

NSS Beth El Sisterhood Shabbat
Parashat Vayetze
December 10, 2016
Composed by Hazzan Ben Tisser

Today as we celebrate our congregation's Sisterhood and all of their accomplishments and contributions to our community, I can't help but think of one word that describes this incredible group of women: leadership. Whether in our synagogue community or on a national level, Sisterhood is a group of women committed to ensuring the best for our synagogues and larger institutions, and so we honor them and their work today.

We know that Jewish leaders, past and present, have always held the Torah close. In millennia past, the Kings of Israel were required to keep a *sefer Torah* by their side at all times; in modern times, the same charge is given to IDF soldiers. They are instructed to study it daily that they may remember that they are bound to Torah; that no one is above the law, themselves included; and that ultimately, we are all in the service of God. The Torah offers many lessons about leadership. This morning we will explore some of these lessons through our patriarchs in the book of Genesis.

In 5774, Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks devoted his year of *divrei Torah* to the theme of leadership. I want to share some of his insights about the characters we have encountered these past weeks in looking at what we can learn from them about leadership.

In the beginning, God creates a beautiful garden with every imaginable beauty—the ultimate paradise—and then creates the first human couple, giving them only two rules. We know how the story goes: they break one of the rules, become embarrassed, and do their best to hide, only to learn that nothing and nobody can ultimately hide from God. Adam ends up blaming his wife for his action; Eve blames the serpent. Nothing was their own fault; they could not accept personal responsibility.

Shortly after, two sons are born to Adam and Eve. We know this story as well: we experience the first case of fratricide as Cain kills Abel. God speaks to Cain saying, "Where is your brother Abel?" Cain replies, "I don't know. Am I my brother's keeper?" God responds, "What have you done?! Listen! Your brother's blood cries out to me from the ground." (Gen. 4:8-10). Rabbi Sacks reminds us that while in this case "Cain does not deny personal responsibility, he denies moral responsibility...he asks why he should be concerned with the welfare of anyone but himself."

In both cases, we learn important lessons about what is not exemplary in a good leader. A leader must not only be willing to take personal responsibility for both successes and shortcomings; he must be willing to accept moral responsibility for his own actions, as well have a true sense of responsibility for those he serves. The Hebrew word for responsibility, *achrayut*, comes from the word *acher*, meaning an “other”. A leader must be in constant relationship and conversation with the other; she must accept responsibility for the other. In some cases this can mean the bystanders; in other cases, as Rabbi Sacks teaches us, “our great Other is God himself.”

A week later, we meet Noah: the “righteous man, perfect in his generations; Noah walked with God.” Noah is the only person in the Torah described as a *tzadik*. In fact, the only person who comes close to such outright praise is Job, referred to as “*tam veyashar*”, “blameless and upright; he feared God and shunned evil.” And yet, the Noah we come to know before the flood, righteous and God-fearing, is not the Noah we part ways with after the flood.

Being righteous does not automatically make one a leader. We have studied this idea many times—Noah’s righteousness is not outright; it is a comparative righteousness, relative only to those around him. In other words, perhaps since it got to the point that God regretted even creating humans, Noah was just the *least bad* of all the people on earth, indeed making him appear righteous.

We can also assume that because the nature of the people around him did not change enough to dissuade God from flooding the earth, Noah’s apparent righteousness had not rubbed off on others. To retain his level of righteousness, we can be led to believe that he separated himself from those around him. One of the great lessons in *Pirkei Avot* is “*al tifrosh min hatzibbur*—one should not separate oneself from the community”. Although we often idealize our leaders, and having a true *tzadik* for a leader is appealing in so many ways, perhaps even more important is to have a leader that is a person of the people; who uses her influence to help those around her be the best possible versions of themselves.

Even if Noah couldn’t ultimately change the people around him, it is the moral imperative of a leader to at a minimum protest—to speak out against what is wrong and what is evil. The Talmud (Berachot 31a) teaches that we will be asked six specific questions when we ultimately arrive in Heaven. One of them asks if we acted with honesty and integrity; but not one of them asks if we were *tzadikim*. Let us learn from Noah that to be righteous is (a) relative to our surroundings, and (b) is therefore not always enough. We must be concerned with those around us and do what we can to

increase goodness in the world; to remind those around us that the opportunity to do *teshuvah*, to improve themselves, always exists, whether or not they choose to do so.

Rabbi Sacks writes, “Leaders lead. That does not mean to say that they don’t follow. But what they follow is different from what most people follow. They don’t conform for the sake of conforming. They don’t do what others do merely because others are doing it. They follow an inner voice, a call. They have a vision, not of what is, but of what might be. They think outside the box. They march to a different tune.” Avram proves to be this kind of leader as he accepts God’s challenge and God’s promise, beginning on his journey toward the Promised Land.

Why was Avram’s deep faith so astonishing? Because people have a natural tendency to conform, and Avram is the first to go against it. He left the culture of the place in which he lived (his land); he left his friends and neighbors, who very likely influenced him throughout his life (his birthplace); and of course he left his family and all else that was dear to him (his father’s house). God asks Avram to be different...not *stam*...but for the sake of starting something new, something that had not previously existed, but that was so needed...something that would be passed on to Avram’s household and future generations through following God’s ways and by “doing what is right and just.”

In accepting God’s challenge, this time and in the future, Abraham ultimately answers the call and in doing so becomes not just a leader, but the father of a nation of leaders. He didn’t have a nation to lead, and he didn’t wait for others to act. He simply did what he knew to be the correct thing. He walked ahead of his time, he took personal and moral responsibility, and to add a new dimension to our biblical characters, he took collective responsibility.

One of the most important lessons we learn in the early part of the Torah is the importance of being oneself—truly important to good leadership. So often we desire to be like those who we admire. Sometimes it is for reasons of vanity; sometimes we perceive another to be of greater import than we; sometimes we perceive another to be more powerful than we, and so we try our best to copy what we see as the essential qualities in that person, rather than following what we know to be authentically ourselves.

In the Torah, we look to Jacob and Esau. Jacob so desired to be the beloved son of his father that not only does he trade some soup for his older brother’s birthright, he tricks his own father as Isaac lay on his deathbed. Ultimately, Isaac planned to give each of his sons the blessing each one deserved and needed...that is to say that had Jacob been content with himself, confident in his own identity, the result would have been the

same as far as his father's blessing. What would have changed, perhaps, is his relationship with Esau, as his brother may have even looked up to him ultimately. The great lesson here is that a leader must be comfortable in his own skin, firm in his beliefs and convictions, not looking to imitate those around him to gain a falsely heightened sense of security or self-worth.

This week, Jacob has a famous dream. Dreams play an important role in the latter parts of the book of *Bereshit*. Through dreams—both the encounters and the aftermath—we have much to learn about good leadership. Jacob's dream is an encounter with the Divine, in a very real way. But it's not just about the struggle; it's ultimately about Jacob putting his faith in God as through him God fulfills the promise made to his father and grandfather about becoming a great nation.

So, too, Joseph's encounters with dreams—his own dreams and those of Pharaoh—have much to teach us, and in just a couple of weeks I am sure we'll hear all about them. What is important to know about dreams with regard to leadership is that a great leader is not necessarily one who dreams, nor one who can interpret dreams. A great leader is a person who can *implement* dreams. As Warren Bennis, a pioneer in the field of leadership studies, said, "Leadership is the capacity to translate vision into reality." Through Joseph's understanding of his dream, he was able to bring himself to a place of creating *shalom* between himself and his family; serving as the leader he knew he would one day be, and using his position for goodness. As well, through interpreting Pharaoh's dreams he was able to put into action a plan that ultimately saved not just Egypt but surrounding communities from the threat of famine.

We are blessed to be a community of leaders in a variety of arenas. I believe it is, therefore, our responsibility to be part of the development of more great leaders to ensure the good future of not only our community, but of broader society. So how do we do this?

The Torah teaches us "*v'shinantam l'vanecha*"—we must teach these lessons to our children, speaking of them at home and on our way, at all times. It isn't enough to *live* this way; we must also impart from our knowledge to those who come after us.

One of the ways in which we can do this is by supporting the institution which trained me, our rabbis, and a number of our congregants—the Jewish Theological Seminary. I want to tell you that as someone who originally had no intention of studying there (another story for another time), I am so deeply grateful not only for the experience of having spent three years of my life as part of the JTS community, but for the support

that came from congregants around the country such as yourselves which enabled me to focus on my studies, rather than on how to find ways to subsidize them.

Our Sisterhood is a proud supporting chapter of Torah Fund. Through class fees and donations, our Sisterhood forwards 100% of the monies it receives for Torah Fund directly to the national Torah Fund. This wonderful project has paid for dormitory buildings, the creation of a seminary prayer space, and hundreds of scholarships so future leaders can focus on their studies worry-free, ultimately giving the Jewish community the gift of hundreds of collective years of leadership. I would strongly encourage you to consider a gift to Torah Fund this year as a way of supporting and sustaining good Jewish leadership. Surely you are all beneficiaries of Torah Fund's generosity through the leadership you have received from clergy and educators over the past many years, and therefore you understand the importance of quality Jewish leadership. I thank Sisterhood locally and nationally for allowing me the opportunity to study at the Seminary, and thank the many of you who have supported Torah Fund for so doing.

In closing, it is my prayer that we take these lessons to heart, using them to guide us through the cacophony of our daily existence, as we each do our part to make the world a better place, and as we give the gift of our lessons learned to the next generation. *Ken yehi ratzon*—so may it be God's will. And let us say: Amen.