

Values That Make A Leader

Last evening I addressed some of the sadness we are feeling in these strange and unprecedented times. I encouraged us to specifically name what we are grieving over, to allow ourselves to sit with emotions such as anger and sorrow, and I suggested we look to our Jewish tradition for guidance which teaches us to find blessings in the darkest of times and to not despair. As your rabbi, your teacher, I am humbled by the opportunity to share the wisdom of this great heritage as it relates to topics both ancient and modern. Many of us walk through life proud of our Jewish roots but when it comes to making decisions, both small and large, we do not weigh the advice Judaism has for us. We should be asking: What are the relevant Jewish values that pertain to this situation or question? And so I see this as one of my most sacred responsibilities: to present the Jewish perspective so you can make the most informed decision possible. To be a Jew is to ask questions and challenge one's own viewpoint.

In the next five weeks, most of us will be voting for president of the United States from the comfort of our own homes. While the Torah does not specifically command us to vote in political elections, it does make clear that civic engagement applies to Jews no matter where we live. We read in the Talmud:

*Rabbi Yitzhak said: "One may only appoint a leader over a community if he consults with the community and they agree to the appointment."*¹

The proof text given for this statement is a midrash from Exodus whereby God seeks the Israelite's majority opinion to confirm the leadership of Bezalel who will oversee the design of the Mishkan.

A more contemporary example comes from a story about the Chazon Ish, a Russian-born rabbi who spent his later years in Israel.² A man came to the

¹ BT Berakhot 55a

² 1878-1953

rabbi and explained that he didn't have enough money to pay his taxes. This would prohibit him from voting in an upcoming election. The Chazon Ish responded: "You should sell your *tefillin* and pay the taxes...*tefillin*, you can borrow from another, but the right to vote you cannot get from someone else."

There are many examples in our Jewish tradition informing us why we must be civically engaged. Voting is perhaps the most fundamental way we have to express our voices and, as a people who have had basic human rights taken away from us over the millennia, we know how significant this privilege is.

This sermon is not about the importance of voting. We all get that. What I want to speak about with you today are the leadership qualities Judaism values the most. While I acknowledge that these values will probably not sway you to change your vote, no matter who you are intending to vote for, and I would never attempt to influence you one way or another, I do hope that you consider these character traits when you fill out your ballot. What kind of leader do we want representing us and our interests? What qualities does Judaism teach us to look for in our leaders? I am aware that this discussion might cause some of us discomfort. *The rabbi should stick to forgiveness and teshuva, or anti-Semitism. Certainly not politics.* But this is the one day where we are supposed to be uncomfortable. Furthermore, if Judaism is irrelevant to us in the "voting booth" but yet we pay attention to it when it comes to choosing wine for seder, then we ought to re-examine the purpose of Judaism in our lives.

Let's first consider the greatest leader in our history—Moses. Why does Jewish tradition hold Moses in such high regards? The one quality Moses possessed that the Torah singles out, in a rare character description, is his humility. The text reads,

*Now the man Moses was very humble, more than all the men that were upon the face of the earth.*³

³ Numbers 12:3

Humility was Moses' greatest virtue. The fact that this is the one trait the Torah mentions is a signal to us that our tradition equates leadership and greatness with humility.

We witness Moses' humility throughout his life. The first time is when he meets God at the burning bush. God instructs Moses to approach Pharaoh and demand the Hebrews go free. Moses responds:

*Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh?*⁴

Moses then explains his reluctance due to his speech impediment and asks that his brother Aaron be his mouthpiece. Even after Moses musters the courage to approach Pharaoh, he never boasts about how he alone can free the slaves, but instead asks for help along the way. While wandering in the desert, Moses seeks the counsel of Yitro on how to handle so many issues from the community. And when Moses nears the end of his life, his primary concern is the welfare of the Israelites. He says to God:

*Let Adonai, Source of the breath of all flesh, appoint someone over the community who shall go out before them and come in before them and who shall take them out and bring them in, so that Adonai's community may not be like sheep that have no shepherd.*⁵

He passed on the mantle of leadership to Joshua with not a hint of jealousy. Throughout his life, Moses exemplified what it means to be humble. While Moses had his flaws, both as a leader and as a man, his greatness was born out of his humility.

This value is very precious in the Jewish tradition and it is illustrated countless times in our sacred texts. For example, the Talmud discusses ten degrees of moral perfection, including piety, holiness, studying Torah, per-

⁴ Exodus 3:11

⁵ Numbers 27:15-17

forming the mitzvot, and yet the one at the very top is humility.⁶ In another section of the Talmud we learn that one who offers humility to God will be rewarded as though he offered all the sacrifices in the world.⁷

Being humble in the Jewish tradition does not equate to meekness or having low self-esteem. A leader who is humble is one who understands that there needs to be room for themselves and others in any given space. As Alan Morinis, author of *Everyday Holiness* puts it, “being humble doesn’t mean being a nobody, it just means being no more of a somebody than you ought to be.”⁸

Another famous Jewish leader was King Solomon. The reason we sing his praises is due to his wisdom and not because of the many structures he built.

There is the famous episode when two women each claimed to be the mother of the same baby. They come to Solomon to solve the case. He determines the real mother by observing each woman’s reaction to the prospect of dividing the child into two halves. One woman was prepared to accept the decision, but the other begged the King to give the live baby to the other woman. Solomon then knew the second woman was the mother.

People from surrounding nations, most notably the Queen of Sheba, traveled great distances to hear Solomon’s wisdom. Much of it was written down in the many works attributed to him, such as the Song of Songs, the Book of Proverbs and Kohelet.

Wisdom, or *chochmah*, is one of Judaism’s most highly regarded traits a person can have. The rabbis speak at length of this value in Pirke Avot, the Ethics of our Ancestors.

⁶ BT Sanhedrin 43b

⁷ BT Sotah 5b

⁸ Morinis, E. Alan. *Everyday Holiness: The Jewish Spiritual Path of Mussar*. Trumpeter, 2009. p. 47

Ben Zoma said: Who is wise? He who learns from all people, as it is written "I have gained understanding from all my teachers."⁹

In other words, a truly wise person is always looking for ways to expand their knowledge. Wisdom does not necessarily equate to knowing a lot of facts, but always looking for ways to learn, no matter who is teaching.

We also read the following description of wisdom a chapter later:

*A wise man does not speak before one who is greater than he in wisdom,
And does not break into his fellow's speech;
And is not hasty to answer;
He asks what is relevant, and he answers to the point;
And he speaks of the first [point] first, and of the last [point] last;
And concerning that which he has not heard, he says: I have not heard;
And he acknowledges the truth.¹⁰*

The rabbis understood that a wise leader is self-aware of their own knowledge. They admit their own deficiencies. They do not interrupt when someone else, especially someone more knowledgeable is speaking. They consider their words before they speak and they keep to the point in order not to give long-winded arguments that others will not understand. The bottom line is that a wise person is thoughtful with their words and respectful to those who know more than they do on particular subjects. One of my mentors teaches, "The four most important words a leader can utter are, 'you might be right'".¹¹

Lastly, Jewish tradition highly values respect for others and honor, or *kavod*, in our leaders. The rabbis teach us:

⁹ Pirke Avot 4:1

¹⁰ Pirke Avot 5:7

¹¹ Dr. Daniel Feller's Rules of Communal Leadership

*Who is respected? He who respects his fellow.*¹²

This ancient teaching seems so obvious. We merit respect by giving respect. Conversely, those who dishonor others for personal gain and satisfaction are not worthy of the mantle of leadership. If we just wait for respect to come, we'll be waiting a long time. The pursuit of respect is a never-ending burden to the one who requires validation of their own worth. Alan Morinis writes, "Whether we admit it or not, most of us want honor and feel we are not getting it, certainly not in the measure we feel to be our due. So the factor that drives us to be so critical of others is nothing other than our own search for honor, especially in our own eyes."¹³

The sages Hillel and Shammai were fierce competitors in the Beit Midrash 2000 years ago. They couldn't agree on anything. In fact, they once had a dispute last three years. But then the Divine voice broke the tie by giving the nod to Hillel. Why did the school of Hillel prevail? Because they were respectful and modest. In addition to studying their own rulings they also studied those of Shammai, and were even so humble as to mention the rulings of the school of Shammai before their own. Hillel respected his adversary. He may not have agreed with Shammai on much, but he showed great reverence for him.

Our country is in a bad state right now, both socially and politically. We are better than this. Luckily, we have a say in the direction this country takes. Many are calling this the most important election in our lifetime. Today I shared three Jewish values that our tradition raises above others with respect to leadership. There are many others to consider as well, such as empathy, order, and patience, and I hope you do consider them. Our sages may be long gone, but their teachings remain with us. Their wisdom is meant to guide us in all aspects of our lives, even in the voting booth. I hope, above all, that you vote. It is a freedom we cannot disregard. But I also pray that each of us weigh the values of humility, wisdom, and respect for others when we take part in the democratic process of electing a presi-

¹² Pirke Avot 4:1

¹³ Morinis, p. 109

dent. May the day come when we *expect* our leaders to share the positive character traits of Moses, Solomon, and Hillel. *Ken yehi ratzon*, may this be God's will.