask you, in this time of chaos, what do you believe are the marks of a good leader? It’s a new Jewish year after all and this is time for reflection so we can reinforce our values and embody them for the betterment of not only ourselves and families but for our community as well.

In reflecting on Judaism and the origins of Democracy, I was thumbing through some ancient Greek philosophy from my years in college. Plato wrote The Republic in the 5th century BCE, i.e., 2500 years ago. He features the philosopher Socrates, whom he met at a young age, in dialogue with a man called Glaucon, who has the same name as Plato’s brother. In The Republic, we have discussions of leadership most famously in the simile of the cave.² In this allegory, we are to imagine a dark cave where theoretical prisoners have been shackled since birth. Behind them, there is a fire burning that casts shadows of puppets on the opposing wall. Because of the prisoners’ physical and experiential limits, they assume that these shadows are the whole truth of reality.

A good leader for Socrates, is none other than an enlightened philosopher, who was once a prisoner himself. However, after being freed from the darkness and able to see reality as it is, he would descend once again into the cave. Socrates relates this one would "...get used to seeing in the dark; once you get used to it you will see a thousand times better than they do and will distinguish the various shadows, and know what they are shadows of, because you have seen the truth about things admirable and just and good. And so our state and yours will be really awake, and not merely dreaming like most societies today, with their shadow battles and their struggles for political power, which they treat as some great prize..."³

Socrates suggests that there is a greater truth behind all that we see and hear. The mark of a good leader, for him, is one who not only knows the truth but is willing to go down to the people. And so, as others are engaged in shadowy battles of little import, the good leader instead seeks to enlighten his people.

Why are people engaged in dubious fights? For Socrates, it is because there are leaders who desire power. Our 5th century BCE sage warns, "If you get, in public affairs, men whose life is impoverished and destitute of personal satisfactions, but who hope to snatch some compensation for their own inadequacy from a political career, there can never be good government. They start fighting for power, and the consequent internal and domestic conflicts ruin both them and society."⁴

Well, I'm sure that you didn't think your rabbi would be quoting ancient Greek philosophy during the High Holy Days. I am doing so because Greek philosophy has undergirded Western civilization and has majorly influenced Judaism. I also believe that Socrates' teachings are relevant to today. I am sure many of us can think about leaders, commanders, and kings throughout history who wanted power to fill a void in themselves. These are those who strive to compensate for their own shortcomings. Socrates, on the other hand states that those who are **not** eager to be leaders are ideal when he writes, "the state who prospective rulers come to their duties with least enthusiasm is bound to have the best and most tranquil government, and the state who rulers are eager to rule the worst."⁵ And so, what is a good leader for Socrates? It is one who seeks knowledge, wisdom, truth and who is willing to help others.

Of course, in such great works as The Republic, Socrates emphasizes how philosophers are the ones most likely to be good leaders. This resonated with me in college but I must share with you my favorite joke about the difference between a psychologist and a philosopher. Full disclosure, at the beginning of my college experience, I was a psychology major and then switched mid-way through to philosophy because I liked the mental flexibility or ability to create ideas and narratives. Well, a psychologist and a philosopher will identify a significant problem in society. The psychologist points his finger at it and works to solve it. The philosopher, on the

other hand, points that same finger, at the same problem, but spends all his time staring at his finger. Okay, maybe philosophers are not always the best leaders.

I do though agree with Socrates' teaching that the best leaders are willing to be among the people and help rise them up. Those who crave for their names to be in the spot light and to increase their power, on the other hand, are not going necessarily to be good leaders. Of course, this would disqualify most of those who seek governance today.

In order to go down into the depths and help others who only see shadows, requires a degree of humility and love for people. In Judaism, we don't have a better role model than Moses. Yes, in the Torah, we are told that our great leader who faced off against Pharaoh and led our kvetching hoards in the wilderness, had a speech impediment. In the Torah, God insists that Moses is the one to go back to Egypt to confront Pharaoh. Moses says, "Please, O my lord, I have never been a man of words, either in times past or now that You have spoken to Your servant; I am slow of speech and slow of tongue." God's response is unequivocal, "Who gives humans speech? Who makes them dumb or deaf, seeing or blind? Is it not I, Adonai? Now go, and I will be with you as you speak and will instruct you what to say."⁶

Well, Moses despite his difficulty with speech and his insecurity, does indeed go to Egypt. He succeeds with God's power to liberate the Israelites. Even with this triumph, our people don't make things easy on him. The Israelites complain about lack of water, the manna they have to eat, as they reminisce on the good ole days in Egypt. Even when Moses ascends Mount Sinai to get the Torah, only three months after our liberation, our people give in to fear and worship the Golden Calf. And then at the beginning of the second year, we are on the cusp of the Promised Land but 10 out of the 12 scouts come back with exaggerated reports of the dangers. Moses, despite all our people's ingratitude and juvenile behavior, sticks with us even when God offers him a new group of people.

And so, how can we be like Moses? Recognizing our limits, knowing that we are not the equal of God, feeling responsibility for the people we serve, and not giving up even when it is hard or takes longer than anticipated. I'm sure many of us have had the experience of working on a project or initiative longer than we anticipated. Perhaps, we have had frustration dealing with other people's idiosyncrasies. And maybe at times, we weren't sure we were up to the task at hand. But to be like Moses, means to recognize the greater good, the larger goals, and even in times of frustration, to remind ourselves of why we are doing the work that we are.

I think you can see where I am going with this sermon. It's about us. You and me. And the many ways that we demonstrate leadership in our day to day lives. It's about reflecting on our deeds and actions and striving to do good whenever possible. Our ancient teachings can help us think through qualities and traits that we value and this is why I am sharing with you some great teachings on leadership.

When I was preparing my study guide on my novel, *Awake, Awake, Deborah!* with Rabbi Wendy Pein, she had me include this very interesting text about different styles of leadership. In the Talmud, written in the 6th century C.E., the rabbis are debating what qualities their leader should have to head the Yeshiva, their school of study. One group prefers a person who is like Mount Sinai, the site of the revelation of our Torah. Being like Sinai means that a leader would have a lot of knowledge. The other group felt that they want a person who uproots mountains because they are decisive and take action. And so, Rav Yosef, a contender for leadership, they said was like Sinai and Rabba was a type of leader who uproots mountains. The rabbis were unable to agree and so they sent a message from Babylonia to Israel inquiring as to what which quality should take precedence. The answer from Israel was as follows, “Sinai is preferable, as the master said,” meaning, one who is expert in the sources.

And so, Rav Yosef, being like Sinai was to be the chosen one. However, he declined the position. Instead, Rabba took the reins of leadership for some years. Was Rav Yosef bitter or remorseful? Apparently not, because the Talmud tells us that Rav Yosef gave him the respect of his position. Interestingly, though, when Rabba’s term was up, it was then that Rav Yosef served as head of the Yeshiva.⁷

What is remarkable in this teaching is that even though Rav Yosef was clearly the preferred leader, he humbly stepped aside and awaited his turn. It’s a fascinating teaching on differing leadership styles but also of a kind of coexistence. I recognize this is a quality missing today, where people are reticent to relinquish power, but back 1500 years ago, in the Talmud, it was recognized as a benefit for the community.

Also, it’s fascinating how this text highlights different kinds of leadership styles. We can appreciate the value of a leader who can take decisive action and the importance of leaders with knowledge. There are certainly times when a leader should be thoughtful, contemplate different possibilities, and be prudent. And yet, there are times when action must be taken immediately. A truly good leader, in my opinion, would have both of these qualities where she could be like Sinai and explore the causes and consequences of action and then at other times when urgency dictates, take immediate action. To be a good leader would require them, in either scenario, to advocate for the greater good of their people.

A last text that I would like to share is from Maimonides in the Middle Ages.

He writes, “Only wise and intelligent men, who are eminent in Torah scholarship and possess extensive knowledge, should be appointed members of either the Great or the Small Sanhedrin. They should be somewhat aware of such branches as medicine, mathematics, astronomy, forecasting constellations, astrology, methods of soothsayers, augurs and wizards as well as idolatrous superstitions, and the like, in order to be competent in dealing with them.—

Although we do not insist upon all these requirements in the case of a court-of-three, nevertheless it is desirable that each of the three should be endowed with the following qualifications: **wisdom, humility, reverence, disdain of gain, love of truth, loved by fellow men, and of a good reputation.**”⁸

Maimonides advocates for leaders who are knowledgeable in Torah but also have a general education. Today, we don't believe that our leaders need to be masters of horoscope or magic but the idea of them being well rounded and having a basic education would seem to be appropriate. Going beyond knowledge though, Maimonides places a strong emphasis on personal traits. He says leaders should be wise, humble, respectful, not looking to gain from their position, pursue truth, loved by people, and have a good reputation.

Maimonides teaching was relevant over a thousand years ago and is still to this day. We recognize that good leaders want to do good for their people as opposed to enriching themselves, are wise, and are humble about what they can and cannot do. Living today in a time where we may find our own leaders wanting, it behooves us to be our own role models. We don't need to be president, representative, CEO, or in any obvious role of leadership to embody the highest character traits. We can make choices in how we speak, what we write, whether we post or not on social media. We can find ourselves in many different settings, where we can choose to express ourselves with kindness and care.

Drawing off the teachings that I have shared with you can be template of sorts in our growth as leaders. Plato's *The Republic* can inspire us to help others who are struggling in the dark. We have all had hardships that we have had to overcome and we have gained knowledge the hard way. We can choose to help others in similar difficulties. We can give them support, advice, and help them transcend the darkness.

We can strive to be like our Biblical leader, Moses, who put his people first and saw us through so many trials in the wilderness and did indeed bring us to the border of the Promised Land. We can explore what it means to move mountains and to act with knowledge and wisdom with accountability. And, we can strive to foster in ourselves the qualities of respect and care for others and doing right for the right kinds of reasons. We can be our own ideal leaders. We can be our own role models.

And if we find ourselves out to sea, facing a flotilla of opposition, we can act despite our fear. Just take charge. Be the leaders required in the moment. If need be, declare code brown, change out our pants, and continue on.

Notes:

¹ <https://maaw.info/GadgetsandGames/BossJokes.htm>

² [Plato The Republic Pg. 317](#)

³ “ “ pg. 324

⁴ “ “ Pg. 325

⁵ “ “ pg. 324

⁶ Exodus 4:10-12

⁷ Horayot 14a

אָמַר רַבִּי יוֹחָנָן: פְּלִיגוּ בַּהּ רַבִּין שְׁמַעוֹן בֶּן גַּמְלִיאֵל וְרַבָּנּוּ, סַד אָמַר: סִינֵי עֲדִיף, וְסַד אָמַר: עוֹקֵר הָרִים עֲדִיף.

§ **Rabbi Yoḥanan said: Rabban Shimon ben Gamliel and the Rabbis disagreed with regard to this matter. One said: Sinai, i.e., one who is extremely knowledgeable, is preferable; and one said: One who uproots mountains, i.e., one who is extremely incisive, is preferable.**

רַב יוֹסֵף סִינֵי, רַבָּה עוֹקֵר הָרִים. שְׁלַחוּ לְתַמָּן: אֵיזָה מֵהֶם קוֹדֵם? שְׁלַחוּ לְהוֹ: סִינֵי עֲדִיף, דְּאָמַר מֶר: הַכֹּל צָרִיכִין לְמַרִּי חֲטִיָּא, וְאֶפִּילוּ הָכִי לֹא קַבִּיל רַב יוֹסֵף עָלֶיהָ. מְלַךְ רַבָּה עֲשָׂרִין וְתַרְסֵי שָׁנִין, וְהִדַּר מְלַךְ רַב יוֹסֵף. וְכֹל שְׁנֵי דְמְלַךְ רַבָּה, רַב יוֹסֵף אֶפִּילוּ אוּמְנָא לְבִיתֵיהּ לֹא (תְּלִיף).

The Gemara relates that this is not merely a theoretical dispute; rather, at one point it had practical ramifications. **Rav Yosef was Sinai; Rabba was one who uproots mountains. They sent a message from Babylonia to there, Eretz Yisrael: Which takes precedence? They sent in response: Sinai is preferable, as the Master said: Everyone requires the owner of the wheat, i.e., one who is expert in the sources. And even so, Rav Yosef did not accept upon himself the appointment of head of the yeshiva. Rabba reigned for twenty-two years, and then Rav Yosef reigned.** The Gemara relates that in **all those years that Rabba presided, Rav Yosef did not even call a bloodletter to his home.** Rav Yosef did not assume even the slightest air of authority, in deference to Rabba, and would go to seek out the bloodletter rather than expecting that the bloodletter would accommodate him.

⁸ Maimonides from the Mishneh Torah, Sanhedrin 2:1-7.