

PARSHAT BEHA'ALOTECHA  
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How are Rabbis like mezuzot? The answer is: Everybody likes them hanging around, but no one pays them much attention. This quip was written by Dr. Byron Sherwin in his book *Workers of Wonders: A Model for Effective Religious Leadership From Scripture to Today*. Just before Shavuot of this year, Dr. Sherwin passed away. He was an internationally renowned Jewish theologian, ethicist, scholar of Jewish philosophy and mysticism, and a longtime participant in inter-religious dialogue. He was a graduate of the Jewish Theological Seminary with a PhD from the University of Chicago and was a student of Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel. For over 40 years Byron Sherwin served Spertus Institute of Learning and Leadership as a faculty member, a Distinguished Service Professor, Director of Doctoral studies, and from 1984 to 2001, Dean and Vice-President of the Institute. In addition, to writing over 28 books and 150 articles, he was the recipient of a Presidential Medal, the Officer's Order of Merit, by the Republic of Poland for his work in improving Polish-Jewish and Catholic-Jewish relations in Poland and the United States. Byron was my friend, rabbinic colleague, teacher, and faculty colleague at the Spertus Institute. Over the years he appeared at this Congregation many times as a teacher and lecturer. I was privileged to attend his funeral last week in New York City as I was on the east coast for some meetings.

Dr. Sherwin's book attempts to look at the authority given to religious figures. Using texts from the Bible, prophetic literature, the Midrash and Talmud, the ministry of Jesus in the New Testament, the Mystical Masters and Hasidic Wonder-Workers, he attempts to outline a model of religious leadership in Judaism. His thesis is that the most influential Jewish leaders throughout history were also miracle workers and that gave them a sense of authority in the community as they fulfilled their positions and their stations in life. Dr. Sherwin suggests that "people tend to follow a leader and to heed the leader's message to the point of altering their behavior if they believe that the leader possesses wonder-working abilities. For the people, that is the masses, the essential characteristic of the religious leader is his or her ability to perform extraordinary deeds, not vouchsafed to others." According to him, "the most 'successful' holy persons have been and remain today those who are believed to have the power to perform miracles, 'to get things done.'" While throughout the ages some Talmudic individuals, Hasidic masters, and even day modern rabbinic authorities, especially in the Sephardic world, are considered to be of wonder-working capacity, most American Jewish clergy today do not define themselves as such.

However, even today, clergy have the ability through words and gestures to convey wonderworking powers. For example, Sherwin suggests, clergy create new entities by marrying an individual, creating a new family and giving a new status; by conferring a name upon a person who converts, representing a new status and identity; by naming newborn children; by officiating at life cycle events such as B'nai Mitzvah. He informs us that people want to be blessed and, like the medieval mystics, the Rabbi is expected to be able to bring down and channel the forces of divine grace into people's lives. This happens at a hospital bedside with a pronouncement of a prayer for those who are ill, it is present when a Rabbi leads a person through a process to find new meaning in life or assists with a congregant's spiritual problems. Although the wonders

clergy may be expected to perform today may differ from those expected in past eras, actions performed by clergy today can be considered full of wonder and miracles.

Sherwin suggests a five-point agenda for Rabbis to follow in order for them to stand in the tradition of their forbearers: The first is that “the most ‘successful’ religious leaders of both yesteryear and today are those who were believed able to work wonders, ‘to get things done.’” The second is that “wonder-working religious leaders have been a feature of Judaism throughout its long history.” The third is that “for the religious teachings and the wonders of the religious leader to be considered credible enough, he or she must exhibit the sources of his or her authority as a religious leader, as a person of G-d in his or her daily lifestyle.” For Sherwin, these include profound Torah learning, personal piety, moral rectitude, and cohesion with the divine.

He continues stating that, “the fourth conclusion is that a person with such characteristics can convey the message through the medium of various types of wonder-working.” And finally, he suggests that “reclaiming the model of the religious leader as a learned, pious, wonder-working intimate of G-d can help re-establish the stature, prestige, and effectiveness currently increasingly evading the contemporary American clergy.”

This is truly a high standard which frightens me a great deal. A Rabbi, after all, is meant to be a teacher. He or she is trained in the sources of our tradition and is given the authority to make Halakhic, Jewish legal, decisions. Today’s rabbis also have to be pastors, teachers, administrators, spokespeople for their religion, and fulfill many other duties as well. Yet, we are still called spiritual leaders. The need to be a master of many disciplines makes the rabbinate a complex vocation today. For me, it has been most fulfilling as I have touched lives, met many fascinating people, and experienced life cycle events with generations of families. It has given me a platform so that I can be involved in the Jewish community locally, nationally, and internationally, in the interfaith community, and in the academic community. Though its rewards are immense, its demands are many and its pitfalls great.

Whereas, communal leadership at one point was left to rabbinic authorities, today the lay community possesses effective leaders as well. Especially here in North America, lay leadership is involved in communal activities and are leaders in the social welfare, political and the communal activities of the Jewish community. There has been, and probably will continue to be, some rivalry between the rabbinic and the secular leadership. However, when partnered appropriately, they both have their place. Rabbis should not simply be those who recite invocations and benedictions and are left out of the major decision-making areas of the community, and lay leaders should not be seen as inferior because of their lack of depth of Jewish knowledge. Working together they can enhance the community. A rabbinic/lay leadership which is strong and effective establishes high standards for all and can lead a community to great heights.

In the first ten chapters of the Book of Numbers, Moses organizes a camp and prepares the people for their long journey. Then come the complaints. First, some people complain on the outskirts of the camp and Moses doesn’t hear their grumblings. Then other people demand meat. Moses must confront the complaining nation all alone. He feels overwhelmed and turns to G-d, offering his resignation. He complains that his job has become impossible: “I cannot carry

all of these people by myself, for it is too much for me,” he states. Even after G-d provides Moses with 70 leaders, it is unclear whether during the desert experience they really offered much meaningful assistance to him.

Moses expected support from those closest to him, his brother and his sister. However, towards the end of our Torah reading this morning Aaron and Miriam mount a personal attack. G-d intervened to defend Moses, but more important Moses needed to know that he could count on Miriam and Aaron. He prayed for Miriam's cure, he defended Aaron's honor during the rebellion of Korah. But Moses is no longer the same leader after this failure of support from those closest to him.

When we read the story of the spies in next week's Torah reading, Moses has changed. He has been beaten down by the people's repeated demonstrations of pettiness. He has become frustrated with them and eventually strikes the rock when they request water at Mei Meribah, an action which led to G-d's preventing him from entering the land of Israel. Moses no longer can lead the people effectively because he had lost his faith in them. Following the episode of the spies, he does not defend the people beyond saving their lives. He is tired, and unable to continue in an effective way. The lesson is that leaders need to believe in their people in order to lead them effectively and people need to support their leaders and be worthy of their leader's confidence to benefit from that leadership.

What was true with Moses is true of religious leadership today. Rabbis need to have faith in their people and people need to have faith in their Rabbis in order for there to be respect for one another and enable the community to grow as a Kehilla Kedosha, a sacred community. Rabbi Jack Bloom coined the term of the Rabbi being a “Symbolic Exemplar.” By that he meant that the Rabbi serves as a model and an example in the moral and religious realm by becoming a larger than life image. He is both designated by others and is unknowingly volunteered to exemplify a religious, caring, nurturing, involved moral person, a paradigmatic model of what a Jewish human being should be. According to Bloom, the Rabbi takes on being the fulfilled Jew, the spiritual savant, the willing helper, the good parent, the knowing older sibling, the para-familial of many families. Many times the Rabbi, according to Bloom, becomes isolated as the price of deference and formal respect. The Rabbi is held up as the model to emulate, but no one really endeavors to emulate that model so the rabbi may feel isolated and disappointed by his community as the community sets up the expectation of the rabbi as a symbolic figure representing them in their Judaism.

Sherwin's concept and Bloom's description serves well to understand Moses and his leadership model. Moses was not considered a Rabbi, but he was “our teacher.” He was the leader of the time. He was considered to be the one with whom G-d had personal contact and was the exemplar of moral rectitude for an entire people. He was the wonder-worker, able to convey blessings and curses upon the Israelites and have a private audience with G-d. He was unable to live up to his task and fulfill his dream because he was isolated and unable to overcome his feelings of anger towards those whom he led.

The challenge in the Jewish community today is to use the leadership potential of all to move the community forward – to make everyone more educated, spiritually elevated, active,

dedicated and yet, humble enough to know that both leaders and followers need one another. Only if leaders are present and followers are willing to assist, can leadership be meaningful and a community continue to establish itself as a strong and viable proponent of a bright Jewish future. Rabbis and their congregants need to understand one another, have faith in one another, appreciate the challenge that confronts them, and work together to fulfill their joint mission.