

What Makes a Leader?

By Mendel Kalmenson

"What makes a good leader?" I typed into Google. Within 0.15 seconds, I had 57,500,000 results. Apparently I'm not the only one with that question.

Is it character or personality that produces better results? Is it vision, charisma, charm, or great oratory skills? These are but a few of the necessary components according to my on-line search.

We'd all like to be more effective in our respective leadership functions: be it in the workplace, at home, or community life. What does the Torah say about this question? How does G-d in His infinite wisdom define the role of a leader?

Passed Over for the Crown

Before his passing, Jacob saw fit to bless his children and impart to them his last will and testament. They each merited a private audience, in which he spoke to them candidly; his blessing interspersed with rebuke, when necessary.

As the firstborn, Reuben had a formidable birthright

It was in Jacob's meeting with Reuben that he notified him about the unfortunate losses he had incurred due to his indiscretion with regards to "his father's bed":

Jacob's bed had been regularly situated in Rachel's tent, which he considered his primary residence. When Rachel died, Jacob moved his bed into the tent of Bilhah, Rachel's handmaiden. Reuben perceived this as a slight to his mother Leah. "If my mother's sister was a rival of my mother," he argued, "should my mother's sister's handmaiden also be a rival of my mother?!" So he unilaterally went and moved his father's bed into his mother's tent.¹

As the firstborn, Reuben had a formidable birthright. His descendents were destined to be the royalty of Israel. But alas, because of his shortcoming, that right was taken from him² and the kingship of Israel was transferred to Judah.³

But why Judah?

Courage and Nobility!

Our sages explain⁴ that Judah earned the kingship because of the great courage and restraint he exercised both in regards to Joseph and Tamar. In that merit, the Israelite kings – the future Davidic dynasty – would emerge from his bloodline alone.

After the brothers had thrown Joseph into the pit, leaving him to languish until his death, Judah turned to his brothers and suggested: "What gain will there be if we kill our brother? Come, let us sell him to the Ishmaelites..."⁵ The brothers heeded his advice, and thereby Joseph's life was saved.

Later, when his former daughter-in-law Tamar was being led to execution because of her alleged promiscuity, Judah had the humility to admit that it was in fact he who fathered the children that Tamar was carrying—thus saving her life as well.

Courage and Nobility?!

Based on a careful reading of the narratives, however, it seems ironic that the leadership was transferred from Reuben to Judah.

"Joseph went after his brothers and found them at Dothan. They saw him from afar; and when he had not yet approached them, they conspired to kill him... Reuben heard, and he rescued him from their hand; he said, 'We will not strike him mortally!' And Reuben said to them, 'Do not shed blood! Throw him into this pit in the wilderness, but send no hand against him!...'"⁶

Reuben, it turns out, was at least as heroic as Judah

Reuben, it turns out, was at least as heroic as Judah. He undoubtedly saved Joseph's life when he convinced the brothers not to kill him.

Furthermore, when we read a little further in the text it seems that Reuben's efforts were even more heroic than those of Judah!

"...in order to rescue him from their hand, to return him to his father."⁷

In a somewhat rare display of biblical narrative, G-d Himself bore witness that Reuben's intention, when advising his brothers to cast Joseph into the pit, was only to rescue Joseph. He planned on returning later on in order to bring him up from the pit and return him to their father Jacob.⁸

And return later he indeed did. And when he found that Joseph was no longer in the pit – for he had been sold to the Ishmaelites as per Judah's suggestion – he rent his garments and mournfully exclaimed, "The boy is gone! What will I do now?!"⁹

Now contrast that with Judah who callously said, "Come, let's sell him to the Ishmaelites!"

Reuben had planned on rescuing Joseph completely, to return him to their father, while Judah suggested that instead of killing the boy they should sell him as a slave!

Yes, it's true that both Reuben and Judah saved Joseph from death; but the end results they had in mind could not have been more different.

Can we honestly compare Judah's efforts to Reuben's?

One more point:

While Reuben was driven by his desire to bring his brother home, Judah said to his brothers, "What gain will there be if we kill our brother? Come, let us sell him."

When Judah "saved" Joseph he was motivated by financial benefits!¹⁰ Apparently, if Joseph would simply be allowed to die a slow death in the pit, that wouldn't bring them any "gain"!¹¹

Humility Rules

The creative bible reader might suggest a different reasoning behind Jacob's choice of Judah over Reuben. A true sign of a leader, Jacob felt, is humility, not courage. A leader is not one who can conquer others but one who can conquer himself. "Who is mighty?" ask our Sages. "One who masters his inclination."¹²

One can only imagine the public shame and ridicule Judah was subjected to

In the words of Rashi,¹³ "Lucky is the generation whose leader is humble enough to bring a sin offering for a mistake he has made."

Perhaps Jacob felt that Judah excelled in this area. One can only imagine the public shame and even ridicule Judah was subjected to upon confessing that the woman he had sentenced to death was in fact impregnated by none other than himself! And yet, humiliation notwithstanding, he admitted his guilt.

However, this solution also leaves much to be desired. For in regards to humility, too, Reuben exceeded Judah.

Reuben also confessed and repented for his shortcoming. Yet, unlike Judah who was motivated (at least partially) based on the knowledge that innocent people would die if he did not, Reuben was motivated to confess and repent simply because he realized that he had erred.

Furthermore, it must've taken incredible humility for Reuben to confess, because he hadn't "sinned" to pursue his own interests, but to safeguard his mother's honor.¹⁴ Nevertheless, notwithstanding the excuses he could have made for himself, repent he did.

And while we don't find any indication in the narrative that Judah's confession and repentance lasted more than the few moments it took to make his dramatic announcement, Reuben continued to repent for more than nine years!¹⁵ Apparently he took his shortcomings very much to heart and constantly strove to better himself—true signs of a humble man.

So what *was* Jacob thinking when he transferred the monarchy to Judah?

The Problem Solver

After outlining to Pharaoh the national disaster about to hit Egypt, Joseph offered unsolicited advice: "Gather all the food of the approaching good years; amass grain... and safeguard it. The food will be a reserve... And Pharaoh said to his servants, 'Could we find like this a man...?'"¹⁶

One simple question: Was there something so brilliant in Joseph's idea? Ask any small child what to do in the event that you have lots of food now but you'll have nothing later on, and he'll reiterate Joseph's words: "Save some of what you have now for later."

Many people see problems but few know how to solve them

Does that make the child fit to rule the world?

But Pharaoh was indeed very wise. He recognized Joseph as a leader because he focused not only on the problems, but on how to fix them. He saw things through a different lens; his were practical glasses and he knew how to achieve results.

Upon identifying the impending catastrophe, Joseph didn't sigh or wring his hands; in the very same sentence, he immediately spoke of action.¹⁷

Many people see problems but few know how to solve them. Rare are the people with vision. Even rarer are those who can translate vision into practice. Joseph was one such man and Pharaoh was wise enough to recognize that.¹⁸

The uniqueness of a leader is his ability to implement. His character, motives, and ideas are of less importance. If one cannot produce results they are not fit to lead. He can advise but cannot rule.¹⁹

Jacob's Choice

Using this paradigm, we can fully appreciate Jacob's choice of Judah to assume the royal mantle.

Reuben might have surpassed Judah in character – purity of motives, sensitivity, piety and humility – but when considering the quality that makes one fit to lead, namely the ability to produce results, Judah exceeded Reuben.

"Reuben returned to the pit – and behold! – Joseph was not in the pit!"

Apparently, Reuben wasn't present when Joseph was sold.²⁰

Although very well-intentioned in his desire to save Joseph, at crunch time – when the time had come to act – Reuben was nowhere to be found.

Moreover, Reuben's efforts, while saving Joseph from one form of certain death at the hands of his brothers, only served to facilitate a different

At crunch time Reuben was nowhere to be found

meeting with death²¹ at the hands of the poisonous snakes and scorpions that swarmed in the pit!²²

Contrast that with Judah, who may have assisted in Joseph's sale, but in doing so actually saved Joseph's life.²³

Judah's ability to produce results was also expressed in his rescue of Tamar, whose life and those of her unborn children were saved as a direct result of Judah's confession.

Selfless

Where was Reuben at so critical a time? What could possibly have been more important than saving his brother's life?

"He was busy with his sackcloth and fasting for having rearranged his father's bed."²⁴ While Joseph's fate hung in the balance, Reuben was off repenting.

Reuben, however pious – and he truly was – had placed his own interests (albeit spiritual) before those of his brother.

In addition to a leader's ability to act, he must put others before himself.

In both of these regards – the knack for practical results and the ability to put others first²⁵ – Judah proved superior to Reuben.

If Reuben had not been busy repenting when Joseph was struggling for his life, Joseph may not have been sold. In essence, Reuben missed the chance to stop a bitter exile short in its tracks.

Judah's actions, on the other hand, albeit not as purely motivated, saved three lives, including that of Peretz, the antecedent of Moshiach. In effect, he jumpstarted the redemption!

What in It for Me?

If we want to lead, we must look for answers, not questions. To find faults are easy, to fix them is not. Good intentions amount to little; good deeds change the world. If we train ourselves to bring positive change to the lives of others, we will be qualified to lead.

The same is true when we look for a leader. We must ask ourselves, can this person effect change, or does he/she only speak of it? Will our workplace produce more and better under this person's management? Will our community grow in size and spirit if this individual is chosen to oversee it? Will our nation securely prosper with this person as president?

Good intentions amount to little; good deeds change the world

Additionally, to lead means to lose ourselves for another; not to find ourselves through them. This we can only accomplish if we are willing to sacrifice of ourselves and our own development. If we seek to lead in order to promote ourselves, we are doomed to failure. At one point or another, the kingdom will fall. It might last for a while but ultimately the time will come when there is a conflict of interest between the leader the people.

More for Me...

Good deeds, even when motivated by selfish or less-than-pure motives, remain good deeds.²⁶ In the world of action, intentions are relatively irrelevant.²⁷

Of course we must strive to refine ourselves and to be driven by altruistic considerations alone; but if someone else will lose out as a result, adulterated action takes precedence over unadulterated intentions.

In the words of the Mishnah,²⁸ "Action is paramount."²⁹

FOOTNOTES

1. [Genesis 35:22](#) and Rashi ad loc.
2. Rashi on [Genesis 49:3-4](#).
3. [Genesis 49:8-9](#) and Rashi ad loc.
4. Ibid.
5. Ibid., 37:26-7.
6. Ibid., 37:17-21.
7. Ibid, 37:22.
8. Rashi ad loc.
9. [Genesis 37:30](#).
10. See Rashi ad loc.
11. Had he cared for Joseph, he could well have done something about it. Rashi on [Genesis 38:1](#) makes it clear that had Judah – the leader amongst the brothers – wanted to call off the sale and bring Joseph home unharmed, the brothers would have done so out of respect for Judah.
12. Ethics 4:1.
13. On [Leviticus 4:22](#).
14. It is for this reason that Rashi says, "All of [the twelve tribes] were equal and all of them righteous, *for Reuben did not sin*." Because he had acted to protect his mother's honor he is seen not to have sinned at all!
In the very next verse after recounting Reuben's deed, the Torah refers to him as "Jacob's firstborn." Rashi observes, "Even at the time of dishonor Scripture calls him 'firstborn!'"
15. See Likutei Sichot vol. 15, pg. 442 fn 37.
16. [Genesis 41:35-38](#).
17. This perhaps sheds light on a question addressed by many commentaries: Joseph had seemingly stepped out of bounds. The king hadn't asked him for advice but strictly to interpret the dreams, so why would he risk his life by speaking out of turn in the king's presence? (See Likutei Sichot vol. 15 pg. 339.) Based on the above, however, we could say that this was the most relevant part of Joseph's presentation, since this is what ultimately brought him to power. Joseph was therefore was willing to take the risk.

18. Thus Pharaoh's raised Joseph to the position of viceroy even though it was illegal according to Egyptian law! "It is written in the protocols of Egypt that a slave may not rule and may not even wear princely garments" (Rashi on Genesis 41:12). Both these laws were broken in Joseph's regard: "Pharaoh said to Joseph, "See! I have placed you in charge of all the land of Egypt...He then had him dressed in garments of linen and he place a gold chain around his neck."
19. Although the role of a leader as we've outlined was defined by a secular Pharaoh, in recounting the story at length, the Torah is apparently encouraging us to learn from every detail of the narrative. I.e., the Torah chooses to record it because it is consistent with the Torah's view.
20. See Rashi on Genesis 37:29.
21. Which Jewish law regards as certain death. If a witness testifies that a man fell into a pit containing snakes or scorpions, he is considered dead and his wife is free to remarry (Talmud, Yevamot 121a).
22. Rashi on Genesis 37:24.
23. The above distinction between Judah and Reuben comes to expression yet again after the sale of Joseph. After the famine strikes and Jacob sends his sons down to Egypt to secure food, they are accused by the viceroy of espionage. They return to their father with explicit instructions to return with Benjamin, but Jacob is unwilling to send Benjamin. Reuben tries to negotiate with Jacob, but to no avail; his petition was rejected (Genesis 42:38). But when Judah gives it a shot, he is successful; Jacob agrees to send Benjamin under his jurisdiction (ibid. 43:11-14). Why the difference? Because when it came to achieving results – in this case one which Benjamin's life depended on – Judah could be relied upon, not Reuben.
24. Rashi, ibid.
25. Judah's ability to put others first is also expressed in his name which comes from the word *hoda'ah* – which means self-nullification. According to chassidic teachings, this is the reason why the Jewish people are called *Yehudim* ("Jews"), due to our enhanced capacity to give of ourselves for others and for a greater cause, similar to the one whose name we bear—Judah.
26. In answer to a philanthropist who desired to give charity anonymously, lest a desire for honor and recognition inspire his mitzvah, the Rebbe suggested a different perspective. "If a building is dedicated in your name, and your name is visible to all who walk by, others will also be inspired to give. More people will thus be benefited."
27. A wealthy chassid who generously fed the poor of his town once came to Rabbi Schneur Zalman of Liadi and complained about the deep satisfaction he received from his good deeds. "I feel terrible that the good I do is driven by selfish intent. Should I put an end to my hypocrisy?" he asked. The Rebbe replied in a singsong: "You might be insincere in your giving, but the poor people you feed are very sincerely satiated." In the world of the recipient, intentions are not what count most.
28. Ethics 1:17.
29. Based on a talk by the Lubavitcher Rebbe, *Likutei Sichot* vol. 15 pg. 439ff.

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