

Shabbat Nasso 5785
Leadership Is Earned in the Difficult Moments
Rabbi Alex Freedman

Shabbat shalom.

For many, this was the last week of school. Students rejoiced. Teachers celebrated. And parents gritted their teeth: what are we going to do with the kids between now and camp?

Ah, summer camp. It was always my favorite part of the year, when I spent my summers at Camp Ramah in Wisconsin. Year after year my friends and I returned, but we had new counselors and unit heads, or Rosh Eidah, each summer. Same place, new faces.

There was one Rosh Eidah in particular who made quite the impression on me. I was 15 years old, in Machon, and one day early in the summer we had a basketball period. For the last few minutes of basketball, the coach lined us up on the baseline to run wind sprints. Just as I lined up to run, I saw something I couldn't believe. Our unit head Joel was on the baseline too, knees bent and ready to run. He looked a little out of place in his bandana and Chuck Taylors, but once the whistle blew, the race was on.

Now I didn't know what unit heads did during the day, but I knew they were very busy, usually too busy to hang out with the kids during their activities. And if they had a few minutes and wanted to hang out, they certainly wouldn't choose to run wind sprints on a hot day. Why would *anyone* choose to do that if they didn't have to? Yet here Joel was doing the hard work alongside us. And I have to say, he earned a lot of respect and buy-in from me during those sprints. There was something about joining us during the stressful moments - coming down from his perch, in a sense - that *elevated* him as a leader. That day he wasn't a leader because of his title, unit head. He was a leader because he wanted to be one of us and experience something challenging alongside us.

The Torah too speaks about leadership, those who lead by title and those who actually exercise leadership. This morning we read Parashat Nasso, which is, shall we say, *Nasso* short. In it, we see that each of the 12 tribes has a leader who brings a dedication gift for the Tabernacle, the portable sanctuary. Each leader is mentioned by name alongside a full description of the gift. I read these names and wonder, who are these guys? What made them qualified to be the leader of the tribe? The Torah does not say why outright, but behind the scenes it quietly tells a moving story about leadership.

To understand it all, we have to go back to the trying moments of Israelite slavery in Egypt.

Today I want to take you through a couple of Torah passages which explain who these men are and why they were chosen to lead.

In Exodus chapter 3, G-d introduces Himself to Moses at the burning bush. As part of the first conversation, G-d tells Moses the following:

“Go and assemble the elders of Israel and say to them: ה, the G-d of your fathers’ [house]—the G-d of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob—has appeared to me and said, ‘I have taken note of you and of what is being done to you in Egypt.’...Then you shall go with the elders of Israel to the king of Egypt and you shall say to him, ‘[Let My people go...].’”

Here we learn that Moses will not be alone in his quest for freedom. The Jewish people already has a leadership council, the elders of Israel. They are the recognized leaders among the nation by virtue of their age and experience. Moses will not face off with Pharaoh alone, an intimidating proposition, but will be accompanied by the elders of Israel. Moses will have strength in numbers.

After G-d talks to Moses, Moses assembles the elders and performs the divine miracles to show G-d is with him. The elders are convinced that Moses speaks the truth, and they persuade the nation that Moses is there to rescue them. They vouch for him. Ordinary Israelites don't know Moses from Charlton Heston, but they are reassured by their established leaders. So far so good.

Full of confidence, Moses prepares to speak with Pharaoh for the first time. Here is the verse:

“Afterward Moses and Aaron went and said to Pharaoh, “Thus says ה, the G-d of Israel: Let My people go so that they may celebrate a festival for Me in the wilderness.” But Pharaoh said, “Who is ה that I should heed him and let Israel go? I do not know ה, nor will I let Israel go.””

Well, that was a disaster. Pharaoh said “No” and soon made things worse for the Israelites. But did you catch what detail was left out? What was not mentioned? Pay attention to who went and actually spoke to Pharaoh. The verse says, *Moses and Aaron* went and spoke to Pharaoh. But what about the elders? Remember that G-d told Moses

the elders would join, but in the crucial moment, they are nowhere to be seen. Where did they go?

The Midrash in Shmot Rabbah fills in the gap. “Our sages said: the elders set out with Moses and Aaron, but they stole away and turned back. By the time Moses and Aaron arrived at the palace, not one of the elders remained with them [as they are not mentioned in the verse]”. In other words, the elders chickened out. In a critical moment, they literally failed to show up.

The Midrash continues: “G-d said to them: ‘This is how you behave? I swear that I will exact a punishment from you.’ When did that happen? On Mount Sinai, Moses and Aaron ascended but told the elders to stay back down at the bottom.” That is, originally the elders were also supposed to receive the ten commandments, but only Moses proved worthy, so he went up alone.

The elders failed miserably at being leaders. It was convenient for them to accept the title of Elders of Israel, and it wasn't too difficult to endorse Moses and Aaron publicly. But the challenge was talking to Pharaoh, and they literally didn't show up. In G-d's eyes, that made them unworthy, so they are effectively removed from the picture. They miss out on being part of that magical Sinai moment.

Their actions have consequences, and things get worse for the Israelites in Egypt. Immediately after Pharaoh tells Moses “No” for the first time, Pharaoh tells his taskmasters to no longer provide the slaves with straw for making bricks. Yet the people still have to produce the same quota as before. Unsurprisingly, the Israelites are not able to produce the same number of bricks when they must spend time gathering straw as well. The verse tells us:

“And the overseers of the Israelites, whom Pharaoh's taskmasters had set over them, were beaten. “Why,” they were asked, “did you not complete the prescribed amount of bricks, either yesterday or today, as you did before?”

Exactly who are these overseers? Rashi tells us more and calls them foremen. He says they were actually Israelites: “The foremen were Israelites themselves, and because they took pity on their compatriots, they were loath to pressure them to fulfill Pharaoh's impossible demands. When these middlemen later delivered the bricks that their workers had produced, the totals of course fell short. And so the taskmasters *beat* the Israelite foremen for not forcing their slaves to work harder.”

In other words, these middlemen were Israelites who were given the dirty work of making other Israelites perform slave labor. They were forced to be Jewish taskmasters, similar to how the Nazis used to force Jews to be Kapos and perform horrific tasks to other Jews in the Holocaust.

But these Israelite foremen had sympathy and mercy on their fellow people. They took the physical beatings from the Egyptian taskmasters, in order to spare the Israelite slaves. They took the hits. Talk about solidarity. These foremen were the ones actually committed to their people. During the moment of crisis, they showed up by taking the beating, not by running away. These were honorable people who deserved to be leaders... and one day they would be given that title. Remember those 12 leaders of the Israelite tribes in the desert who brought their offerings that we read about today? Those were 12 men who used to be Israelite foremen in Egypt.

G-d saw these people, according to another Midrash, and said: "just as these men shared in the people's suffering in Egypt and devoted themselves to the nation, and endured lashes on their behalf, so will they come to see Israel's prosperity."

12 of them became tribal leaders, and others became part of the second council of 70 elders in the desert, who would support Moses in leading the people. These were people who deserved to be leaders because they *protected* their people in the challenging times. That earned them deep respect from the people and G-d alike.

Leadership, emphasizes the Torah here, is a verb more than a noun. The highest form of leadership is earned, not given. It is not reserved for those with the titles, but can be exercised by absolutely all of us, no matter our age, title, or position. True leadership is best demonstrated when the situation is dire, not when conditions are optimal.

When I was a 15-year-old camper running wind sprints next to my unit head, of course it was a world away from slavery in Egypt. But it was still in a difficult moment that Joel chose to join us. I thought, Joel, you really want to be one of us, so I'm ready to follow you.

Shabbat Shalom.