

Like Sheep Without a Shepherd¹

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Lacking a crystal ball, I propose we begin to consider what the Jewish world will be like ten years' hence by engaging that peculiar Jewish ability to look forwards by looking backwards, thus to see what lies ahead by studying terrain already covered and allowing what we know of the road travelled to suggest something about the road yet to come. I will leave to other contributors to this journal to discuss issues that loom large on the horizon but regarding which I have no particular expertise. Instead, I would like to propose an idea for my readers' consideration that I do know all about, one that seems to me to rest at the heart of the matter as I personally wonder what will befall the House of Israel in the coming years.

When I allow myself collectively to make my own experiences the lens through which the past is projected into the future, I see a Jewish world characterized by a crippling lack of leadership, one that more than anything else resembles Moses' worst nightmare for his people as he spoke from the very edge of his own life and begged God to send someone worthy to replace him lest the people be "like sheep that have no shepherd" (Number 27:17). God, touched by Moses' dying wish that he be replaced by someone able and willing to accept the mantle of national leadership, instantly instructs Moses to transfer the charism of leadership to Joshua both formally by placing his hands upon him in public and also by transferring to Joshua some of his own majestic bearing. (How exactly Moses is to do that is left unexplained. Rashi, commenting *ad locum*, has the idea that the idea was for Moses to project some of the light radiating out from his effulgent face onto Joshua and that that

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would do the trick. It would be interesting to know if Rashi was right. But surely the more important point is that Moses apparently understood what was being asked of him, not that we do not.) This is not to say that there are no Jewish leaders in the world; rather, it is true Jewish leadership, with all the charisma and gravitas that it should and can entail, that has been lost.

When I was a student at the Jewish Theological Seminary in the 1970s, the Jewish world was home to any number of individuals who were universally recognized, including by people who differed with them (and who even disagreed with them vehemently) about specific issues, as leaders of the American Jewish community. The people of whom I am thinking were very different in many ways, but what they all had in common was the foundation of deep cultural awareness and learning upon which they stood. These were leaders so fully and absolutely steeped in Jewish culture and Jewish learning that it seems hard to imagine them in any other context at all: despite the famous, oft-cited comment by Solomon Schechter about the indispensable need for American rabbis to know all about baseball, it is as hard for me actually to imagine Louis Finkelstein actually taking up softball in his spare time—and I speak as someone who served as the man’s research assistant for most of my years at JTS—as it would be to imagine Menachem Schneerson bowling or Joseph Soloveitchik playing miniature golf.

Am I falling prey to the “golden age” syndrome, that particularly version of craziness that makes people my age imagine that things were invariably better in the good old days of their irretrievable youths? I suppose we must all consider that possibility when we find ourselves looking backwards wistfully, but it doesn’t feel that way to me. Just to the contrary, actually, is how it feels: we live in a Jewish world in which people with almost no Jewish learning at all claim—and to a great extent succeed at assuming—significant positions of Jewish leadership.

As far as I can see, no member of the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations could possibly claim to be a leader of American Jewry, let alone world Jewry, in that sense of the word I have in mind. Nor can the current leadership of any Jewish seminary in the United States seriously claim to speak on behalf of American Jewry in a way even remotely comparable to the way Maimonides represented Egyptian Jewry in his day. Nor do we have leaders who can give a thoughtful response fully steeped in the Jewish tradition to social injustice in the same way that Abraham Joshua Heschel could in his day: when Heschel marched at Selma with Martin Luther King Jr., for example, he was widely and reasonably understood to be the living embodiment of his people in his adopted country, living proof that Jewry can rise above particularistic politics while still being fully entrenched in tradition. It is precisely that kind of leadership that we lack, the kind entrusted to leaders who are learned, suffused totally with Jewishness, possessed of the deepest understanding of tradition acquired through a lifetime of intensive study, *and* able to command the respect of others not by demanding it but by inspiring it through piety, erudition, faith, absolute intellectual and spiritual integrity, and the deepest and most abiding allegiance to Jewish observance.

What will happen if we continue to steer forward the ship without captains at the helm able to guide us towards a future in which Jews everywhere feel inspired eagerly to embrace their Jewishness *and* their Judaism seems obvious: the ship will sail around endlessly in ever-wider, ever-less-goal-driven circles and eventually founder on the shoals of irrelevance. When I project the contemporary view ten years into the future and see the Jewish world even *more* unraveled and unstable than it is today because of a lack of true, commanding leadership at the top, I feel despondent. And, rationally speaking, why shouldn't I? Nor can we rationally hope to import leadership from elsewhere, like the American Jewish community did in the past. Indeed, what American Jewry needs today is an indigenous revitalization, specifically *not* one brought in from the outside.

From where will these leaders emerge? One of the foundational ideas of North American culture is the notion of limitless merit-based opportunity. There is a certain satisfying republicanism to the notion that anyone can grow up to be president, and that all that is required to be a great leader is initiative, here defined as the mere desire to step forward and successfully to assume the mantle of leadership. But embedded in that set of ideas is a less-noticed corollary: that, because leaders following this paradigm step forward from the people, there must inevitably be a certain commonality that links the leader to the led. Taken one step further we come to the notion that to be a leader one not only may, but actually must, be cut from the same cloth as those one guides forward and, indeed, the *primus inter pares* model supports that concept by suggesting that one can indeed be of the people and over them at the same time. This model works in the Supreme Court of the United States, for example, where the Chief Justice presides over the court and has distinctive administrative responsibilities but no actual control over the opinions, legal and otherwise, of the other justices, thus being *over* the other justices and *of* them at the same time. To work well in the American Jewish context, however, this concept needs serious adjustment. In fact, this notion, so current in the Jewish world that it feels almost axiomatic in most contexts, is part of our problem: having not been at all careful regarding that for which we wished, we have been granted leaders who are just larger, richer, more forceful, and/or more powerful versions of ourselves. But that is not at all where we should have gone or where we should go as we make our way through the next decade and come out, either better or less well off, at the other end in 2025. Obviously, our leaders must be of us. Yet, our leaders must also hold to a higher moral and social standard, one that emphasizes their distinctiveness *from* the people they serve rather than their similarity *to* them. That is the reality we should demand for ourselves as we venture into the next decade.

Scripture actually has quite a bit to say about the qualities we should demand from our leaders. To return that passage cited above, the one in which Moses pleads with God that the Israelites not be left after his death as sheep without a shepherd. I started halfway through

the story without setting the words I cited in their literary context. God instructs Moses to climb a certain mountain, one called in this passage Mount Avarim, and to gaze from there at the Promised Land for it is there, atop that specific mountain that he, Moses, is going to die. And it is then, before climbing to his death, that Moses utters the prayer cited in part above “May the Eternal, God of the spirits of all flesh, appoint a leader over the community, one who will go out before them and who will come in after them, who will personally lead them forward and oversee their return. And thus shall the congregation of the Eternal not be as sheep who have no shepherd.” The leader is therefore to be someone apart from the general populace, from *amkha*...but also someone who will lead them out and bring them back not as the first among equals but as someone wholly distinct and different. Moses’ own story is instructive: he begins living among the people, but eventually sets his tent outside the camp *not* because he was too good to live in the midst of the people, but in order to maintain distance from them and to model the kind of austere bearing that he no doubt hoped would adequately bear witness to the fact that Moses was chosen by God and personally invested with the divine spirit that he eventually bequeathed to his successor, to Joshua.

The text says this explicitly, by the way, noting that Joshua was an *ish asheir ru-ah bo*, a man in whom inhered the spirit of the living God, presumably in a way that set him apart from the rest of humanity. And this is also what Scripture means to teach us at 1 Samuel 10:6 when it depicts Samuel explaining to the young Saul that the sign that he, Saul, has been chosen to be king of Israel will be when he encounters a group of prophets descending from the *bamah* at Givat Ha-elohim and, as the spirit of God envelops and transforms him, he becomes an *ish aheir*, a different man: different from the man he was previously, but also different from the people he is now called upon to lead.

Leadership like this is not limited to Scripture. Rabbi Judah ben Shimon, the Jewish Patriarch of Roman Palestine in the second and early third centuries CE popularly called Judah the

Patriarch (or, less often, Judah the Prince), was such a man in his day. And so was Samuel ibn Naghrillah, more often called Shmuel Ha-nagid by Jewish moderns, in eleventh-century Spain. Certainly, the quintessential embodiment of this kind of leadership was Maimonides himself, a man who was as deeply involved in the political landscape of his day as he was in the practice of medicine yet who nonetheless exemplified (and even today continues to exemplify) Jewish learning at its deepest and most intellectually compelling. There have been Shabbetai Tzvi's, to be sure—charlatans whose sole claim to leadership was their personal will to self-aggrandize. But there have also been Menasseh ben Israels, Moses Mendelssohns, and Rav Kooks. All lived within the four ells of *halakhah*, yet also managed somehow to inhabit the entire Jewish world of their day, thus to symbolize the finest and most noble spirit of Jewishness not by hiding from the world but by living fully and really in it. That should be our model for leadership, and we should, in my opinion, have the courage to establish our hierarchy of leadership in direct proportion to the degree to which our would-be leaders approach that specific ideal.

We have manufactured a Jewish world for ourselves in these United States that shows no particular interest in denying positions of prominence to people for whom Judaism itself is only an ancillary feature of their Jewishness, and who themselves are Jewishly unlettered. To say that this will not lead us forward to a good place is to say the very least. When I look into the future and force myself to open my eyes, what I see is the national embodiment of the psalmist's self-deprecating image of himself that closes the 119th psalm, the image of himself as a lost lamb hoping against hope that he might find some way to survive in a world wholly unsympathetic to lambs and their needs.

As he faced his last hours, Moses prayed to God, and God sent Joshua to lead forward the House of Israel in Moses' stead. In a world that seems unable to distinguish between fanaticism and piety, between know-nothing fundamentalism and spiritual integrity, between self-absorption and selflessness, and between grandiosity and true leadership skills,

perhaps we too should resort to prayer and hope that we not be forced to live as sheep without a shepherd, as lost lambs longing for salvation but without any clear idea how or whence redemption might yet come.

I write, as I said above, as myself: as a rabbi who has devoted almost his entire professional life to service in the congregational rabbinate. Can rabbis give up their endless internecine sniping long enough to offer the Jewish world the kind of leadership it so sorely lacks? I'd like to think so. And, in fact, I do think so. Denominationalism is not quite as passé, let alone dead, as is so often advertised: as Mark Twain said of himself, the rumors of its death have been, to say the least, greatly exaggerated. But some of the bitterness that denominationalism has brought to the rabbinic enterprise has strained away, I believe, in the last decade; I am personally involved in a start-up publishing venture that has succeeded in bringing together well over 180 authors, the large majority of them rabbis, from every corner of the Jewish world to work together on books of essays intended to inspire and enthuse the larger Jewish world out there. So perhaps from that vast sea of learning can emerge leaders able to inspire *and* to lead, to teach *and* to guide forward, to stand personally for the finest Jewish values *and* to represent Jewishness at its finest and most stirring to the great world out there *and* to the men and women of Jewish America. Stranger things have happened!

Chabad has made a kind of strange virtue out of leaderlessness, just as the Breslover hasidim did before them. But although that seems to work well for both those groups, it will not serve a people as disparate and given over to querulousness and almost fetishistic disunity as contemporary American Jewry. Such a group needs a Rambam—a Maimonides—at its helm, a leader whose political acumen, spiritual bearing, rabbinic learning, intellectual integrity, emotional maturity, and moral excellence makes it unnecessary for him or her actually to campaign for the (non-existent) position of American exilarch. Can such a person step forward and seize the mantle of national, let alone trans-national, Jewish leadership in a way that brings together rather than drives apart...and in so doing makes membership in the

House of Israel deeply attractive to a new generation of young people? In my opinion, the answer to that specific question more than anything else will shape American Jewry in 5785.

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