

Torah teaches about leadership

Lessons in Leadership: A Weekly Reading of the Jewish Bible by Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, Maggid Books, Jerusalem; ISBN 978-1-59264-432-2 ©2015, \$18.00, p. 311

By Fred Reiss, Ed.D.

WINCHESTER, California — Supreme Court Justice Potter Stewart in a 1964 ruling on a pornographic film, said, “I shall not today attempt further to define the kinds of material I understand to be embraced within that shorthand description [of hard-core pornography], and perhaps I could never succeed in intelligibly doing so. But I know it when I see it...” Though clearly not in the same category, leadership is difficult to define, but I strongly believe that we know it when we see it.

The definitions and descriptions of leadership are nearly as numerous as the studies purporting to explain it. Many scholars see leadership as a process of intentional social influence, where one person is able to enlist the aid of others to accomplish some task. But, questions remain: Is the leadership a specialized role, or can it be shared? Is leadership the same as management? Does leadership emerge spontaneously, or does it materialize from specialized knowledge or some particular set of character traits? Whatever the answers might be, leadership is a function of the social group and not the individual; there can be no leaders without followers.



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Author Lord Jonathan Sacks based the material for *Lessons in Leadership* on his twenty-two years as chief rabbi of the United Congregations of the [British] Commonwealth and referred to the insights garnered from those experiences as “Torah from life.” So, is there such a thing as a Jewish way of leadership?

In the Preface, Sacks relates the story of his meeting with Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneersohn, the last Lubavitcher Rebbe, who led thousands of Hasidic Jews and reversed a couple of centuries of Hasidic behavior by sending his followers outwards—to college campuses and out-of-the-way communities, thereby creating one of the most successful Jewish movements in modern history— tells us that Schneersohn radiated no charisma or overflowing personality, contrary to what one might expect from a great leader. “To the contrary, he was so self-effacing there seemed to be only one person in the room: the person to whom he was speaking.” This meeting, according to Sacks, changed his life and from the Rebbe he learned that “A good leader creates followers. A great leader creates leaders.”

Lessons in Leadership searches the weekly *Torah* portions for and finds connections between circumstances and biblical characters, leaders of the Jewish nation, and between leaders and followers. Is there something uniquely Jewish about leadership styles? Yes and no. Sacks reminds us that wisdom, the foundation for leadership, is a universal trait, a possession of all nations. For instance, Jews did not invent the positions of priest, judge, or king, but they did stamp their imprint on how these functioned.

Both leadership characteristics to follow and traits to avoid are found in the well-known biblical figures—Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, and Moses. But, lesser personalities have something to offer as well.

All leaders must be responsible, and Sacks describes how the *Torah*, through the stories of Adam and Eve, Cain, and Noah, is affirming that there are different kinds of responsibilities for which leaders must be held accountable:

communal, moral, and personal. From the story of Abraham leaving his homeland, Sacks concludes that leaders don't just lead, they also follow. "But what they follow is different from what most people follow. They do not conform for the sake of conforming.... They follow an inner voice."

If the Netziv (Naftali Zvi Yehuda Berlin), whom Sacks quotes, is correct, then much of the contention between Jacob and Esau falls on the lack of communication between their parents, Isaac and Rebecca, as described in *Parsha Toledot* (Gen. 25:19-28:9), leading Sacks to draw the conclusion that all leaders, whether the head of a household or a corporate CEO, must establish "good, strong, honest, open communication."

As another example, in *Parsha Metzora*, the portion of the Book of Leviticus (14:1-15:33) describing the identification and treatment of leprosy, Sacks finds that good leaders need to know how to praise. He arrives at this conclusion by noting that the rabbis taught that *lashon hara*, evil speech, causes leprosy. Now, according to the Rabbi Judah (*Talmud, Nedarim* 11a), a positive can be inferred from a negative; so, one can avoid leprosy by practicing its opposite, *lashon hatov*, which Sacks calls "focused praise".

Modern medicine and much of the rabbinate no longer accept metaphysical causes for diseases, but the need for focused praise is as strong as ever. Sacks cites the words of first century Rabbi Yohanan ben Zakkai (Avot 2:11) in praise of his students as a telling example, concluding that "Praise, and how we administer it, is a fundamental element in leadership of any kind.... The right kind of praise changes lives. That is the power of *lashon hatov*."

Some other aspects of leadership, which he infers from the weekly *Torah* portions, fall into the areas of vision, flexibility, and celebration of successes. In addition, Sacks sets aside a chapter, the Afterword, to enumerate and summarize the principals of Jewish leadership he gleans from the *Torah*.

Lessons in Leadership is a straight forward, in-depth look at the activities, actions, and interactions among our biblical ancestors in order to learn how to follow in their footsteps or avoid the paths they took. Sacks offers authentic biblical-based insight into Jewish-style leadership, which he notes has wisdom at its foundation. To the extent this is true, then the author of the Book of Proverbs, purported to be King Solomon, is accurate when he said, "Where there is no wisdom, the people perish."

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