

Rosh Hashanah D'var 5777
Congregation Betenu
Rav Bryan

During this Rosh Hashanah, as we commemorate the birthday of the world. As we delve into thinking about our deepest values. Our greatest hopes. The practical ways we want this year to be better than the year before I want to spend some time thinking about leadership especially in a year many of us are likely already thinking about qualities of leaders.

One thing we know starting with the Torah portion that was beautifully chanted and read for Rosh Hashanah is that we are tasked with caring for and having leadership over all other creatures. Humans were made in the image of G!d by G!d according to our tradition in order to care for all creatures.

In terms of biblical leaders, we have many, but the Talmud spends a lot of time on three of them: Noah, Abraham and Moses. Noah as many know from the biblical text is said to have been righteous for his time. We are also told that Noah walked with G!d. From Noah we learn that being righteous and in some way attuned to the divine are qualities of leadership.

There are many many many qualities associated with Abraham. Sticking just with the biblical text there is one the lesser known, but significant story in Genesis 18 where Abraham looks up and sees three strangers. He immediately greets them , tells them he will wash their feet; a common biblical way of treating guests with kindness and get them food. This seems like simple kindness, but one thing that makes this significant is we are told in the previous verse G!d appeared to Abraham.

Because of this introduction that G!d appeared to Abraham some commentators claim these three people were actually angels sent by G!d and that Abraham was so spiritually connected he recognized their divinity. The Dean of Hebrew College and one of my teachers Rabbi Sharon Cohen Ansfeld has a different interpretation. She reads that Abraham was so hospitable to his guests that even when G!d appeared to him, even when he was in conversation or deep connection to G!d he said, "Hold on G!d. There are people at my tent that need to be taken care of. We'll have to continue this conversation later." We learn from Abraham that a quality of leadership is radical hospitality. Welcoming all and ensuring they are cared for.

There are other biblical comparisons we could make especially how they respond to G!d announcing destruction. Noah goes with G!d's plan to destroy the world; building the ark and saving his family. Abraham argues against G!d's destruction of two cities. This is one of the most cited differences in rabbinical literature for why Abraham would have been the better leader.

There is another debate about their connection with divinity. We are told that Noah walked with G!d whereas Abraham walked before G!d. Rabbinic literature prioritizes walking before, but without getting into those debates one thing that is clear is for our ancient rabbis a connection to divinity or something greater than one's self is essential to leadership.

Even with these rabbinic debates about Noah and Abraham it is clear the most valued Jewish leader in the biblical tradition is Moses. We are told in Deuteronomy 34:10, "Never again was there a prophet like Moses in all of Israel who G'd signaled out face to face." Once again connection to divinity is referenced, but in this case it is in regards to a prophet. If we look at Moses as a leader though we know he struggles. Much of the Torah he is upset at the people or the people are upset at him, but some things to highlight are

- When his father-in-law sees the people bringing petty grievances to Moses he suggests that Moses should set up a system of courts and delegate leadership so it is not solely his burden. Moses listens to this advice.
- Despite initial reluctance Moses with support from his brother Aaron confront Pharaoh and the oppression that existed in their time ultimately and successfully freeing the oppressed peoples.
- Under Moses leadership all of the people made contributions to build the tabernacle.

In other words Moses listened to the advice of experienced leaders, led a successful fundraising campaign, and fought for the oppressed people of his day. Perhaps these are things we should expect from our leaders or from ourselves when we are in leadership positions.

I should also note while this is not explicit in the biblical text along with Aaron and his father in law Yitro it is likely Moses confided in and took advice from his sister Miriam who we are told in her own right was a leader of the women in her time. There is not a lot said about her biblically, but the Talmud tells a story that Moses parents were going to stop trying to have children for fear that if they had a male son Pharaoh would drown him. Miriam stood up to them saying, "You are worse than Pharaoh. He is only killing male children, you are preventing the birth of male and female children. Without her intervention according to the Talmud we would not even be able to wonder about the qualities of Moses' leadership.

The bible raises Moses up as a premier leader, but the Talmud wonders if he was the best leader we had. There are a lot of debates about if Moses or Aaron was a better leader of the Jewish people. At the time of Moses' death, the Torah says, "And the children of Israel wept for Moses in the plains of Moab thirty days." (Deuteronomy 34:9) At the time of Aaron's death the Torah says, "...They wept for Aaron thirty days, all of the house of Israel."

Rabbinic literature makes a lot of the fact for Aaron that it says "ALL the house of Israel." Kallah Rabbati and Avot deRabbi Natan two sources of rabbinic Midrash tell a similar story that when two people quarreled Aaron would go to one saying, "Look at your friend. They are ashamed. They are weeping saying, 'How can I face my friend for it is I who wronged them.'" Aaron would stay with him until he removed all the jealous rage from his heart. He would then go to the other party in this argument say the same thing and stay just as long as the story goes when the two would meet they would hug, embrace, and kiss each other.

The claim is that Moses being a judge and prophet ultimately had to decide between quarrels. He would ultimately say one party was innocent potentially causing strife to another party. He could not be impartial and therefore not everyone would weep for him.

We learn from this rabbinic material that Aaron would meet individuals wherever they were at one on one. Stay as long as necessary until the individually resolved the issues they had with another person and in some ways ensure reconciliation between the two. A leader is one who can bring people together and is willing to work with people no matter how long it takes to ensure reconciliation. It is this quality that allows all the people to weep for him at his death.

We can learn a lot from biblical leaders and how our ancient rabbis interpreted their actions. We know that some of our leaders stood up against oppression. Miriam convinced her parents to have children when they wanted to give into Pharaoh's oppressive laws. Moses took this fight further leading to the redemption of the Jewish people. Before him Abraham stood up for the people of Sodom and Gomorrah.

We can also see how Moses brought the people together. Galvanized them to bring gifts of the heart in order to build a dwelling place for G!d. We see not only from Moses, but also from Abraham and Noah a connection to something greater than oneself guides them in their leadership.

We see the values of radical hospitality from Abraham and Aaron. Abraham leaving a conversation with G!d to welcome the other. Aaron going out of his way for as long as possible to ensure people reconcile with each other. All of this can help us learn about ourselves as leaders, figure out how we want to decide our future leaders, and what values we want to cultivate in ourselves and help cultivate in others.

On this Rosh Hashanah may we remember the first mission G!d gave us; to take care of all creatures and with inspiration from these biblical figures gain more clarity on how we can develop ourselves into the best leaders we can be and chose the best leaders we can for ourselves and others.

Shanah Tova!