

Lead by Following

Shabbat Vayera 5779 – 10/27/18

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The situation was no longer desperate. It was dire.

Just before Israel was established as a state, it looked like the Jews would have to wait another 2000 years to return home.

In January 1948, Jewish Palestine faced an existential crisis. Unless major funds arrived immediately, the Jewish militias could not survive. The Jews required a real army with real fighting equipment to fend off the Arab militias.

Palestine's treasurer Eliezer Kaplan accepted the task of fundraising in the US... and returned empty handed.

Chairman of the Jewish Agency David Ben Gurion knew they must try again. He told his cabinet, "Kaplan and I must leave for the United States immediately to make the Americans realize how serious the situation is." But he was challenged.

Golda Meir objected and said to Ben Gurion, "What you are doing here [that is, the military strategies] I cannot do. However, what you propose to do in the United States, I can do. You stay here and let me go to the States to raise the money."

Ben Gurion objected but his cabinet overruled him.

So urgent was the situation that Golda hurried onto the first plane without even stopping at home to bring a change of clothes. She carried only a ten dollar bill.

Upon landing, the customs agent saw that she had no bags and asked how she would support herself the US. Golda answered, "I have family here."

She was rushed here, to Chicago, in the middle of a snowstorm and addressed the annual gathering of the Council of Jewish Federations and Welfare Funds at the Sheraton Hotel.

As she rose to the podium, somebody whispered loudly: "She looks like the women of the Bible."

Then, without a text in front of her, she made her case to save her people, their people, our people. These are her words:

“All we ask of Jews the world over, and mainly of the Jews in the United States, is to give us the possibility of going on with the struggle. There is no Jew in Palestine who does not believe that finally we will be victorious. That is the spirit of the country. However, this valiant spirit alone cannot face rifles and machine guns. Rifles and machine guns without spirit are not worth very much, but spirit without arms can in time be broken with the body. I want to close with paraphrasing one of the greatest speeches that was made during the Second World War—the words of Churchill. You cannot decide whether we should fight or not. We will. The Jewish community in Palestine will raise no white flag for the Mufti. That decision is taken. Nobody can change it. You can only decide one thing: whether we shall be victorious in this fight or whether the Mufti will be victorious. The time is now.”

There was frightening silence... then deafening applause. Those in attendance gave everything they had on them. They then called their bankers and took out personal loans totaling what they hoped to raise in their own communities. In that Chicago ballroom, those attendees raised \$25 million that day. A national speaking tour followed, raising more.

Golda Meir left Israel with \$10 in her pocket. She returned to Israel with \$50 million. Today that's worth \$500 million. With those funds Israel purchased the fighting supplies it needed to survive and then win the war.

When Golda returned to Israel there was no entourage waiting at the airport to greet her. Just Ben Gurion. The man who wanted to go in her place said to her, “The day when history is written it will be recorded that it was thanks to a Jewish woman that the Jewish state was born.”

No, Mr. Prime Minister, you're only half correct.

Golda *was* the extraordinary *leader*, even more significant during a time when women faced endless challenges, but she was only half the story.

The other credit must go to all the *followers*, those people who donated more than they could afford. Who took out loans and went back to their homes and rang the bell for Israel again and again. Who motivated yet others to open their hearts and checkbooks. Golda couldn't do it by herself, and she didn't.

This important story in local and Israeli history brings me to today's Parsha for two reasons.

Parshat Vayera contains an unforgettable conversation - actually an argument - between G-d and Abraham. Genesis 18 sees G-d filling in Abraham on G-d's plan to destroy the wicked cities of Sodom and Gomorrah.

Upon hearing of G-d's plan, Abraham gets in G-d's face, as it were. He cries out, "Will You wipe out the innocent along with the guilty? What if there are 50 righteous people there? Far be it from You to kill the innocent along with the guilty!" (Gn. 18:23-25).

And then comes the knockout punch: "*Hashofet Kol Haaretz Lo Yaaseh Mishpat?* Will the Judge of the whole earth not do justice?" (Gn. 18:25).

Talk about chutzpah.

But Abraham isn't even finished. Gently, he urges G-d to save the cities if there are 45 righteous people. G-d says yes. Abraham keeps going to 40, 30, 20, and 10. G-d agrees to all of it before Abraham departs.

The Rabbis love that Abraham challenges G-d here. Abraham cares deeply about all people, even strangers, even the wicked. This is where justice is encoded into Jewish DNA.

The first parallel between Golda's story and Abraham is that they are unafraid of confronting the all-powerful. Granted, David Ben Gurion was not G-d, obviously, but he too was an intimidating figure. Additionally, the most important and powerful person in all of Jewish Palestine was known for his stubbornness. Nevertheless, Golda was unafraid to speak up and confront him.

But that wasn't all. Neither Golda nor Abraham raised their hand, stood up, and merely said 'You're wrong.' They each made a convincing case. But how?

I'll read you Golda's words again: "What you are doing here I cannot do. However, what you propose to do in the United States I can do. You stay here and let me go to the States to raise the money."

In other words, she demonstrated that she and Ben Gurion were on the same team. Their values were aligned because they agreed money was needed to be raised. It was in both their interests to split the work up the way she suggested. After all, she had lived in the US.

Abraham does something similar. He tells G-d "Far be it from You to kill the innocent along with the guilty! Will the Judge of the whole earth not do justice?"

He reminds G-d that the G-d of justice must do justice. G-d introduced standards of justice into the world and must also abide by those standards. Abraham and G-d are on the same team. Their values are aligned because they agree that it's unjust to punish the innocent along with the guilty.

It was less arguing with G-d than reminding G-d of G-d's own expectations for justice. That makes Abraham brilliant and admirable.

The second parallel between the Golda story and Abraham has to do with the importance of active followers.

I would love to ask Abraham the following question: Why did you stop at ten? You got G-d to agree to spare the cities if there were 50 righteous people, then you kept going until you got to ten. With all this momentum, why did you stop there?

The Midrash suggests that Abraham knew that it couldn't be fewer than eight because when G-d destroyed the world with a flood, G-d spared only eight people: Noah, his wife, his three sons and their wives. But I find this answer unsatisfying because one son, Ham, is known to be wicked, and this answer doesn't adequately explain nine. Its second explanation is that he was thinking of his nephew's Lot's family, who numbered ten. But they too were not all righteous.

The most convincing answer, I believe, comes from the Etz Hayim Humash. It suggests: "Perhaps it takes a critical mass to generate an alternative way of living; isolated individuals cannot. The number 10 may be psychologically related to the stipulation of 10 people for a Minyan, the quorum for public worship, the point at which an assembly of individuals becomes a group, a congregation."

In other words, Abraham agreed with G-d that the cities weren't worth saving unless there was a core of righteous people that could sustain itself and develop a righteous culture. You can't do that with one, two, or even three people. Just like you can't form a snowball from just one snowflake, you need a critical mass when it comes to building a like-minded community, and that magic number is ten.

The Bible echoes this. Jacob sends ten sons to look for Joseph in Egypt (Gn. 42:3). The ten wicked spies who scout out Canaan and deliver a negative report are called "a congregation" (Nu. 14:27). In the Book of Ruth, Boaz gathers ten men together so he can marry Ruth (Ruth 4:2).

Abraham was willing to be a leader, but he realized his only chance of success lay in having active followers. Not the passive Yes-people who nod their heads and then go home. But the

active followers who identify the leader with the right vision, give them tools to succeed, and then on their own continue growing the project.

Active followers like those guests gathered in that Chicago hotel ballroom listening to Golda. She gave a stirring speech that made everybody there feel something. But those gathered took the next steps and turned that emotion into action. Golda didn't do that, those people did. Those active followers deserve so much of the credit too.

I'm fully aware that in my praise of active followers I'm bucking a trend. Today, it seems like everybody talks about being a *leader*, attends *leadership* training, has *leadership* books on the shelf. The Jewish professional world is no exception. Nobody talks about being effective followers, and yet they are essential for accomplishing just about anything.

I attended Camp Ramah in Wisconsin for as many summers as I could. As a camper, I thought the counselors were the most important people in camp. They were on the front lines making things happen for us. Then I became a counselor and realized that the Roshei Eidah, unit heads, were the most important people because they directed the counselors. Then I became a Rosh Eidah and worked closely with the camp director. And I became convinced that the most important people in camp were...the counselors. The director did a lot, of course, but it was the army of counselors who instilled the vision and formed the close relationships with the kids. Counselors are leaders of their cabins, for sure. But they are active followers of the Roshei Eidah and camp director. Without followers, leaders can't lead.

People don't talk about active followers because there's less prestige in being a follower than a leader. There are negative connotations of being a follower, which are sometimes deserved. Passive sheep enable power-hungry leaders to get away with anything, even murder. Finally, there isn't a lot of literature written about being an effective follower. But this literature, by Robert Kelley and others, seeks to identify what differentiates passive leaders - ineffective - from active leaders - effective.

My friend, Rabbi Noah Cheses, wrote an essay about this years ago which brought it to my attention. Rabbi Cheses connected this to our Parsha in a different way. He writes, "As the first courageous follower in Jewish history, Abraham challenged G-d, not in an obnoxious or belittling fashion, but with respect and humility. Abraham should serve as our exemplar of followership because he delicately balanced a devout trust in G-d with pushing back at Him when he felt it necessary. It is quite possible that G-d was not angered by Abraham's courageous followership but was instead delighted in the bravery and moral strength of His own creation."

The situation in Sodom and Gomorrah was no longer desperate. It was dire. Abraham gave it his best shot. But Abraham knew his and G-d's project of building an ethical society could not

succeed there because they lacked courageous, active followers. Indeed, these living, vibrant cities were destroyed.

The situation in pre-state Israel was indeed dire. Golda Meir gave it her best shot. And with the unprecedented support of Chicago and the US's active followers, together they succeeded. Indeed, this barely-living people clinging to a hostile patch of desert was brought to life.

May we be blessed with wisdom to know whom to follow; with strength to accomplish our own collective tasks; with confidence to understand that active followers are leaders too.

Shabbat Shalom.