

PARSHAT SH'LACH
RABBI VERNON KURTZ
JUNE 9, 2018

Let me ask you a question: Who are the leaders in the public arenas of music, art, politics, religion, sports, media, literature that we would want children to emulate? I'll give you a minute. My guess is that you will have difficulty coming up with enough names to fill the five fingers on one hand. Now, who are the people in your more private life who you would consider to be a leader, a mentor, someone who you would like your children and grandchildren to emulate? It may be someone in your family, a teacher, a professional mentor, a clergy person, a college professor, a partner in your firm, or simply your next door neighbor. My guess is that will be a little easier.

Ronald Heifetz is the King Hussein bin Talal Senior Lecturer in Public Leadership, Founding Director of the Center for Public Leadership at the John F. Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University. He has done a great deal of research during the last three decades on the practice and teachings of leadership.

His 1994 book *Leadership Without Easy Answers* describes what he calls adaptive leadership. He writes, "Rather than define leadership either as a position of authority in a social structure that has a personal set of characteristics, we may find it a great deal more useful to define leadership as an *activity*. This allows for leadership from multiple positions in a social structure. A President and a clerk can both lead. It also allows for the use of a variety of abilities depending on the demands of the culture and situation."

He writes that: "The myth of leadership is the myth of the lone warrior: the solitary individual whose heroism and brilliance enable him to lead the way. This notion reinforces the isolation." He further states that: "The strategic challenge is to give the work back to people without abandoning them. Overload them and they will avoid learning. Underload them and they will grow too dependent, or complacent." In another part of the book he writes: "Exercising leadership and bearing personal responsibility requires seeing the difference between oneself and one's role. A person who leads must interpret people's responses to his actions as responses to the role he plays and the perspective he represents." This enables an individual not to be misled by his emotions into taking statements and events personally that may have little to do with him. He concludes his book by stating: "A leader has to engage people in facing the challenge, adjusting their values, changing perspectives, and developing new habits and behavior."

In a book in 2002 co-authored with Marty Lisky entitled *Leadership on the Line*, he continues these thoughts by stating: "You gain credibility and authority in your career by demonstrating your capacity to take other people's problems off their shoulders and give them back solutions." He tells us that "The hard truth is that it is not possible to experience the rewards and joy of leadership without experiencing the pain as well." And he reminds us that "The most difficult work of leadership involves learning to experience distress without numbing yourself."

The quintessential leader of the Jewish people is Moses. He is referred to as *Moshe Rabbeinu*, Moses our teacher. His leadership was found in his ability to be a teacher, a motivator, a leader, an interlocutor with G-d, the one who assumed the burdens of the children of Israel and led them out of the slavery of Egypt to the foot of Mount Sinai and, then finally, to the shores of the Jordan River.

While Moses may have been a reluctant leader, throughout most of his life he was an effective one. Yet, he was not perfect and made mistakes along the way. It was his father-in-law, Jethro, who told him that he could not judge the entire nation on his own, as he was doing. He needed associates, for the burden was too heavy for him. He had little support from his family. We never hear of his wife and children and Miriam and Aaron were not of the greatest support to him. The Children of Israel complained over and over again about his and G-d's leadership. Over the period of the desert experience Moses does not seem to be the same leader he was in the earlier part of the story.

In our Torah reading this morning we have the episode of the spies. There are several contrasts between Moses' behavior during the golden calf episode and during this episode. The most striking contrast is that during the spies episode, Moses convinces G-d to spare the people's lives, but does not attempt to obtain complete forgiveness. Moses had gone all out during the calf episode. He just couldn't bring himself to do it once more after the story of the spies.

Rabbi Eitan Mayer explains that this change has to do with a downward progression of Moses' leadership. After the calf, Moses was audacious and daring in defending his people. His energy was high and he was confident that his people had the potential to become a Holy nation. By the time of the spies, the situation was different. He had been beaten down by the people's demonstrations of pettiness. Doubts were beginning to nag him. Those closest to him complained about his leadership. Eventually, he became so frustrated with them that he struck the rock when they requested water at Mei Meribah. It was that episode which led to G-d preventing him from entering the Land of Israel.

Moses could no longer lead the people effectively because he had lost his faith in them. He couldn't understand why their dedication did not equal his. During the spies episode, he does not defend the people beyond saving their lives because he had lost a great deal of faith in their potential to meet the spiritual rigors of the mission. 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 their leadership.

In the words of Ronald Heifetz: "Leadership is an activity. The leader cannot simply be an authoritative individual, he must work together with his followers. Together, they form a solitary unit of faith and trust in order to reach the challenges of the moment and the challenges of the future."

I ask the question again: Who are the people to whom we look at this time to lead us appropriately, to set the proper example, and in whom we can have faith to make the

proper decisions? And, who are the leaders who can look to us and know that we have their backs, that we will work together with them in order to create common goals of values and proper living? The answers are not self-evident. In fact, I would suggest, that one of the reasons for the despair of many of our young people is that they can't find those who will lead them toward a life of meaning and significance.

My colleague and friend Rabbi James Gordon has just published a new book entitled *Pray Ball 2!!!: Spiritual Insights into Sportsmanship*. It follows his first volume of *Pray Ball!*. Rabbi Gordon had asked me to read the galleys and to comment on his work. My comments are found in the Preface to the book. In the book Rabbi Gordon takes sports stories and creates analogies to real life situations. The stories themselves and the sports figures are very accessible as he highlights the importance of sportsmanship for those inside the game and outside the game. He uses biblical, rabbinic, and medieval Jewish sources to supplement the stories and creates the opportunity for young people to look up to some sports figures with a sense of pride and respect.

Rabbi Gordon's choice for a Lifetime Achievement Sportsmanship Award would go to former UCLA basketball coach, John Wooden. Gordon writes that Wooden is as close to an ideal role model that there is. He practiced and preached the importance of treating others with respect and honor in his life and in his relationships. While he was a highly successful basketball coach, he considered coaching to be an extraordinary opportunity to impact upon the lives of his student players. He taught them life skills, that more important than winning on the court was being a success off it. For him, integrity was the foundation of his existence and the core of his curriculum.

Often, when speaking to youth, Coach Wooden would hand out his business card, which contained his sportsmanship pledge: "I'll be a good sport when I win or I lose. No whining, complaining or make excuses. I will always be trying 100%, to give my best effort in every event. This sportsmanship pledge will bring out my best. Coach Wooden has taught me to be a success." Not only was he a successful basketball coach, but he was a deeply devoted family man, a person devoted to his faith, and to the highest ideals of American society. Bill Walton was one of his outstanding basketball players who later went on to have a significant career in the NBA, and as a basketball analyst. In a tribute to Wooden, Walton writes: "John Wooden taught us how to practice against an imaginary, ideal opponent so as not to waste time and effort. He taught us to find a source of motivation to inspire us to even higher levels of preparation and work... He taught us that confidence is an integral part of achieving peak performance, but that confidence must come from a lifetime of preparation that ensures deliverance to the championship level." Walton thanked his coach for his lessons, his vision, and especially his patience.

This is what leadership is about, this is what mentorship is about. There is no doubt that there are people in our society, in our families, in our schools, in our churches and synagogues, who would be considered leaders and mentors, people who our children and grandchildren can emulate, who stand as paragons of virtue and proper ideals. In the society in which we live, in the broken world which we inhabit, we must find those

people who will lead us on the proper track. They are present in our lives and when we find them we owe them a great debt of gratitude.

I don't know exactly who your mentor is and who you would consider a leader, but I want to challenge you this morning to be both a leader and mentor yourself. There are no easy paths to leadership. Even the great Moses had many difficulties along the way and over a period of time lost some of his energy and faith in those who followed him. Yet, as Heifetz reminds us a President and a clerk can both lead. I don't care what one's status is in life, and it matters not at what age you currently find yourself, I want to challenge you and me to be the leaders that others can look up to, that others can follow. I want to challenge all of us to be the examples that the next generation can look to for a bright future.

In the world in which we live nothing is more important, nothing more crucial. May we take the challenge and embrace it throughout the course of our lives.