

RABBI JONATHAN SACKS

FOREWORD BY PROFESSOR RONALD HEIFETZ



LESSONS IN LEADERSHIP

A Weekly Reading of the Jewish Bible


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LESSONS IN LEADERSHIP
A WEEKLY READING OF THE JEWISH BIBLE



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Rabbi Jonathan Sacks

LESSONS IN LEADERSHIP

A Weekly Reading of the Jewish Bible

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Lessons in Leadership
A Weekly Reading of the Jewish Bible

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*This book is dedicated in honor of the 95th
birthdays of our grandparents*

Frances and Robert Rub עמו"ש

who lead by example

in the way they live their life together

*in their seamless integration of
traditional Judaism with the evolving world,
to the enhancement of both*

*in their commitment to building
a vibrant home for Jews in Israel*

*in their passion for learning and educating their children,
grandchildren, and great-grandchildren*

in their engagement with their community

*in the warmth and kindness they share
with everyone they encounter*

*in their unwavering devotion to their family
and, most of all, in their love for each other*

With love, respect, and gratitude to our
Bubbe Frannie and Zayde Bob

Fred, Judy, JJ, and Leia Gluckman
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Foreword

Leadership and Public Learning

Ronald Heifetz*

Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks's extraordinary commentary on the Five Books of Moses provides encyclopedic insight and wisdom into the exercise of leadership. As the former chief rabbi of Great Britain and the Commonwealth, he draws upon a unique career combining religious inquiry with leadership practice. Within the inflamed reality that divides Jews, Christians, and Muslims in our world today, his work could not be more relevant.

* Ronald Heifetz is the founding director of the Center for Public Leadership and the King Hussein bin Talal Senior Lecturer in Public Leadership at the Harvard Kennedy School. He advises heads of governments, businesses, and nonprofit organisations, and speaks extensively throughout the world. His first book, *Leadership Without Easy Answers* (1994), is a classic in the field and has been reprinted and translated many times. He coauthored the best-selling *Leadership on the Line: Staying Alive through the Dangers of Leading* with Marty Linsky (2002). His third book, *The Practice of Adaptive Leadership: Tools and Tactics for Changing Your Organization and the World* (2009), was coauthored with Linsky and Alexander Grashow.

In an earlier volume, *The Great Partnership*, Sacks distinguishes the domains, and explains the synergy, of scientific and religious exploration.¹ Science explores causal relationships and seeks explanations. Religion explores interpretations and seeks meaning. In the pursuit of meaning, the three Abrahamic faith traditions draw on the stories and laws of the Five Books of Moses for interpretations that orient our lives. Indeed, in our interdependent world, these five books touch religious and philosophical communities everywhere.

It thus becomes particularly important to understand how these books can inform and correct the widespread cultural assumptions about leadership and authority that determine the way our societies tackle our toughest problems and seize opportunities to develop and grow. As I have argued elsewhere, some of these cultural assumptions work against us. Rather than achieve collective success, they too often lead us to corruption of our values, destruction in our lives, and finally, the extinction of our communities. As we see from the Bible, this is true not only in contemporary societies, but in ancient civilisations as well.

The Bible itself is a product of a people who, more than three thousand years ago, struggled to generate better forms of social organisation in the wake of the first agricultural revolution. For several million years up until that time, our ancestors were very well-adapted to nomadic life in communities of less than forty people. But the land available to sustain the low-density needs of a foraging economy in that region became scarce; the population had grown too large for hunting and gathering. With the advent of agriculture, density became feasible and humanity challenged itself to develop new capacities to coordinate village, city, and national life with four hundred, four thousand, 400,000, and more people. We therefore had to develop new forms of governance, authority, and social architecture.

In the Five Books of Moses, we see small communities of herdsmen – Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob – encounter Egypt, already an empire; we then see Moses and his colleagues establish, with God's guidance, the norms and governance of a society that would learn the

1. Jonathan Sacks, *The Great Partnership: Science, Religion, and the Search for Meaning* (New York: Schocken, 2012).

lessons of Pharaoh's Egypt – and depart from its vices – to build something new and adaptive for all time.

We continue to face this struggle of governance and organisation today. There is a compelling logic to imperial thinking, to a social contract of habitual deference and authoritative command as a means of governing large organisational systems or populations of people. At the same time, this kind of thinking often gets it wrong. Empires usually go extinct. When does this approach fail?

My colleagues and I have found that the most common source of failure in leadership is diagnostic. People treat adaptive challenges as if they were technical problems. Technical problems are those that are largely known, and therefore the systems, processes, and cultural norms of a community are already in place to solve them. They are much more readily amenable to authoritative expertise and command. To use a medical analogy, these are the problems that doctors and nurses can fix by performing surgery or prescribing medication. In contrast, adaptive challenges demand a change of people's attitudes, values, and behaviour. One has to sift through what to keep, what to discard, and which innovations will enable one to survive and, hopefully, thrive. In medicine, these challenges might be compared to the fundamental changes in lifestyle often required of patients and their families.

Thus, the authoritative problem-solving response that would be appropriate in the case of a technical matter becomes inadequate when the challenge is adaptive and demands the more complex response of social learning, innovation, and change. These are the times that call for leadership and not just authoritative decision, coordination, and command – when our organisations and communities must develop new capacities. Yet it seems nearly universal that in these times of distress, people yearn for technical solutions that require a minimum of personal or collective responsibility and disruption. Too often,

we look for the wrong kind of leadership. We call for someone with answers, decision, strength, and a map of the future, someone who knows where we ought to be going – in short, someone who can make hard problems simple. ... Instead of looking for saviours, we should be calling for leadership that will challenge

us to face the problems for which there are no simple, painless solutions – the problems that require us to learn new ways.

Making progress on these problems demands not just someone who provides answers from on high, but changes in our attitudes, behaviour, and values. To meet challenges such as these, we need a different idea of leadership and a new social contract that promote our adaptive capacities rather than inappropriate expectations of authority. We need to reconceive and revitalise our civic life and the meaning of citizenship.²

This is the challenge that Rabbi Sacks explores between these pages. By analysing the practices of leadership and structures of authority in the Bible, Sacks shows us how the struggle we face today, every day, can be guided by the stories of our ancestors. Our struggle is neither entirely new, nor are we alone in having to discover solutions.

Every generation faces a variation of this challenge, because every generation faces the natural inclination to invest its authorities with more answers than they have. We are born into the world looking to authority (our parents, originally) to know the way to go. We have a strong natural tendency to retreat back to dependency on authority when times get tough and problems seem to be beyond our capacity to resolve. We create a market for charlatans and demagogues, and many are only too happy to volunteer. As I've advised several CEOs, directors, and presidents and prime ministers of countries, *leadership should generate capacity, not dependency.*

Sacks provides us with profound insight into this fundamental question of leadership: how can an individual with a grant of authority, human or divine, maintain the self-discipline to focus on the very hard work of developing collective capacity, rather than succumb to the temptation of generating perpetual dependency?

In biblical terms, we might ask how a culture of dependency can transform into a culture of widely distributed leadership, how a people enslaved for generations can become a society in which all members are called upon to take responsibility whenever they see fit, whoever they

2. Ronald Heifetz, *Leadership Without Easy Answers* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap/Harvard University Press, 1994), 2.

are. As Sacks puts it, how do we become God's partners in the ongoing work of creation?

Central to meeting this challenge, both in ancient and modern times, is the need to comprehend the difference between leadership as a practice and a calling for all of us, and the structures of authority and governance that specify which roles we are to play in an organisation or community. Leadership and authority are not the same. Many lead from a position of authority, but many others lead without it, going beyond the call of duty.

We have to create authority structures, as Yitro counsels Moses, in order to organise our large communities. We need chains of command to coordinate complex living. And we need checks and balances of authority to prevent the corruption of power, as Sacks explains: between kings, prophets, and priests in biblical times and between executive, legislative, and judicial branches of government in our day. Indeed, we quite desperately need authorities who are worthy of our trust. At the same time, we cannot rely solely on authorities, even when they are trustworthy. As I've suggested, adaptive challenges – challenges such as climate change, poverty, population growth, gender equality, terrorism – are located within us, are distributed among us, and can only be solved by all of us.

To survive and thrive in a changing world, we need an evolution in our cultures that will allow for the generation of wisdom, critical thinking, and innovation from the bottom up. Leadership cannot be reserved as the province of the few in high positions of authority. Authorities must serve as the backbone of a trusting society, but the leadership of that society cannot come from there only. We need the people to transform from followers to citizens, to see that citizenship is a call for leadership, mobilising others within one's reach to take responsibility for the problems and opportunities we share. As Sacks suggests, we need passion, initiative, and genius to emerge from anywhere it can.

Sacks's commentary shows us how the lessons of our ancestors, because they are embedded in our collective memory, can help us meet the challenges of leadership and authority in our time. They are profoundly useful both for personal guidance and for public engagement. These stories provide practical leadership tools to explain to people the move from dependency to capacity, from responsibility lodged in

authority to responsibility shared by a community, from technical problems to adaptive change. They can help us refashion the historic narrative of our peoples so that, rather than live in the past, we can build from it towards a better future.

The Five Books of Moses can begin to answer the central questions of authority and leadership: How can authority figures remain honest and trustworthy? How can we check the corrupting tendencies of centralised governance? How can a people scarred by abusive authorities renew its ability to authorise and trust others? How did Moses, “the nursing father,” succeed in transforming a slave-minded people – both deeply dependent on and deeply skeptical of authority – into a self-governing society? What principles of adaptability have enabled the Jewish community to survive and flourish over time?

Finally, this volume hints at a question close to my heart. Does God learn? Sacks suggests that, since the partnership between God and humankind is real, perspectives flow both ways. Deliberation takes place – top down, bottom up. God changes the plan based on dialogue. We must learn to listen; God listens, too. And if God, the ultimate authority, listens and learns, then why shouldn’t people in positions of authority be able to publicly learn, too?

This volume contributes profoundly to our understanding of authority, both human and divine, and of leadership as the building of the adaptive capacity of a people. I hope it inspires us to grant our authorities and ourselves as we practise leadership greater permission to learn in public, together. Moses and Aaron fell on their faces before the people. The need of leadership today is less that we know, and more that collectively we have the courage to learn.

Introduction

Daring Greatly

Throughout the twenty-two years that I served as chief rabbi of the United Hebrew Congregations of the Commonwealth, my team and I faced many challenges. Early on, whenever this happened, we developed the habit of sitting down and studying Torah together. We would search for the most appropriate text, and let it speak to us. It was astonishing how often it did so. That was when we discovered that there are three types of Torah. Two we were familiar with: the Torah you learn from books, and the Torah you learn from teachers. The leadership challenges taught us a third kind: the Torah you learn from life. That is how this book was born, as a series of insights we learned from a life in active dialogue with Torah, the central text of our tradition.

It was fascinating to discover how much of the Torah is, in fact, about leadership, not in the narrow sense of holding formal office, but rather as a general approach to life. The heroes and heroines of the Torah, the patriarchs and matriarchs and their children, and the Israelites as they left Egypt and journeyed to the Promised Land, were all faced with the *responsibilities of freedom*. That, it seems to me, is the central drama of Judaism. The ancient Greeks produced a monumental literature about

character and fate, with larger-than-life heroes and often tragic outcomes. Ancient Israel produced a quite different literature about will and choice, with figures with whom we can identify, often battling with their own emotions against defeat and despair.

The Torah offers us some dramatic and unexpected scenarios. It was not Noah, the “righteous man, perfect in his generations,” who became the role model for the religious life but rather Abraham, who confronted God with some of the most audacious words in the history of faith: “Shall the Judge of all the earth not do justice?” Moses, the hero of four of the Torah’s five books, is surely one of the most unexpected leaders of all time, inarticulate and tongue-tied at first, and utterly unconvinced of his capacity to fulfil the task to which God has summoned him.

It is a pattern that continued throughout Jewish history. Saul, Israel’s first king, looked every inch the part, “heads and shoulders above” his contemporaries, yet he turned out to lack both courage and confidence, earning the stinging rebuke of the prophet Samuel, “You may be small in your own eyes, yet you are head of the tribes of Israel” (1 Sam. 15:17). David, his successor, was so unlikely a candidate that when Samuel was told to anoint one of Jesse’s sons as king, no one even thought of including him among the candidates. The battles the Greek heroes had to fight were against their enemies. The battles their Jewish counterparts had to fight were against themselves: their fears, their hesitations, their sense of unworthiness. In that sense, it seems to me, the Torah speaks to all of us, whether we see ourselves as leaders or not.

During those twenty-two years, I came to know many leaders in many fields: politicians, business people, other faith leaders, and so on. I soon discovered the difference between the public face that leaders must always show, bold, confident and unshakable, and the private face, when a leader is no longer on display and can share his or her feelings with friends. That is when you realise that even the great leaders have their doubts and hesitations. They have their moments of depression and near despair, and they are all the more human for it.

Don’t ever think that leaders are different from the rest of us. They aren’t. We all need the courage to live with the challenges, the

mistakes and mishaps, and to keep going. One of the truest as well as most amusing remarks is the one attributed to Winston Churchill: “Success is going from failure to failure without loss of enthusiasm.” It is not their victories that make people leaders; it is the way they cope with their defeats – their ability to learn, to recover, and to grow.

Most of all, I began to understand that we are all called on to be leaders within our sphere of influence, be it the family, the community, at work among colleagues, or in play among teammates. What distinguishes a leader from a non-leader is not position or office or role but rather, a basic attitude to life. Others wait for something to happen; leaders help *make* something happen. While others curse the darkness, a leader lights a light. The sages said that whenever we see the word *vayehi*, “And it came to pass,” it is always a prelude to tragedy. Leaders don’t wait for things to come to pass. They say not *vayehi* but *yehi*, “Let there be.” That was the word with which God created the universe. It is also the word with which we create a meaningful life, one that leaves the world a little better for our presence.

It was during one of the worst crises of my life that I first discovered the work of Ronald Heifetz and Marty Linsky at the John F. Kennedy School of Government at Harvard. One sleepless night, I was surfing the pages of a well-known internet bookshop when I came across a book entitled *Leadership on the Line*.¹ It was the subtitle that caught my eye: “Staying alive through the dangers of leading.” This sounded radically unlike any book on the subject I had encountered before. The others seemed to say that leadership means seeing the path ahead and inspiring others to follow. None had used words like “danger.” None had hinted that you might need help staying alive.

I ordered the book, read it, and realised immediately that I was reading the insights of people who understood the problems and pressures of leadership better than anyone else I had encountered. Not only did they make sense of what I was feeling at the time, they also helped me understand Torah, and the Hebrew Bible as a whole.

1. Ronald Heifetz and Marty Linsky, *Leadership on the Line: Staying Alive through the Dangers of Leading* (Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 2002).

For instance, there is an extraordinary passage in which, after the people complain about the food, Moses says to God, “If this is how You are going to treat me, please kill me now, if I have found favour in Your eyes, and let me not see my own ruin” (Num. 11:15). What puzzled me is that the people had complained to Moses about the food before (Ex. 16), and on that earlier occasion he had not given way to despair.

What I now realised through Ronald and Marty’s book was that on the first occasion, Moses was faced with a *technical* challenge: the people needed food. On the second occasion he was faced with an *adaptive* challenge. The problem was no longer the food but the people. They had begun the second half of their journey, from Sinai to the Promised Land. They had escaped from slavery; they now needed to develop the strength and self-confidence necessary to fight battles and create a free society. They were the problem. They had to change. That, I now learned, was what made adaptive leadership so difficult. People resist change, and can become angry and hostile when faced with the need for it. “Receiving anger with grace,” I read, can be “a sacred task.”² This was a breathtaking insight, and it helped me through some difficult moments.

I felt moved to write to Ronald Heifetz and thank him for the truthfulness of his book. He wrote back, said he would be in London in a fortnight’s time, and suggested we meet. We did, and became friends. Elaine and I have cherished his wisdom ever since.

I say this because the essays in this book were not intended as a technical study of leadership, but simply as the way we – the members of our team – learned to study the Torah in a way that spoke to us, wrestling as we were with the challenges of a religious community in the twenty-first century. In them I did not strive for terminological exactitude. So it is worth making two distinctions at the outset that I learned from Ronald Heifetz’s work.

The first is the distinction between *leadership* and *authority*. Authority is something you have in virtue of office or the position you hold in a family, community, or society. Presidents and prime ministers, chief

2. *Ibid.*, 146.

executives and team captains all have authority. But they do not necessarily lead. They can be unimaginative or defensive; they can resist change even when it is clear that change is needed. The classic example is Pharaoh in the book of Exodus. Long after it has become clear that his refusal to let the Israelites leave is bringing disaster on his people, he continues obstinately to refuse.

Conversely, one can lead without authority. Here the classic example is Nahshon son of Aminadav who, according to tradition, was the first to wade into the Red Sea, after which the waters parted so that the Israelites could cross over on dry land.³ The fact that tradition has preserved this detail despite the fact that it is not mentioned in the Torah tells us how deeply the sages knew that we cannot leave everything to divine intervention. God needs us to act so that He can act through us. Hence the profound wisdom of the Jewish tradition, that faith does not mean leaving everything to God. It is not what God does for us that changes the human situation. It is what we do for God.

One of the most moving traditions of the sages concerns Miriam, the sister of Moses. A midrash says that after Pharaoh issued his decree that every male Jewish child be thrown into the river, the men resolved that they would have no more children. It goes on to say that Amram, the father of Miriam, was head of the Sanhedrin, the court that took this decision, and it was Miriam who persuaded him to rescind it. Only because of this was Moses born. Implicit in this tradition is the judgement that a young girl had more faith than the man who was in effect the religious head of the community. He had authority, but it was Miriam who had the gift of leadership.

The way I have put the point in these essays has been to contrast influence and power. Judaism has tended to be critical of power. Kings had it and often abused it. Prophets had none, but their influence has lasted to this day. The Talmud tells us that one *nasi* (head of the Jewish community), Rabban Gamliel, asserted the authority of his office in such a way as to humiliate his deputy, R. Yehoshua, and was deposed for so doing (Berakhot 27b). The *gedolei hador*, the great sages of the generation whose interpretation of Jewish law is usually followed, rarely – if

3. Mekhilta, *Beshallah*; Sota 37a.

ever – had formal authority. They simply emerged through common consent as the leading voices of their time. To a remarkable degree, Judaism is about leadership by influence, not about authority in virtue of formal office.

The second distinction worth making is between leadership as a gift – a talent, a set of characteristics – and leadership as a process through which we acquire the skills and experience it takes to influence others, and the qualities of character needed to be able to make space for others. Often in the Torah we see people grow into leadership rather than being singled out for it from birth. Genesis traces this out in different ways in relation to both Joseph and Judah. We see both grow. Only in Egypt, after many shifts of fortune, does Joseph become a leader, and only after several trials do we see Judah do likewise. Moses undergoes a series of personal crises in the book of Numbers before he emerges, in Deuteronomy, as the figure through which he is best known to tradition: *Moshe Rabbenu*, the leader as teacher. Leadership is not a gift with which we are endowed at birth. It is something we acquire in the course of time, often after many setbacks, failures, and disappointments.

There is a story I have told elsewhere, but it is worth retelling in the present context. It happened in the summer of 1968, when I was an undergraduate student at Cambridge. Like most of the Jews of my generation I was deeply affected by the anxious weeks leading up to the Six Day War in June 1967, when it seemed as if Israel was facing a massive onslaught by its neighbours. We, the generation born after the Holocaust, felt as if we were about to witness, God forbid, a second Holocaust.

The little synagogue in Thompsons Lane was thronged with students, many of whom had shown little engagement with Jewish life until then. The sudden, extraordinary victory of Israel released a wave of relief and exhilaration. Unbeknown to us, something similar was happening throughout the Jewish world, and it led to some dramatic consequences: the awakening of Soviet Jewry, the birth of a new type of yeshiva for *baalei teshuva*, people returning to tradition, and a new sense of confidence in Jewish identity. It was, for instance, the first time Jewish students felt able, or moved, to wear a yarmulke in public.

I decided to spend the next summer travelling around the United States and Canada, meeting as many rabbis and Jewish thinkers as possible, to get some sense of where they were spiritually and intellectually. I was studying secular philosophy at the time, and it was almost taken for granted, in Britain at least, that being a philosopher meant that you were an atheist, or at the very least an agnostic. I wanted to know how Jewish thinkers in America were responding to these challenges. In 1966, *Commentary*, an American Jewish magazine, had published an issue titled *The Condition of Jewish Belief*, in which thirty-eight leading rabbis and theologians gave their answers to a series of questions about faith. There was no equivalent in British Jewry. So I booked a flight and a Greyhound bus ticket, and in the spirit of Simon and Garfunkel counting the cars on the New Jersey Turnpike, I came to look for America.

I met many impressive thinkers, but two names kept coming up in conversation: Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik at Yeshiva University, and the Lubavitcher Rebbe, Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneersohn. Rabbi Soloveitchik was the outstanding Jewish mind of the age, an intellectual giant who combined, as few have done, Talmudic mastery with philosophical depth, exegetical genius, and poetic insight into the human condition.

The Lubavitcher Rebbe, meanwhile, had emerged as a unique leader in Jewish life. He had done something very unusual: he had turned his hasidic group outwards, sending them to campuses and small communities, places that had never encountered that kind of Orthodoxy before. It is hard now, half a century later, to realise that almost no one had engaged in Jewish “outreach” before. He was a genuine pioneer, the rarest of phenomena in an ultra-traditionalist segment of Jewish life better known for its segregation from the rest of the Jewish world. Wherever I went, people spoke of him with awe.

I was determined to meet them both. The story of my encounter with Rabbi Soloveitchik belongs elsewhere. It was the meeting with the Rebbe that has to do with leadership, in a way that was completely unexpected. Full of chutzpah, I had gone to his headquarters at 770 Eastern Parkway in Brooklyn, asking the first Hasid I met how to arrange a meeting. He collapsed laughing. “Do you realise how many thousands of people want to see the Rebbe?” he said. He told me to forget about

it. It was simply not possible. Undaunted, I told him I would be traveling around the United States and Canada for the next few weeks, but that in a few weeks' time I would be staying with my aunt in Los Angeles, and if by any chance there was a possibility of a meeting, I could be contacted there. I gave him my aunt's phone number.

To my surprise, four weeks later, on a Sunday night, the phone rang. The Rebbe, I was told, could see me for a few minutes on Thursday evening. I packed my case, said goodbye to my aunt, and travelled by Greyhound bus from Los Angeles to New York, not a journey I would necessarily recommend to anyone wanting to travel coast to coast. That Thursday night I met the Rebbe. It was a meeting that changed my life.

He was quite unlike what I expected. There was no charisma, no overflowing personality. To the contrary, he was so self-effacing that there seemed to be only one person in the room: the person to whom he was speaking. This in itself was surprising. I later discovered that this was one of the fundamental principles of Jewish mysticism, *bittul hayesh*, the nullification of the self, the better to be open to the Divine, and also the human, Other.

More surprising still was what happened halfway into our conversation. Having patiently answered my questions, he performed a role reversal and started asking questions of his own. How many Jewish students were there at Cambridge University? How many of them were engaged with Jewish life? How many came to the synagogue? And when he heard the answers – at the time, only about ten per cent of the Jewish students were in any way actively engaged with Jewish life – he asked me what I was personally doing about this.

This was not what I was expecting. I had not the slightest intention of taking on any leadership role. I began a tortuous statement explaining why this had nothing to do with me: “In the situation in which I find myself...,” I began. The Rebbe let the sentence go no further. “You do not *find* yourself in a situation,” he said. “You put yourself in one. And if you put yourself in one situation you can put yourself in another.” Quite soon it became clear what he was doing. He was challenging me to act. Something was evidently wrong with Jewish student life in Cambridge, and he was encouraging me to get involved, to do something to change the situation.

What happened over the next few decades is a story for another time and place. Suffice it to say that this encounter was the beginning of a long journey that led, in time, to a young man who had plans of becoming a lawyer, an economist, or an academic, becoming instead a rabbi, a teacher of rabbis, and eventually a chief rabbi. In retrospect I said that people misjudged the Rebbe. They saw him as a man with thousands of followers. It was true, but it was the least interesting thing about him. What I learned from him was that a good leader creates followers. A great leader creates leaders. That is what the Rebbe did.

It is as a way of saying a belated thank you to him that I wrote this book. One of the most important tasks of a leader is to encourage leadership in others. That is what I hope these essays do in some small way for you. We each have a role to play in strengthening Jewish life, and the scale in which we do so does not matter. If we make a positive difference to one other person, that is enough. One life, said the sages, is like a universe. Therefore, if you change a life you begin to change the universe in the only way we can: one person at a time, one day at a time, one act at a time.

To offer help to those in need, hospitality to the lonely, or encouragement to those wrestling with difficulties, is to do a mitzva, a holy deed. It is to do what God does: He “supports the fallen, heals the sick, and releases those who are bound.” We can heal some of the wounds of this world. We can do something; and we should never be discouraged that we can’t do everything. As R. Tarfon said, “It is not for you to complete the task but neither are you free to stand aside from it.”

We are all called on to be leaders. But we are also called on to be followers. In Judaism the two concepts are not opposites as they are in many cultures. They are part of the same process. Leaders and followers sit around the same table, engaged in the same task, asking the same question: how, together, can we lift one another? A leader is one who challenges a follower. A follower is one who challenges a leader. A Talmudic sage once said, “I learned much from my teachers, more from my colleagues, but most of all from my students.” That is one of the great insights of Jewish leadership. We are all part of the team and only as a team can we change the world.

Perhaps the most profound and unexpected lesson I learned in the course of those twenty-two years was that leadership is not only about what you achieve by it. It is what you become because of it. Leading forces you to develop muscles you did not know you had. It changes you. It gives you strength and courage and the willingness to take risks. It teaches you emotional intelligence and the ability to see the good – often the great – in other people. Moses began his career as a leader unable to speak in public; he ended it as one of the most eloquent visionaries the world has ever known. Leading makes you grow. It is the most powerful thing that does.

The Jewish people right now needs leaders, people unafraid to face the challenges of today and build for tomorrow instead of, as so often happens, fighting the battles of yesterday. At the dawn of time, said the rabbis, God showed Adam each generation and its searchers, each generation and its leaders – meaning, no two generations are alike. The world changes and leaders help us to adapt to the new without breaking faith with the old. I hope something in these essays moves you to take on one leadership challenge, however small, that you may not have done before.

Happiness is a life lived in the active mode. It comes not to those who complain, but to those who do. The greatest word uttered by the Jewish people at the holiest moment of their history, when they met God at the mountain and became His people, was *Naaseh*, “We will do.” Judaism is a religion of doing, and what we do together is greater than any of us could do alone. That is the challenge of leadership. Jews dared believe that together, and with heaven’s help, we can change the world. Daring greatly makes us great. There is no other way.

My deepest thanks for the ideas in this book go to the people with whom I worked most closely in the Chief Rabbinate. The first director of my office, Jonathan (now Lord) Kestenbaum, framed the questions that led to the study sessions out of which this book was born. His successor, Syma Weinberg, taught me about the personal dimensions of leadership and the importance of emotional intelligence. Joanna Benarroch and Dan Sacker helped me think through ways of communicating these ideas in new ways to a new generation, and in a new role. Working with each of them has been a privilege.

So too was serving British and Commonwealth Jewry. My colleagues in the London Beth Din and the rabbinate were always good friends, and it was a blessing to see Jewish life in Britain, under their leadership, grow more spiritual over the years.

The presidents and honorary officers of the United Synagogue were the most loyal friends any leader could wish for. The British Jewish community was and is blessed by the time, energy, and commitment its members give to enrich every facet of Jewish life. Ours is a community of leaders, doers, and givers out of all proportion to its numbers, and it was inspiring to be a part of it.

My thanks as always to my publisher, Matthew Miller, my editor, Gila Fine, and the team at Maggid Books for their enthusiasm and professionalism far beyond the line of duty. I am indebted to Professor Ronald Heifetz not only for his lovely preface to this book, but for all he has taught me over the years about leadership, its challenges, and possibilities. It is a privilege to call him and his wife, Kathryn, friends.

I always save my deepest thanks for my wife Elaine, never more so than in the case of this book. Throughout the years she has been my lifeline, and her humour, her groundedness, her deep calm, simplicity, and constancy of faith made every day a blessing. I thank God for the gift of her love, and if I achieved anything as a leader, the credit is hers.

Jonathan Sacks
London
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Genesis

בראשית



Bereshit

Taking Responsibility

If leadership is the solution, what is the problem? On this, the Torah could not be more specific. It is a failure of responsibility.

The early chapters of Genesis focus on two stories: the first is Adam and Eve; the second, Cain and Abel. Both are about a specific kind of failure.

First, Adam and Eve. As we know, they sin. Embarrassed and ashamed, they hide, only to discover that one cannot hide from God:

The Lord God called to the man, “Where are you?” He answered, “I heard You in the garden, and I was afraid because I was naked, so I hid.” And He said, “Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten from the tree that I commanded you not to eat from?” The man said, “The woman You put here with me – she gave me some fruit from the tree, and I ate it.” Then the Lord God said to the woman, “What is this you have done?” The woman said, “The serpent deceived me, and I ate.” (Gen. 3:9–12)

Both insist that it was not their fault. Adam blames the woman. The woman blames the serpent. The result is that they are both punished and exiled from Eden. Adam and Eve deny *personal responsibility*. They say, in effect, “It wasn’t me.”

The second story is more tragic. The first instance of sibling rivalry in the Torah leads to the first murder:

Cain said to his brother Abel. And it came to pass while they were in the field, Cain attacked his brother Abel and killed him. Then the Lord said to Cain, “Where is your brother Abel?” “I don’t know,” he replied. “Am I my brother’s keeper?” The Lord said, “What have you done? Listen! Your brother’s blood cries out to Me from the ground.” (Gen. 4:8–10)

Cain does not deny personal responsibility. He does not say, “It wasn’t me” or “It wasn’t my fault.” He denies *moral responsibility*. In effect, he asks why he should be concerned with the welfare of anyone but himself. Why should we not do what we want if we have the power to do it? In Plato’s *Republic*, Glaucon argues that justice is whatever is in the interest of the stronger party. Might makes right. If life is a Darwinian struggle to survive, why should we restrain ourselves for the sake of others if we are more powerful than they are? If there is no morality in nature, then I am responsible only to myself. That is the voice of Cain throughout the ages.

These two stories are not *just* stories. They are an account, at the beginning of the Torah’s narrative history of humankind, of a failure, first personal and then moral, to *take responsibility* – and it is this for which leadership is the answer.

There is a fascinating phrase in the story of Moses’ early years. He grows up, goes out to his people, the Israelites, and sees them labouring as slaves. He witnesses an Egyptian officer beating one of them. The text then says: “He looked this way and that and saw no one [*vayar ki ein ish*; literally, ‘he saw that there was no man’]” (Ex. 2:12). It is difficult to read this literally. A building site is not a closed location. There must have been many people present. A mere two verses later we discover that there were Israelites who knew exactly what he had done. Therefore, the

phrase almost certainly means, “He looked this way and that and saw that there was no one else willing to intervene.”

If this is so, then we have here the first instance of what came to be known as the “Genovese syndrome” or “the bystander effect,”¹ so called after a case in which a woman was attacked in New York in the presence of a large number of people who knew that she was being assaulted but failed to come to her rescue.

Social scientists have undertaken many experiments to try to determine what happens in situations like this. Some argue that the presence of other bystanders affects an individual’s interpretation of what is happening. Since no one else is coming to the rescue, they conclude that what is happening is not an emergency. Others, though, argue that the key factor is *diffusion of responsibility*. People assume that since there are many people present someone else will step forwards and act. That seems to be the correct interpretation of what was happening in the case of Moses. No one else was prepared to come to the rescue. Who, in any case, was likely to do so? The Egyptians were slave-masters. Why should they bother to take a risk to save an Israelite? And the Israelites were slaves. Why should they come to the aid of one of their fellows if, by doing so, they would put their own lives at risk?

It took a Moses to act. But that is what makes a leader. A leader is one who takes responsibility. Leadership is born when we become active rather than passive, when we do not wait for someone else to act because perhaps there is no one else – at least not here, not now. When bad things happen, some avert their eyes. Some wait for others to act. Some blame others for failing to act. Some simply complain. But there are people who say, “If something is wrong, let me be among the first to put it right.” They are the leaders. They are the ones who make a difference in their lifetimes. They are the ones who make ours a better world.

Many of the great religions and civilisations are based on acceptance. If there is violence, suffering, poverty, and pain in the world, then that is the way the world is. Or that is the will of God. Or that is the nature of nature itself. All will be well in the World to Come.

1. Martin Gansberg, “Thirty-Eight Who Saw Murder Didn’t Call the Police,” *New York Times*, March 27, 1964.

Judaism was and remains the world's great religion of protest. The heroes of faith did not accept; they protested. They were willing to confront God Himself. Abraham said, "Shall the Judge of all the earth not do justice?" (Gen. 18:25). Moses said, "Why have You done evil to this people?" (Ex. 5:22). Jeremiah said, "Why are the wicked at ease?" (Jer. 12:1). That is how God wants us to respond. *Judaism is God's call to human responsibility*. The highest achievement is to become God's partner in the work of creation.

When Adam and Eve sinned, God called out, "Where are you?" As Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Liadi, the first Lubavitcher Rebbe, pointed out, this call was not directed only to the first humans.² It echoes in every generation. God gave us freedom, but with freedom comes responsibility. God teaches us what we ought to do but He does not do it for us. With rare exceptions, God does not intervene in history. He acts *through* us, not *to* us. His is the voice that tells us, as He told Cain before he committed his crime, that we can resist the evil within us as well as the evil that surrounds us.

The responsible life is a life that responds. The Hebrew for responsibility, *ahrayut*, comes from the word *aher*, meaning "other." Our great Other is God Himself, calling us to use the freedom He gave us, to make the world more like the world that ought to be. The great question, the question that the life we lead answers, is: which voice will we listen to? Will we heed the voice of desire, as in the case of Adam and Eve? Will we listen to the voice of anger, as in the case of Cain? Or will we follow the voice of God calling on us to make this a more just and gracious world?

2. Noted in Nissan Mindel, *Rabbi Schneur Zalman of Liadi, A Biography* (New York: Kehot Publication Society, 1969).