

Pinchas 2014 – Leadership

Shabbat Shalom. I have a confession to make. It may not come as such a surprise to this group in particular, but I feel the need to get it off my chest. It's a bit uncomfortable to share something so personal...the truth is...I own a few pairs of shorts, and a very special pair of blue jeans with a big hole over the right knee...a couple of t-shirts and tank tops...and even...flip flops... There's more... Sometimes, when I get home from the synagogue late at night, I sit on the couch and...watch television—there, I said it! Phew—I feel much better...

Why do I share this with you? Because I want to talk about leadership this morning. Anyone who has ever been in a leadership position knows that leaders, and people in positions of power (there is a difference—I'll get to that later) are very often held to a much different standard than the rest of us. A short vignette to show how I learned this myself about eight or so years ago.

I was in my early twenties, a student at the University of Judaism in Los Angeles. I had recently accepted my first year-round Cantorial pulpit. It was just a couple of months after the first high holy days. The young rabbi I worked with was about to celebrate his birthday, and he preferred gifts of the liquid persuasion. So one day after going to the health club, I stopped by the supermarket to pick up a nice bottle of vodka for the rabbi's party that evening. Now imagine, I am in a pair of basketball shorts, a tank-top and sneakers--looking my absolute best after an hour at the gym. As I take the bottle off the shelf, a little girl and her mother walk down the beverage aisle. The girl timidly stops and gives me a kind of funny look, and then says, "Look mommy, it's god!" It was then that it hit me...I am now the Cantor--little kids don't think about me going home and having a normal life outside of the synagogue as they do...for them, I am the prayer-leader, dressed in my suit or white robe, chanting from the bimah high above them...How, then, could I possibly be wearing sweaty gym clothes on a Monday morning... That little story will stay with me the rest of my life...both because it was a very cute (and slightly embarrassing) moment, and because it gave me a renewed perspective on how leaders should be perceived and looked at. But before we can do that, we have to define what exactly it means to be a leader. Is a leader merely someone with a C-level title in an organization (CEO,

etc.)? Does one who earns the title of Rabbi or Cantor automatically become a leader? Is a military general or even the president of a country a true leader?

You'll pardon me for revisiting a topic Rabbi Englander addressed last week, but I can assure you I wrote about it first... I want to speak about a leader who made quite a few headlines last week. She made headlines because her son, Naftali Fraenkel, was one of the three Israeli boys kidnapped and murdered while hitchhiking his way home for Shabbat from the Yeshiva. Prior to the horrific events of last week, very few of us had ever heard of Rachel Fraenkel unless we were studying at her women's yeshiva in Jerusalem or were very otherwise involved in the orthodox feminist movement. Rachel is very well versed in Torah and Rabbinic literature and uses her Orthodox background to find new ways to understand and embrace Jewish law and ritual practice within an Orthodox lifestyle and mindset.

Over the past several weeks, she has made several statements which have been noted in Israeli media, a few of which we heard about from the rabbi last week. But what she did at her son's funeral made big headlines—and very few people spoke out against them. She did something that had been halachically permitted for women to do in Israel for some years, but that very few, if any, women have ever done in the Orthodox world (or in Israel, for that matter). It is something that we do and see often, and take for granted that it is such an accepted practice in our world...but it is so revolutionary in her world. At her son Naftali's funeral, she stood up and recited the Kaddish next to her husband.

As I read the article in Haaretz, I was sure the next paragraph would talk about the protest and outcry in Israel. How could a woman do such a thing? Isn't that a man's role? But no...the next paragraph spoke about how she did not say Kaddish as an act of protest for religious equality for women. She simply did what any grieving parent would do—as she stood just feet from the grave of the son she lost all too soon, she turned to God using the words of our tradition...words which at no point mention death--only our deep faith in God, something a Jew acknowledges, even in life's darkest moments. Perhaps even more important for the Israeli people than her recitation of Kaddish is that the Chief Rabbi of Israel and all the thousands of people present and watching around the world responded "Amen" to her prayer. At that

moment, nobody thought about how strange it was for a woman to be reciting kaddish. The Jewish world had lost a son, and Rachel became a mother to all of us.

Most of the people present and most of the people viewing the funeral on TV had never seen or heard a woman recite Kaddish. But somehow it seemed right. It seemed necessary. And it was accepted. In that moment I am sure Rachel had no thought in her mind about the deep meaning of that act. She had not an ounce of dominance or charisma in her at that moment-- she was mourning the loss of her teenage son. And in that moment she became not only a leader, but a heroine.

"Emor me'at va-asei harbei" teaches Pirkei Avot...say little and do much. To me, this quality is a mark of good leadership, and it is exactly what Rachel Fraenkel did. She took her vision, to which she has devoted her professional life, and simply put it into action in the most natural way...she led by example...she practiced what she preaches...and hopefully the result of that moment will allow many more women the sense of freedom to express themselves through public prayer in life's moments.

There is a constant conversation in Israel and abroad about the lack of good, old-fashioned leaders--in Israel, as well as in other places. If you walk into any given coffee shop in Tel Aviv and listen to Israelis of a certain generation talking, you shouldn't be surprised to hear them reminisce about the *real* leaders of yesterday--Ben Gurion, Dayan, Begin, Rabin, Golda...*They* were real leaders! Well, I would answer them, just as the nature of the country has changed, and just as the world has changed, the nature of our leaders must change.

It's true--many of tomorrow's leaders lack an essential appreciation for the miracle of the birth of the State of Israel that those of a certain generation have. It's natural-- they weren't there in 1948 or 1956 or 1967 and were likely too young to really know much about 1973 or 1984! they did not fight in the wars, they were not the ones making the tough decisions to risk the lives of thousands of soldiers against the powerful Arab armies that surrounded them with nothing less than a desire to erase the young state from the globe.

But our up-and-coming leaders have other appreciations that those who came before them could not imagine. They see our country as a leader in so many world industries--science, medicine, technology, military strategy, agriculture... They see us as an example of what it

means to go out into the world and offer assistance wherever disaster strikes. They will be the ones who find ways for us to use our role as a light unto the nations in very important ways we could not have dreamed of just thirty or forty years ago, much less sixty-six years ago when Israel was born.

But our new leaders also face new challenges. Historically it has been the job of Israeli leadership to determine how to best protect its citizens by using its military to defend against other militaries, for example. Today, as we know, our enemy is not an army...we do not fight in battlefields or over the Sinai. Sometimes we fight against organized terrorism, sometimes against rogue terrorists, but almost always we find ourselves trying to hit targets in densely populated areas, trying our hardest to avoid civilian casualty. Urban combat is a very different situation, and the considerations one must take when making decisions to launch ground and air strikes are very complex. The forethought that must go in to planning these missions is very different than we have had to think about in the past. Even Moshe Dayan would find today's combat scenarios mind-bogglingly complex. The risk to civilian life is much greater, and while it has been made clear that our enemies do not see great value in Israeli civilian life, we as Jews know from the Torah that life is precious and we must do all we can to protect the life. This is not political commentary, this is a statement of values.

Could a Ben-Gurion or a Levi Eshkol come back and make such decisions today? I am sure they could, but they would do it with a very different frame of reference than those who grew up in the years of suicide bombers on Israeli buses, intifadas and the murder of a prime minister by one of our own. And even in the last two decades the situation has changed so quickly that finding the right leader for each and every moment seems an impossible task. But we must have faith in those who lead. They, like us, are fallible. They, like us, make mistakes. But we must trust their ability to learn and move forward, leading the way to hopefully a much better tomorrow.

New leadership is scary sometimes. It takes us out of our comfort zone. We so want to go back to the way things were--civilized, recognizable, even predictable. But we must have faith in those who come after us to lead, and we must have the patience to both offer guidance and assistance, and to let them fail and learn on their own.

This week we read about a change in leadership—the selection of Joshua as successor to Moses. The story takes a relatively brief section of the parsha—only about 12 verses. God calls Moses up to the mountain—the mountain upon which he will die—to view the promised land—the land to which he has led the people of Israel but will not enter. And on that mountain God explains to Moses why he will not enter the land, for in the wilderness of Zin he struck the rock and thus rebelled against God’s instruction in front of the people. Moses then speaks to God, asking for Him to select a leader for the people of Israel: “who may go out before them, and who may come in before them, and who may lead them out, and who may bring them in...” That is to say, “don’t do to the next guy what you did to me...I didn’t want this job in the first place—I told you I am slow of speech and not up to the job, but you told me to do it anyway and I obeyed...and now after all these years I don’t even get the reward of leading the people into the Land...don’t do that to the next guy...”

Moses came to leadership from what I would imagine to be a very difficult place. He himself was born a Hebrew to a household of slaves. Then he was adopted by the Pharaoh’s daughter and raised as royalty. It was in Pharaoh’s palace, then, that he would have developed his earliest sense of what leadership is. However by the definitions of leadership I spoke of earlier, serving in the Pharaoh’s court is not true leadership. Moses learned the skills necessary to be a strong commander or master, but he was not schooled in true leadership in the palace. Like many of us, he had to develop those skills “on the job”.

Moses was charged with freeing the people from four centuries of bondage, and bringing them to the promised land. We know how the story of the Exodus and the forty years of trekking through the desert went. We also know that from the outset Moses was not confident in his own abilities as a leader.

Over the years, Moses learned a great truth—leadership is about developing other leaders. Once the Tabernacle was established, he appointed seventy elders from amongst the people, empowering them with God’s spirit. This is one of the earliest descriptions of institution building we see. Because these leaders worked with Moses, we can assume that the mission of reaching the promised land was much more successful than it otherwise would have been.

Moses was a humble servant of God. From the beginning he was insecure about his ability to carry out the work. But as time went on and his relationship with God and with the people became more solid, his sense of self did not grow. He did not take on this role as a leader to feed his own ego, rather he knew there was a far greater purpose and he recognized that it had become imperative upon him to see that vision through.

But Moses knew another truth...he knew that at some point a new leader would take over his role and bring the people into the land, and it is at that point in the Torah where we find ourselves this week. At that moment on the mountain, Moses was forced to face his own mortality. And in doing so, he recognized that it was his very responsibility to publicly select the man who would lead the people across the Jordan River and into the promised land.

In the scene described in this week's parsha, God commands Moses to place his hand upon Joshua as a public symbol of his acceptance of Joshua as a leader. To show the people that he does this with no qualms, no hesitations, no conditions, he put *both* of his hands upon Joshua—which, by the way, is to this day part of the ritual of *s'micha* or ordination of rabbis and cantors.

There is something very special about this act, though. Moses' hands had done much over the years. They had held the scepter of the Prince of Egypt and they had killed one of the taskmasters that served the palace. They held a shepherd's staff in Midian after Moses fled Egypt, and they held the staff that embodied God's spirit as Moses brought the plagues upon Egypt. They are the hands that, as he raised them to the heavens, split the sea. They are the hands that chiseled the first set of tablets, then dropped them at the sight of the Golden Calf, then brought down the second pair. But they were also mortal hands: they were the hands of a man who never asked for the life he ended up living; Moses would have been perfectly happy living a shepherd's life in Midian, but the story of his life became synonymous with the story of our people. And now these hands would be lain upon Joshua, imbuing him with God's spirit as he prepared to take over command of the Israelites.

I have spent many hours thinking about how I would feel in both Moses' and Joshua's places at that very moment. I suppose the closest experience I have had in my own life was when my cantor came to New York and placed this tallit over my shoulders, putting his hands on me, as I

was invested as a cantor. Not quite the same, but a ritual based on this short biblical story. It was a very emotional moment for me, and during those five minutes I remembered myself as a little boy who could barely see over the *amud*, chanting the shacharit prayers, Cantor Fox singing sweet harmonies to my solos. I would listen to the cantor sing the service and dream that one day I would be privileged to lead prayer for such a wonderful, large congregation. And then there I was, in the auditorium of the seminary, being given the authority by that same wonderful man to carry on leading the next generation in song and prayer. The emotion was very palpable--I can still very vividly experience it over and over again as I recall it in my mind's eye.

As Jews, we are all leaders--it's in our blood. Whether or not we take upon ourselves the role of active leadership, we must treat ourselves as such and live our lives in such a way that the world looks upon us with great respect. Our parents and grandparents figuratively "laid their hands" upon us, entrusting the future of our people, our values, our heritage, to us. Any time one of us takes an aliyah at the Torah, a blessing is recited for us in which we ask God to bless "*maasei yadeinu*", literally the doings of our hands--our worthy endeavors. We must live up to that challenge in the most real way. We must be sure that our actions are reflective of our best values, so that we should continually have God's blessing. And sometimes, that means we have to be able to be honest when one of our own acts in a way that is not acceptable to our tradition--not always the popular thing to say.

Moses was a leader who was not overly concerned with popularity much of the time. He was charged with taking a people who knew nothing more than having every detail of their life determined by an outside force and leading them into a life of freedom. Much of that generation died out in the trek across the desert and Moses was no longer the right leader for the new group who grew up in freedom.

I suppose the lesson is that there are many great leaders yet to take the stage. They may not think like us on every issue, and they may not understand everything as we do, but once they are in front of the people we must trust them and help them be the best leaders they can

be. And when they make the headlines for the wrong reasons, we should not be afraid to say so.

These past weeks have been very difficult for Jews around the world, especially our Israeli brothers and sisters. We cannot imagine the decisions our leaders across the pond have to make, the things they have to take into account. Whether or not we agree with each move, we ask for God's blessing and guidance, that they should do all they can to protect life and protect our holy land. To quote a passage we read just a short while ago, I pray that our children will see the day when war and bloodshed cease, when a great peace will embrace the whole world. Then nation will not threaten nation, and mankind will not again know war. And let us say, Amen.