

THE TORAH OF LEADERSHIP

ESSAYS ON THE WEEKLY PARASHA



Yeshiva University
THE RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS-HERENSTEIN
CENTER FOR VALUES AND LEADERSHIP



Erica Brown

The Torah *of*
Leadership

Essays on the Weekly Parasha

Maggid Books

Yeshiva University – The Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks-Herenstein
Center for Values and Leadership

The Torah of Leadership
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First Edition, 2024

Maggid Books
An imprint of Koren Publishers Jerusalem Ltd.

POB 8531, New Milford, CT 06776-8531, USA

& POB 4044, Jerusalem 9104001, Israel
www.korenpub.com

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The publication of this book was made possible through the generous support of *The Jewish Book Trust*.

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ISBN 978-1-59264-681-4, *hardcover*

Printed in the United States

With our deepest love and appreciation,
we dedicate this book to our dear wife and mother,

Audrey Wagner עמו"ש

who has taught us all the importance of leadership. Throughout her life she has provided the sound advice, mentorship, and leadership that are so inherent in her nature, character, and world outlook. Whether through her years of teaching and influencing thousands of students at HILL, Hillel, and HAFTR, or her active involvement in benefiting children in Eretz Yisrael through AMIT, ALYN hospital, and other communal organizations, she has instilled in us the importance of reaching out to help and inspire others. This is something she witnessed in the home of her parents, Tessie and Julius Bienenfeld ז"ל, and has passed on this beautiful *mesora* to her children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren.

It is fortuitous that Dr. Erica Brown decided to present to her devoted readers a book on Jewish leadership, because Audrey Wagner is just that, the quintessential Jewish leader, in both family and community matters. She truly understands and taught us that the "We" is more important than the "I," the primary requirement of any leader.

It is our hope and prayer that the *Ribbono shel Olam* grant our dear wife and mother many more years of health and happiness, so that she can continue to provide our family and community with her unique abilities to mentor, advise, and lead.

Max Wagner

Susan Wagner and Alan Klingler

Stephen and Tamara Wagner

Shmuel and Terri Wagner

Barbara and Gavy Simon

Author's Dedication

In memory of

Captain Daniel Shimon Perez

who died serving the State of Israel on October 7, 2023.

*You taught us that heroes do not wait
to answer the call to leadership.*

And in honor of Daniel's parents,

Shelley and Doron Perez

*You taught and continue to teach us
hope in the darkness
and that everyday kindness is a form of redemption.
The redemption will come.*



Contents

Preface: What's New About Jewish Leadership Today?	xiii
Introduction: Reading Leadership into and Out of the Torah	xxiii

LEADERSHIP IN THE BOOK OF GENESIS

<i>Bereshit</i> : A Garden of Possibility	3
<i>Noah</i> : The What and Why of the Ark	7
<i>Lekh Lekha</i> : The Reputation Nation	11
<i>Vayera</i> : Still He Delayed	15
<i>Hayei Sara</i> : "I Will"	19
<i>Toledot</i> : The Lies of Leadership	23
<i>Vayetzeh</i> : Leadership Dreaming	27
<i>Vayishlah</i> : The Gift	31
<i>Vayeshev</i> : Wait For It	35
<i>Miketz</i> : Attracted to Problems	39
<i>Vayigash</i> : The Anxiety of Approach	43
<i>Vayehi</i> : Leading Through Darkness	47

LEADERSHIP IN THE BOOK OF EXODUS

<i>Shemot</i> : Making It Good	53
<i>Va'era</i> : When You Discover You're Like No Other	57
<i>Bo</i> : Leadership and the Prayer Community	61

<i>Beshallah</i> : Confusion and Control	65
<i>Yitro</i> : Celebrating Success	69
<i>Mishpatim</i> : Cursing the Leader/Blessing the Leader	73
<i>Teruma</i> : Sacred Work	78
<i>Tetzaveh</i> : Dress for Leadership Success	82
<i>Ki Tisa</i> : The Stiff-Necked People	85
<i>Vayak'hel</i> : Work and Rest	89
<i>Pekudei</i> : Leadership Gems	93

LEADERSHIP IN THE BOOK OF LEVITICUS

<i>Vayikra</i> : The Power of Invitation	99
<i>Tzav</i> : The Perpetual Flame	103
<i>Shemini</i> : When Leaders Atone	106
<i>Tazria</i> : Taking the Lead	110
<i>Metzora</i> : Where Leadership Lives	114
<i>Aharei Mot</i> : Leadership and the Scapegoat	118
<i>Kedoshim</i> : Thanks for the Feedback	122
<i>Emor</i> : Scrupulous Leadership	126
<i>Behar</i> : The Eternal Stranger	129
<i>Beḥukotai</i> : What is Life Worth?	133

LEADERSHIP IN THE BOOK OF NUMBERS

<i>Bemidbar</i> : Navigating Uncertainty	139
<i>Naso</i> : To Be a Blessing	142
<i>Behaalotekha</i> : Leadership Through Separation	146
<i>Shelah</i> : Leadership and Diversity	149
<i>Korah</i> : When What You Have Is Not Enough	153
<i>Hukat</i> : Have a Little Faith	156
<i>Balak</i> : What the Eye Can't See	160
<i>Pinḥas</i> : The Zealous Leader	164

<i>Matot</i> : Adjusting Sights	168
<i>Masei</i> : Leadership of the Land.....	172

LEADERSHIP IN THE BOOK OF DEUTERONOMY

<i>Devarim</i> : Leadership Stars	179
<i>Va'ethanan</i> : Words on Fire	183
<i>Ekev</i> : Leadership and the Destination Postcard	186
<i>Re'eh</i> : The False Prophet	190
<i>Shofetim</i> : Leadership and Bias: Blinding Wise Eyes	194
<i>Ki Tetzeh</i> : Leadership and Favoritism.....	197
<i>Ki Tavo</i> : Climb Every Mountain	201
<i>Nitzavim</i> : Stand Strong.....	205
<i>Vayelekh</i> : After Leadership.....	209
<i>Haazinu</i> : Healing Leadership	213
<i>VeZot Haberakha</i> : The Greatest Leadership Legacy.....	216
<i>Hadran</i> : Finishing and Beginning Again	220

Acknowledgments	225
Notes.....	227

Preface

What's New About Jewish Leadership Today?

My first book, *Inspired Jewish Leadership*,¹ was published in 2008, over fifteen years ago. My publisher at the time encouraged me to explain its contents with a subtitle: *Practical Approaches to Building Strong Communities*. He advised putting most of the table of contents on the front cover in case a reader was unsure of the relationship between the words “Jewish” and “leadership.” Despite the thousands of books on Christianity and leadership, there were almost no books utilizing Jewish sacred texts that seriously integrated leadership concepts through an organic Torah lens. There were even fewer that applied these ideas to the unique, often idiosyncratic realities of Jewish leadership structures and challenges today with vignettes from professionals and lay leaders serving in Jewish nonprofit organizations.

Several years later, in 2015, Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks published *Lessons in Leadership: A Weekly Reading of the Jewish Bible*,² his collected essays on the subject that followed the Torah reading of the week. That book put the subject of leadership more squarely on the map as an integrated discipline worthy of study and application. His essays on the

The Torah of Leadership

Torah portion of the week, *Covenant & Conversation*, often contained leadership observations that emerged from a close reading of Jewish texts. His death was a profound loss to world Jewry and to those of other faiths who were inspired to learn and to lead. Every essay in this book contains a pearl of his wisdom as a tribute to his influence in cultivating leadership.

In the intervening years since I wrote that first book on leadership, I've been blessed to work closely with hundreds of lay and professional leaders in nonprofit organizations: rabbis, board members, volunteers, philanthropists, and donors. Much has stayed the same in terms of the governance issues and challenges they deal with on a daily basis, and there is still, thank God, an enduring desire to leave the world a little bit better than we found it. On every level, people are leading purpose-driven lives and devoting time and energy to doing "what's right and good in the eyes of the Lord" (Deut. 6:18). Leaders are still moved by compassion and social justice, even if the expression *tikkun olam* has too often become denuded of its Jewish significance. We believe in the power and mandate of collective, community organizing. We can produce positive, transformative change together and do so as Jews committed to both our community and our humanity. We still want to serve. We need to serve.

So, what has changed in the past two decades? Much has evolved that leaders must leverage, pay attention to, and address:

Jewish wisdom is more accessible than ever. Access to the rich storehouse of Jewish texts and tradition is now, due to technology, just one click away. Technological advances have also created online participation in study sessions and synagogue services, a special boon to the sick and elderly and to those in isolation, enabling them to connect to community in meaningful ways.

Judaism's low-barrier approach, however, has often resulted in low commitment. Reduced membership fees, free trips to Israel, and discounted Jewish services can create the impression that Jewish life requires little material sacrifice or genuine time commitment. People value what they work for and put effort into creating and sustaining. The strategy of getting people through the door by lowering the bar to entry has not necessarily resulted in people coming through the door and staying a while. Low barriers to entry can also translate into low

substance. Despite having more access to Jewish texts and traditions than ever before, Jewish literacy has been eclipsed by Jewish celebrities, Jewish culture, and Jewish cuisine. Jewish clichés are no substitute for Jewish learning.

Jewish continuity is at greater risk than in any other time in history.

Rates of intermarriage have been consistently climbing every decade in North America. The immense push for inclusion has, over time, resulted in fewer and fewer genuine Jewish links across multiple generations. So many Jewish grandparents today do not and cannot share the language of Jewish life and commitment with their grandchildren. Not in terms of ritual. Not in terms of social networks. Not in terms of Jewish giving. The chain has been broken in too many places.

Support for Israel wavers. During the decades since its founding, Israel was consistently regarded as the great unifier of Diaspora Jewry and the joint project of our people. But, just before October 7, 2023, Israel was at a point of fragmentation over its complex politics, the Middle East conflict, and the thorny issues around judicial reform. It was a polarizing place for many Diaspora Jews. People took sides. Rabbis, our spiritual leaders, confessed their fears of speaking in public about Israel lest they be vilified for their views. Over a decade ago, in 2013, the Jewish Council for Public Affairs surveyed 552 rabbis, mostly Reform and Conservative, and “found that a third of them hesitate to speak honestly to their congregations regarding their feelings about Israel.” This trend grew as issues of perceived threats to democracy and religious pluralism heightened. A senior rabbi from a large East Coast city told me that he never expected, after over thirty years in his current pulpit, to think twice before mentioning Israel in a sermon. “What has our world come to?”

The events of October 7, however, changed the conversation about Israel dramatically. Most Diaspora Jews were, more or less, unified in their support for Israel and their desire to combat antisemitism, particularly on college campuses. The strong sense of *ahdut*, unity, enhanced morale and reminded us of what it means to be a family in pain who show up for each other. The solidarity the war inspired was a source of solace, strength, and comfort. But many of the fissures that existed before the war were not inherently resolved, making their reappearance inevitable.

The Torah of Leadership

Antisemitism is on a precipitous climb upward. Anti-Israel rhetoric often has antisemitism at its core. At least this challenge unites us to combat injustice at the same time it reminds us that hate is here to stay. This plague of irrational animosity was responsible for the single largest antisemitic attack on American soil in 2018 and the war against Hamas in 2023, collapsing the Jewish sensibility that the world learned its lesson after the Holocaust and that, as a society, we are becoming ever more enlightened with each coming year. Leaders are expected to have answers and strategies to situations that are punishingly cruel and unpredictable at a time when local Jewish communities are often more fragmented, more afraid, and less aligned.

Politics has become more coarse, more tribal, and more venomous. Reaching across the aisle as a leader is regarded as a sign of weakness rather than an emblem of courage. Identity politics have become chokingly particularistic and can take inadvertently increasingly pronounced and self-absorbed notions of the individual's importance above the directive to build diverse communities. We lead in an increasingly parochial way, less on behalf of joint values across diverse populations and more for those who confirm or can magnify our own values in opposition to those of others. We play the victim rather than the resilience card when those values are challenged. We cancel those whose views do not accord with our own. Some date the expression "cancel culture" to as early as 2014. Others put that date in 2017. In 2008, we didn't have words to describe an ironically radical and casual nullification of others – usually but not always strangers – who do not conform to our notions of correctness.

Technology has moved apace with the speed of the Tower of Babel's construction but with little governmental regulation. Whenever we master one form of technology, we seem to be thrown another. People can find us at all hours and anywhere across the world. Leaders are expected to respond instantly if not sooner to everyone's texts, tweets, or email missives. Imagine receiving two hundred pieces of mail a day in your mailbox at home, carefully formulating responses to every last one of them, sealing and stamping the envelopes, and then checking the mailbox the next day to find two hundred more. We've become edgy about getting back to people because every response gets a response. Adam Grant advised us to stop apologizing for not writing back: "Apologizing

for slow replies is a symptom of unrealistic demands in an always-on culture.”³ Over-responsiveness can communicate that our own work/life balance is way out of alignment.

Technology has also encumbered a progressively younger generation with the burden of a Wild West of adult content to navigate with few tools. Search engines blessedly give us access now to mountains of information, but without filters to help us understand the authority or veracity of what we are reading. It’s hard for leaders to keep up, given the wealth of information and news. It’s hard, in Wayne Gretsky’s words, to “skate to where the puck is going,” when the rink has no boundaries. No child should have to manage the poison of cyber-bullying, but every child with a smartphone must today. Leaders in schools and youth groups are struggling with how to guide the next generation to responsible use when technology changes faster than regulations do.

While we are ever connected, we are also more lonely. America’s Centers for Disease Control publicized a study conducted in 2020 by the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine that reported a spike in social isolation and loneliness, especially in older adults. Over a third of adults aged forty-five and older are experiencing loneliness. That percentage jumps up to a quarter for adults aged over sixty-five. Better preventative care and advances in medicine are keeping us alive longer, while loneliness has come with the unanticipated health risks of depression, anxiety, suicide, increased heart disease, and risk of strokes. We have not figured out how to lead older, more vulnerable populations and ensure they are integrated and cared for within our communities.

Our greater affluence presents immense opportunity and its own surfeit of challenges. As a Jewish community, our affluence is a reassurance to many nonprofits, but tuition and membership rates are much higher than the rate of inflation. The costs of being Jewish and living in Jewish neighborhoods have risen. The space between the Jewish haves and have-nots is increasing. Board members tend to be more uniformly wealthy today – a worrying trend, because boards are meant to be as diverse as our communities are to be truly representative of our major constituencies. In this climate, leadership can become more about status than about skills. Rabbi Jonathan Sacks writes that we must “make it clear to all that leadership is service, not a form of status.”⁴

The Torah of Leadership

In a related issue, the constant push to raise money can undermine energetic and inspired lay and professional leadership if it becomes their sole and exclusive responsibility and the criterion by which we judge a leader's success. Institutions need to be well-funded. We cannot be Pollyannish about or dismissive of the important and necessary role that philanthropy plays in the long-term success of leaders and their organizations. Sometimes, we even tolerate bad leadership because the person in the most senior role is a great fundraiser or generous contributor. But the never-ending task of raising money for Jewish nonprofits too often prioritized over the higher goal of building meaningful relationships. Just consider the endless call for water when the Israelites traveled in the wilderness. Receiving "quality gifts" involves investing in quality relationships. Anything more shallow leads to transactional treatment. Sometimes community-wide agendas are dwarfed by the singular idiosyncratic voices of local and national philanthropic organizations and family foundations that pursue individual interests and fund their preferences. That is their right. But, as a result, professionals on the frontlines of the work can feel increasingly powerless to determine collective directions, especially when their expertise is marginalized, sidelined, or belittled. Genuine communal needs can inadvertently become ignored.

The talent pipeline risks drying up. In many cases, the hierarchy of wealth and power has damaged an already fragile lay-professional relationship, with many senior executives, from JCCs to synagogues to day schools, in position for fewer than five years. We don't need a succession pipeline as much as a talent intervention; our talent pipeline has been drying up for years. Good people do not want to face a steady stream of criticism or move their families from one place to another because they got on the wrong side of a powerful board chair.

To illustrate, I'd like to introduce you to Rabbi Josh. He told me that a while back, someone in his congregation died on a Friday night. Relatives came to his home and knocked on the door. He was in his bathrobe but welcomed them into his living room with the kindness one needs in such moment of loss. New to death and confused, these family members didn't know what to do. Rabbi Josh handed them a phone book and advised them to start making calls to organize the logistics as he took care of other details. Sometime later, one of the synagogue

officers at a board meeting yelled at him in front of other trustees about this specific interaction: “You didn’t let them in. You didn’t help them. You cracked the door open and threw the phone book in their faces.” What hurt Rabbi Josh the most was that the family knew this wasn’t true, but they didn’t deny it. The board member’s accusation poisoned the rabbi’s dignity: “He was the kind of guy – the clergy killer – who spent the whole time finding fault with me. I know what I did, and I would do the same thing again. You want to say something, but you can’t always.” Looking back with hindsight and more experience, he now realizes that the people who held so much power over his job at the time were mean and unforgiving. It was the beginning of what Rabbi Josh now describes as his own depression. Even though he knew what they said wasn’t true, he struggled to make sense of his career choice, to lead others spiritually while facing constant criticism. When reflecting on the board, he shrugs: “To this day, they are just as dysfunctional, and I feel so lucky I’m not there. Water takes the shape of its container.” He admitted how nervous his senior colleagues are about being let go – at any time and for anything. “In the rabbinate, there is always the overriding fear of losing your job.” Can anyone lead successfully in this kind of tense environment?

Navigating uncertainty is now a certainty in leadership. A major change in the past twenty years is that we lived through a global pandemic, which was followed a few years later by a catastrophic war in Israel and a sharp and intense rise in global antisemitism, especially on college campuses.

Rabbis, Hillel directors, educational leaders, nonprofit CEOs, and senior board members confessed to me that they questioned themselves or broke down in different ways – lots of times. When Covid hit, there was no leadership manual to prepare them for this new, horrifying reality. Initially, they did not know how they could keep their organizations alive and functioning for an unclear duration of time. How would anyone get paid? Should they just shut down? Should they adjust their mission, downsize their staff, bring people back with conditions, or change the rules altogether? Some people could not stay in this zone of proximal tolerance. The burnout rate depleted our already shrinking pool of educators. One crisis after another left us all unsure, exhausted, and crestfallen. I heard what many of us heard and even said: “I didn’t

sign up for this.” And either during the pandemic or not long after it, many left leadership roles altogether. They are blameless. The war in Israel prompted another wave of uncertainty that came with its own leadership difficulties.

The irony is that if you are a leader, you actually *did* sign up for this. You signed on to leadership in a world that is constantly changing and one that can produce surprises you never anticipated. A rare breed of leaders even leaned in during the pandemic and thrived. After finding imperfect solutions to imperfect situations, these leaders got creative. Because the entire world felt like an experiment, they had freedom they never would have had otherwise to consider radical possibilities. They worked collaboratively to restructure and to rethink, to reconsider their human resources on a board and professional level, to make serious decisions about strategic directions, and to reorganize their budgets to adopt more cost-saving efficiencies.

So much has changed in these last decades. How do we address these many new challenges? We need to promote more effective leadership dispositions that are less rigid and more durable, ones that reflect what Robert Jay Lifton describes as a protean self: “We are becoming fluid and many-sided. Without quite realizing it, we have been evolving a sense of self appropriate to the restlessness and flux of our time. This mode of being differs radically from that of the past and enables us to engage in continuous exploration and personal experiment.”⁵

A new leadership framing is necessary to face these enormous challenges, one that emerges from a posture of humility about the world and greater realism about the human condition. In his bestselling book, *Thinking, Fast and Slow*, Nobel Prize winner Daniel Kahneman studied, among other issues, the way we diagnose situations and make decisions. “The idea that the future is unpredictable,” he writes, “is undermined every day by the ease with which the past is explained.”⁶ We make mistakes when we lead in a way that is based on too-easy assumptions about the past to inform the organizational leadership of the future. “When faced with a difficult question,” Kahneman contends, “we often answer an easier one instead, usually without noticing the substitution.”⁷ This can create a lack of realism about how we chart a course for change: “We are prone to overestimate how much we understand about the world and to underestimate the role of chance in events.”⁸ Kahneman

identifies the problem starkly when he writes that we have “an almost unlimited ability to ignore our ignorance.” To combat this and acquire the skills necessary to lead in the world requires “rapid and unequivocal feedback about the correctness of thoughts and actions.”⁹ We need more constructive feedback to lead well. We need to create feedback loops in real time because organizations undergo more rapid transitions today.

We also need to move from the ubiquitous language of journeys to the more compelling language of commitments. Several years ago, I had the good fortune to meet and interview Pete Davis. Pete is a young man who works on projects to strengthen democracy and solidarity in these times of increasing division. Upon graduating Harvard, he gave a commencement address on commitment that has been viewed by millions of people. There he cites the French philosopher Jacques Maritain, who said that the meaning of life is “self-mastery for the purpose of self-giving.”¹⁰ Pete then describes the great task his generation now faces: We say we love commitments, but we keep acting like browsers in the way we shop, date, watch TV. This culture of browsing seeps into a way of thinking and being in the world that comes down to three fears:

First, we have a fear of regret: We worry that if we commit to something, we will later regret having not committed to something else. Second, we have a fear of association: We think that if we commit to something, we will be vulnerable to the chaos that that commitment brings to our identity, our reputation, and our sense of control. Third, we have a fear of missing out: We feel that if we commit to something, the responsibilities that come with it will prevent us from being everything, everywhere, to everyone.

The only way to combat these fears and cultural trends is to interrogate them and discover our core convictions. “This is the challenge of growing up – to turn the corner from self-mastery to self-giving. What is the moment at that corner – between inwardness, growth, and concerted self-development and outwardness, public interestedness, and other-centeredness? Commitment.” Pete coined a phrase, explaining that what we need right now, in an age of browsing and too much choice, are “long-haul heroes.” *Our community needs more long-haul heroes.*

The Torah of Leadership

Leadership suffers from a lack of commitment. I once described this shift in attitude with the help of a restaurant menu. Many decades ago, when people in the United States moved, they sought out and joined a myriad of Jewish organizations to feel belonging. They joined a synagogue, sent their children to Jewish day schools or Hebrew schools, and their teenagers to Jewish youth groups. They gave money to their local Federation, exercised in a JCC, and became members of multiple Jewish social clubs. We'll call this the fixed-price menu to community building. Then we moved to the *à la carte* menu of communal options, which slowly eroded the accepted communal norms. People joined Jewish organizations that serviced their needs at the time. They came in and out of synagogue membership depending on the stage of their families. They gave to charities episodically. According to demographic studies of various communities, people might, for example, send their children to Jewish day schools but not be members of a synagogue. Costs were often a deterrent. But today, "doing Jewish" for most Jews in North America most closely resembles a tapas menu. People come in and out of Jewish synagogue services, if they go at all. They go to events rather than commit to organizations. And, as a result, organizations suffer, especially when it comes to attracting younger members and supporters.

Leading now requires a cultural sea change. We cannot turn back the hands of time, but we can educate for commitment. We can move away from the language of journeys and engagement – those ever-amorphous terms of loose involvement – to asking people about their convictions and commitments and providing meaningful spaces to discover them. There is a lot of work to do. A lot.

Much of that work is discussed in the pages ahead. These essays are designed to amplify some of the leadership messages that are organic to each Torah portion and support them with the insights of contemporary leadership experts. With each weekly *sedra*, I found that heroes come in all forms, that some leaders are born into greatness and others are shaped by circumstances. Each leadership lesson jumps off the page and into life, provoking us to think bigger and to do more. For this reason, I conclude each essay with a personal leadership question.

Thank you for reading, and thank you for leading.

Introduction

Reading Leadership into and Out of the Torah

Leadership appears everywhere in the Torah in black words on white parchment. We need not read leadership *into* the Torah as a forced theme or a modern imposition on a sacred text. We read it *out* of the Torah on almost every page. Whenever there is a problem, we look to our leaders – in life and in Tanakh, the Hebrew Bible. Something goes right, spectacularly right, and we turn to leaders to give them thanks, credit, and praise. Something goes wrong, terribly wrong, and we turn to leaders to provide direction, inspiration, strength, moral guidance, military wisdom, if necessary, and hope. We also apportion blame. That was true then, and it is still true today.

A new leader in Tanakh is the key to actualize a vision, to carry out an assignment, and to respond to a crisis. The new leader is the builder of an ark, the founder of a faith, and the ancestor who put a stake in a land. The new leader confronts enemies, calls for a social justice revolution, brings down the law in tablets of stone, and inspires the building of a sanctuary where God can dwell among the people. The new leader escorts millions across the Jordan River and conquers a land full of ene-

The Torah of Leadership

mies. The new leader sits under a tree and teaches the law until she goes out to war or faces down the head of an empire to beg for the life of her people. The new leader assures continuity by assigning or grooming a successor. The ancient talent pipeline was constantly flowing because a new leader was always necessary and available.

God alone, with omnipresent power, can save human beings from any form of distress, but in Tanakh, God almost never acts alone. God always chooses a human partner to act as a broker, an emissary, a teacher, an ambassador, an agent, a guide, an enforcer, a motivator, a challenger, a critic, and a parent. In virtually every one of the Bible's revolutionary stories, be they small family dramas or large battlefield scenes, God works with a leader to advance a mission. From the first chapter of Genesis onward, humans were created to take leadership roles – to work and to watch a garden, to have governance over the natural world and to steward it responsibly. Adam and Eve were tasked with co-creating the next generation and filling the world. All of this was to be done in God's likeness: Observe the way God creates with care, intention, separation, and evaluation, and then rest. We are to lead the way God leads as an expression of being created in God's image.

Our job is to be careful and impassioned Torah readers so that we can become careful and impassioned Jewish leaders. And this is a problem, because many have lost touch with this elemental, educational aspect of the Torah's challenge to us. For some, the Tanakh is a foreign book with outdated assumptions written in an unfamiliar or vaguely nostalgic language. It cannot be our teacher if the book is closed. For others, it is a deeply familiar guide to living a life of Jewish law and practice, informed by stories that have become their master narratives of ethics. But even then, it has not necessarily translated itself into the mandate to lead others, only to live a meaningful spiritual life of *mitzvot* in relation to God and in community. This approach, too, misses much of the Torah's messaging. It is ultimately a call text to inspire us to see the plight of the needy – to those who live in Isaiah's darkness or Ruth's poverty or Malachi's mediocrity – to feel compassion, to take action, and to change the conditions around us so that we can live in a world that is just, moral, and fair. The Torah asks us to be valiant, to be brave, and to be different. If we reduce the Torah to stories or to laws alone, it

will not give us its fullness. By presenting so many leaders in so many different situations, it stimulates us to consider our own surroundings, our crises, our institutions, our boundaries, and our options and then to do something to make things better. We are *not* here to live passively. The Bible's pages remind every one of us in subtle and vivid ways to take initiative, to act with integrity, and to lead passionately.

To illustrate, we will travel way back in time to a biblical leadership story that resonates with contemporary sensibilities. This example is one of dozens that present what we'll call the cycle of leadership redemption. It is stamped all over Tanakh. The problem: a foreign enemy. The solution: a leader.

A long time ago, under a blazing Near Eastern sun, a young warrior named Gideon was charged with saving the Israelites from their tormentors, the Midianites, who were "swarming as thick as locusts" (Judges 6:5). Odds were stacked against the underdog. The same biblical verse tells us that the Midianites "and their camels were innumerable." With soldiers and strong animals, the "Midianites would invade the land and ravage it." We know variations of this story all too well. Oppressed Israelites cry out to God begging for salvation. God sends them a prophet who offers them words of solace and reassures them that just as God had freed them from Egypt's house of bondage, God would once again relieve them of their suffering. The solution is always the same: a new leader.

Back to our young new leader Gideon. In the midst of Israelite misery, God sent an angel to sit under a terebinth tree while Gideon, a farmer, was beating out his wheat, which was hidden in a winepress so the Midianites would not steal his harvest. "The angel of God appeared to him and said to him, 'God is with you, valiant warrior!'" (6:12). The angel essentially named Gideon the leader of his generation. But Gideon was not honored by this visit, nor did he feel privileged to lead his people in battle. Instead, he used the meeting as an opportunity to berate God: "Please, my lord, if God is with us, why has all this befallen us? Where are all those wondrous deeds about which our ancestors told us, saying, 'Truly God brought us up from Egypt'? Now God has abandoned us and delivered us into the hands of Midian!" (6:13). Gideon's accusation reflected a faithless generation. The God who freed the Jews from slavery once upon a time is now blamed for neglecting their descendants.

The Torah of Leadership

God directly responded by ignoring the insult and entrusting Gideon to be His human partner, replicating our familiar pattern: “God turned to him and said, ‘Go in this strength of yours and deliver Israel from the Midianites. I now make you My messenger’” (6:14). But Gideon rejected the call. He, like Moses before him and Jeremiah after him, questioned his capabilities: “Please, my Sovereign, how can I deliver Israel?” (6:15). He also claimed he was from the smallest tribe and was the youngest in his family; surely there were people more adept, mature, and experienced? God responded the way God replied to Moses and Jeremiah in their times of insecurity and hesitation: “I will be with you, and you shall defeat Midian all at once” (6:16). At this point in the leadership cycle, we expect Gideon to change his mind, say, “*Hineni*” – I am here and ready – and outfit himself for war. That did not happen.

Gideon, at the very moment of this invitation to lead, questioned God’s very existence: “If I have gained Your favor, give me a sign that it is You who are speaking to me” (6:17). But God did not show anger. God acquiesced and told Gideon to prepare an offering and place it on a rock, and it was immediately consumed by fire. This should have been sufficient proof. But not for Gideon. Even after he began the task of leading, Gideon tested God again, then a final time as a guarantee that he could beat the Midianites were he to lead them to war:

And Gideon said to God, “If You really intend to deliver Israel through me as You have said – here I place a fleece of wool on the threshing floor. If dew falls only on the fleece and all the ground remains dry, I shall know that You will deliver Israel through me, as You have said.” (6:36–37)

The next morning, the fleece was soaked through with water, a whole bowlful of it. Gideon needed a sign, and God responded with a surplus. Yet Gideon was still unsatisfied. With signature *chutzpah*, he prodded God again:

“Do not be angry with me if I speak just once more. Let me make just one more test with the fleece: Let the fleece alone be dry, while there is dew all over the ground.” God did so that

night: Only the fleece was dry, while there was dew all over the ground. (6:39)

When Gideon needed another sign, God gave him another. God saturated the fleece, then dried it. This was an odd request given the miracles God was capable of performing, a test more suited to a shepherd than a farmer. But this time, Gideon had no more excuses. Finally, finally, as our chapter closes and the next opens, Gideon led his troops into battle.

Gideon eventually assumed the very leadership role he initially rejected, so what was the function of testing and retesting God?

I believe the story communicates with the starkest reality the anxiety of leadership that must be overcome to fight any battle: military, spiritual, or emotional. Gideon first did not believe in himself and then did not believe in the authority of the One giving him the assignment. His, like ours, was an age of disbelief and cynicism.

A biblical book earlier, the Israelites transitioned from Moses to Joshua. They finally reached the Promised Land and were motivated to fight for it. For the most part, Joshua was successful. The Israelites conquered the land, and the tribes settled. But Joshua never appointed a successor, the way that Moses did. As soon as Moses's death warrant was issued, Moses understood that his people required the stability of new leadership: "Let the Lord, 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 the Lord's community may not be like sheep that have no shepherd" (Num. 27:16–17). Thus, Joshua was named as Moses's successor. In contrast, the closing chapter of the book of Joshua ends with the death of both the military leader, Joshua, and the spiritual leader, the high priest Eleazer. No replacements are mentioned in the book. Not surprisingly, in the early chapters of Judges, the people began to worship idols, lost military ground, and suffered, for the most part, the incompetency of multiple ill-equipped leaders. Failure to put a leadership pipeline in place spelled political and spiritual disaster.

The book of Judges is strikingly modern in its depiction of a generation bereft of godliness and good leadership, and Gideon was its chief representative. Gideon didn't believe in himself, but he also didn't

The Torah of Leadership

believe in anyone else or in the God of old. He and his generation lacked inspiration and ambition. Pummeled by an enemy nation and unable to live and work freely (remember, he hid his work in a wine vat), he did not experience God's presence in his life – only God's absence. It is hard to lead when you lack conviction and drive, when you need constant proof that God exists and that leadership is a worthwhile use of your time. Even with proofs, Gideon continued to hesitate and had to test. He had internalized the pessimism of the defeated and lost the impulse to resist and to fight. He felt God had betrayed His people, and he regarded leadership as a second-rate endeavor. He deigned to lead only when badgered enough.

The leadership messages embedded in this story are sharp and powerful. I've distilled five:

1. **Offer leaders meaningful encouragement and support.** Taking the lead when it is very necessary and when no one else is stepping up to the plate often requires a double dose of reassurance. When people test others repeatedly – in this case, God – it is usually a sign of their own insecurity that masks itself as a false display of intransigence and arrogance. Unwittingly, Gideon was testing himself. Did God really think Gideon was up to the task? He did. He let Gideon know it. God had more faith in Gideon than Gideon had faith in God.
2. **Don't take "No" for an answer.** Ask again. And again. When leadership is the only answer, "Will you lead?" becomes the only worthwhile question. God could easily have lost patience with Gideon's offensive refusal and sought out another leader. Yet God did not dismiss the tests Gideon requested. He honored them and did not judge Gideon.
3. **Create a leadership pipeline early.** When good people do not step up to lead, those less noble and competent will occupy the vacuum. This happens a few chapters later. Gideon, in the end, was a highly successful military leader, who, like Joshua, failed to appoint a successor, despite having seventy sons (Judges 9:2). When the succession pipeline is broken, danger ensues. An unprincipled son of his, Avimelekh, consequently took control and

“hired some worthless and reckless fellows, and they followed him” (9:4). Avimelekh was such a troubled leader that he had to pay his followers. He then killed sixty-eight of his brothers to make sure there was no competition for the top seat. The youngest brother, Yotam, however, ran and hid. He came out of hiding on the day of Avimelekh’s inauguration, stood on top of a mountain, and delivered a parable about bad leadership, asking the people to think carefully before formally appointing Avimelekh. Yotam thought he might shake the people out of their cognitive dissonance. They all knew what trouble Avimelekh was.

Yotam’s words fell flat. Avimelekh reigned for three years, until the relationship between him and the people soured. The people sought a replacement, but Avimelekh resisted and went to war against them, eventually destroying the inhabitants of the city of Shechem, where this story takes place. He hired followers and killed followers. The pattern of no leadership, then good leadership, then bad leadership repeated itself because Gideon created the possibility of change without instituting continuity to enhance leadership stability. The result was mutiny, chaos, and death.

4. **People need to be led with greatness.** Leadership greatness is a combination of aspiration, inspiration, strategic thinking, competence, and character. Few leaders start out with all of these dispositions and behaviors. Gideon’s hesitation transformed, over time, into real leadership drive, and he was successful at conquering the demons within and the enemies without.
5. **It takes only one person to reverse the cycle of defeat.** God did not call upon the community at large to change the political landscape. He called upon one person, and that one person was able during his lifetime to shift the winds of defeat into the courage of triumph.

Today, we are the inheritors of Gideon’s leadership. We stand with Gideon in his moments of doubt, not sure if we can lead, not sure if this is what we want or God wants, and not sure of the people we are leading. We work hard, we fail, and we try again.

The Torah of Leadership

But, whatever Gideon's failings, he *did* provide a leadership solution for a limited period of time. And that's all we have: a limited period of time. No one leader can solve every problem for all time. This makes the need for selecting, training, and retaining good leaders all the more pressing. Every trend, challenge, and problem requires its own unique diagnosis and treatment. Every leader needs to marshal his or her own resources to achieve a modicum of victory. There will always be losses and disappointments. That is real and undeniable.

People will treat the leader unfairly. There will be gossip and ingratitude and complaints. Moses managed forty years of it when ushering the Israelites through the wilderness. Maybe that time period offers us a guide. Not only must we put up with the difficulties and everyday challenges of leadership, we must also sustain our work for the long game. Moses freed the Jews from slavery, gave them the law, built the *Mishkan* – the portable Sanctuary – and took the people to the edge of the Promised Land. These are achievements of service across a lifetime. With faith, enthusiasm, and luck, we can make the world a little bit better in our own time, not for all time.

We are lucky to wake up in a state of blessing and thank God that we are here to do something meaningful and useful for others, in the spirit of Mary Oliver: “It is a serious thing / just to be alive / on this fresh morning / in this broken world.” And because that is all we can do with our one “wild and precious life,” that has to be enough.

xxx

Leadership in the Book of Genesis

פרשת בראשית • *Parashat Bereshit*

A Garden of Possibility

The joy of starting the Torah cycle again is twinned with the sense of new interpretive possibilities that once again unfold. We may have read the first chapter of Genesis dozens, if not hundreds of times, but we bring a new self to it this week, a self that is a year older and made wiser through new experiences and insights.

We'll begin where our most foundational story began: in a garden. Why a garden? Everything about a garden thrums with new growth and possibility. Remember those little seeds in cups we planted as young school-children? Remember the excitement of watching the first green sprout appear from the soil? In a garden, we cultivate that delight again and again.

Richard Powers, in his Pulitzer Prize-winning novel, *The Overstory*, writes, “This is not our world with trees in it. It’s a world of trees, where humans have just arrived.”¹ The book of Genesis opens with the verdancy of a tree-filled world. We humans only arrive later. On the third day, God said, “Let the earth sprout vegetation: seed-bearing plants, fruit trees of every kind on earth that bear fruit with the seed in it.’ And it was so.” The text continues, as speech brings forth action followed by evaluation: “The earth brought forth vegetation: seed-bearing

The Torah of Leadership

plants of every kind, and trees of every kind bearing fruit with the seed in it. And God saw that this was good” (Gen. 1:11–12). Seeds speak to the generational continuity of creation; every living thing in this special garden can replicate itself.

Humans, new scientific research tells us, are similar to the trees that preceded them in creation. Humans were not only in the Garden, we were *of* the Garden. Formed from the dust, our namesake – Adam – signifies the loamy earth – the *adama* – that produced us. In Genesis 2, the Garden is described as a bare landscape in desperate need of a human-divine partnership: “When no shrub (*siah*) of the field was yet on earth and no grasses of the field had yet sprouted, because the Lord God had not sent rain upon the earth, and there was no man to till the soil” (Gen. 2:5). Later, in Deuteronomy 20:19, humans are compared to trees, prompting the midrashic comment: “This teaches that human life comes only from the tree” (*Sifrei* 203).

The Spanish medieval exegete Nahmanides observes that although vegetation was created in Genesis 1, its continued growth relies upon God’s rain and the human gardener described in Genesis 2. God created a water supply and a person to tend and steward nature: “But a flow would well up from the ground and water the whole surface of the earth. The Lord God formed man from the dust of the earth. He blew into his nostrils the breath of life, and man became a living being” (Gen. 2:6–7). This image is both primal and poetic.

Rabbi Abraham ibn Ezra, the twelfth-century Spanish poet and commentator, defines the *siah* of Genesis 2:5 – typically translated as “shrub” – as a fruit-bearing tree. He then offers another definition for *siah*: “conversation.” This meaning is borne out by a quick study of the word’s appearance throughout Tanakh. *Siah* can also mean to sing (Judges 5:10), to speak (Job 12:8), to pray (Ps. 55:17), to meditate (Ps. 77:6), to praise (I Chr. 16:9), and to complain (Job 7:11).

Is it possible that a word for many types of trees also signifies the varieties of speech? Yes. Speech, Ibn Ezra conjectures, is the fruit of our mouths. The similarity between humans and trees is not only in form, he writes, but in what we produce. Trees produce fruit. We produce words. Ibn Ezra then offers us a panoply of tree images we use to describe humans: limbs, trunks, roots, fruit, branches. Powers in *The*

Overstory makes the comparison genetic: “You and the tree in your backyard come from a common ancestor. A billion and a half years ago, the two of you parted ways. But even now, after an immense journey in separate directions, that tree and you still share a quarter of your genes.”²

Ibn Ezra may have been onto something by alerting us to the linguistic “root” shared by trees and language. In 2015, Peter Wohlleben, a German forester who has devoted his life to the study of trees, published the bestselling book *The Hidden Life of Trees: What They Feel, How They Communicate*.³ He challenges our common misconception of trees as loners that compete with other vegetation for water, sunlight, and nutrients. Mounting scientific evidence suggests that trees form alliances with other trees, even those not within the same species. They not only live cooperatively, they also communicate at the root level. Above ground, they use scent signals and pheromones to speak to each other. Through these complex, interconnected networks, trees send distress signals about drought, disease, and insect attacks. Wohlleben calls it the “wood-wide web.”

Powers, through one of his characters, described this majestic undergrowth in this way: “A forest knows things.... There are brains down there, ones our own brains aren’t shaped to see. Root plasticity, solving problems and making decisions. Fungal synapses. What else do you want to call it? Link enough trees together, and a forest grows aware.”⁴

God’s decision to create humans in this Garden may have been a way to communicate to Adam and Eve that they entered an interconnected natural world that predated them and required their leadership and tender care to bloom. The Garden was their classroom, where they were to learn from trees how to nurture an interdependent universe that communicated under and above ground. By creating through the process of separation, God was showing Adam and Eve that on a cosmic level, we are all profoundly connected. Trees were the best living example of this for the new couple. In *Studies in Spirituality*, Rabbi Jonathan Sacks writes, “If I were asked how to find God, I would say: Learn to listen. Listen to the song of the universe in the call of the birds, the rustle of trees...”⁵

It’s not hard to understand the implications of the tree/human comparison for leadership. “Root cause analysis” in leadership is the study of all that is unspoken underground that may shed light on orga-

The Torah of Leadership

nizational problems, prompting us to search for creative and lasting solutions. Examining underlying, causal issues can prevent problems from reemerging. Moreover, taking the tree metaphor seriously in leadership implies alerting others to our inherent connectedness, especially when it is not obvious, especially in times of divisiveness. We lead when we select our words with intention and use them to create new possibilities. As the saying goes, what we pay attention to grows.

We are born “to work and to watch” this remarkable garden. The blessing of the very first psalm is also the blessing of what a great leader can do to protect and inspire us, “...like a tree planted beside streams of water, which yields its fruit in season, whose foliage never fades, and whatever it produces thrives” (Ps. 1:3). Leaders help others flourish. John Gardner, in his book *On Leadership*, compares mentors to farmers.⁶ Every word we utter can be a seed to help someone else thrive. As we begin the Torah anew, we are challenged to think about how to tend to the world around us and within us.



Personal Leadership Reflection

As we begin this sacred Torah cycle anew, who and what will you be growing this year?

פרשת נח • *Parashat Noah*

The What and Why of the Ark

My grandchildren love to play with my collection of wooden Noah's ark figures. Some have movable animals and a small Noah holding a staff. When I clean up after the children, I make sure to keep the animals in pairs. The children adore the Noah story. The image of the ark appears on kids' wallpaper and in their books; it's the stuff of toys.

The only problem is that the Noah story is not for children. It's an unhappy story of immorality, loss, and despair. The land takes its revenge on society and destroys all within its path. Even the closing covenant God made with Noah contained a note of the tragic: "Never again will I doom the earth because of man, since the devisings of the human mind are evil from youth; nor will I ever again destroy every living being, as I have done" (Gen. 8:21). God's promise never to destroy the world again is predicated on a lowering of expectations. Humans will forever be flawed. I'm not going to tell my young grandchildren the whole story just yet.

The Torah of Leadership

Maybe the only way we can understand this story is by standing with Noah before he built the ark:

God said to Noah, *“I have decided to put an end to all flesh, for the earth is filled with lawlessness because of them: I am about to destroy them with the earth. Make yourself an ark of gopher wood; make it an ark with compartments and cover it inside and out with pitch. This is how you shall make it: The length of the ark shall be three hundred cubits, its width fifty cubits, and its height thirty cubits. Make an opening for daylight in the ark, and finish it within a cubit of the top. Put the entrance to the ark in its side; make it with bottom, second, and third decks. For My part, I am about to bring the Flood – waters upon the earth – to destroy all flesh under the sky in which there is breath of life; everything on earth shall perish.”* (Gen. 6:13–17)

Imagine, for a moment, a divine voice calling out to you with an important task that you, and only you, can actualize. Aside from a few family members, there will be no one to assist you. You are on your own. Your world will narrow into this one responsibility for the foreseeable future, but surprisingly, it is to create something rather prosaic. You are told to build a ship and to populate that ship with a pair of animals from every species. You try to prepare yourself mentally for the assignment, but you still cannot understand its significance. Unsure of how large this boat should be, you pay careful attention to the dimensions God commands.

You read the instructions a dozen times and make a list of what you'll need. You don't want to get it wrong. The job is too important. You create an architectural rendering of the ark. You wake up with the sun. Hammer in hand, you spend all day in the hot Near East nailing boards together. Everyone around you laughs. They jokingly look for the body of water where you are going to place your ship. They act as if you've lost your mind. But the word of God is a constant whisper in your ear that keeps you focused.

It's only when the rain first beats on the roof and you rush your family and the animals inside that you realize you've missed something critically important. You just closed the door on all of humanity. Holed up

in the ark's dark and cavernous inside, you review the directions repeatedly to see where you went wrong. Suddenly, you see what you failed to see before. With your singular focus on following directions, you missed that in the opening and closing of the instructions, God presented an apocalyptic vision of the world. And now it is too late to do anything to help all those you left behind. All you can do is monitor the sea and pray.

This is the fate of Noah.

God told Noah exactly what to do. But God also told Noah why. Noah focused on the what and bypassed the why. The directions he was given form a unique and unusual passage, because the Tanakh rarely offers concrete recommendations. Abraham was told to go to another country and start a nation with no GPS. Moses was commanded to free the Jews from slavery and take them out of Egypt with no map and no guidance other than a staff. Esther was told by Mordecai to save her people but was given no script. Ruth made a covenantal commitment to Judaism without any explicit instructions. Why is it that Noah, of all people, was given such clear guidelines?

There is a powerful framing to God's technical instructions. Every few lines, God explicitly told Noah about the moral state of the world. Noah responded by taking out his tools and concentrating on the skylights. Noah missed the larger driving factor behind the situation. Rashi notes this and cites a passage of Talmud (Sanhedrin 108b) to support his reading. There are numerous ways, Rashi notes, that God could have saved Noah. Why select an ark? "So that the men of the generation of the flood might see him constructing it for 120 years and might ask him, 'What do you need this for?' and so that he might answer them, 'The Holy One, blessed be He, is about to bring a flood upon the world' – perhaps they might repent."

According to the Talmud, the ark's significance was not in its use during the flood, but its very presence long before the water hit. Noah's neighbors would be curious about this building project – how could they not be? – and badger him with questions. Noah could use this conversational opportunity to discuss the larger forces in society that prompted this task and perhaps convince others to repent.

They could have all built arks, every last one. The ancient seas could have, without much imagination, been filled with many other arks

The Torah of Leadership

captained by all of Noah's friends and neighbors. But if any such conversations existed, they are not recorded in our *sedra*.

Noah was righteous, one midrash states, in *his* generation. Rashi offers two readings of the word "his": Noah was either truly righteous or relatively righteous in comparison to others who lived at the same time. This is both compliment and criticism. Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, in *Lessons in Leadership*, concludes that "Noah was a good man who was not a leader."⁷ Noah was, in the words of leadership experts Ron Heifetz and Marty Linsky, a master of technical leadership. He focused on what he had to do logistically, but that ironically blinded him from seeing what he had to do adaptively. Adaptive leaders do more than solve problems. They examine causes, assess risks, and anticipate challenges and resistance. They learn the skills that will help them manage contingencies and crises.

When Noah left the ark, he offered a sacrifice – an act of giving to repair a world once flooded with theft and lawlessness. But Noah also planted a vineyard, produced wine, and got drunk in his tent. The enormity of the trauma he experienced was overwhelming. We understand his desire to lose himself in obliviousness. Drinking might have temporarily numbed Noah to all he ignored when building the ark, but at some point, the sobering reality set in. Noah had to construct a new world immune to the moral challenges of the one he left. His technical skills would be of little use. Everything about the new world required adaptive leadership.

One day, when my grandchildren are ready, I will tell them the whole story and remind them to listen to directions and always ask why and what they can do to help. Because that's what leaders do. Simon Sinek, in *Start with Why: How Great Leaders Inspire Everyone to Take Action*, writes that "regardless of WHAT we do in our lives, our WHY – our driving purpose, cause, or belief – never changes."⁸ Leaders who only ask "what" questions are liable to forget the "why." But it's always the "why" that catalyzes true and meaningful change, one raindrop at a time.



Personal Leadership Reflection

What's your leadership "why"?