

# Are Our Leaders Scared to Empower their Students?

Do You Know How to Make Your Disciple Shine? How Chabad Keeps It Together

Rabbi YY Jacobson

February 6, 2025

Dedicated by **Amanda Lyman** in honor of her **husband** and **children**, living, loving and learning Torah

Dedicated by **Maeira Werthenschlag**, in loving memory of **Shmaryahu** and **Aryeh Leib ben Mordechai Dov** and **Baila**.

## Three Versions of a Song

One of the first things we did together as a people was sing.

The nation of Israel was born on the 15th of Nissan in the year 2448 from creation (1313 BCE). Seven days later, the Israelites witnessed the Red Sea split, to allow them passage and to drown the pursuing Egyptians. The Torah relates how upon beholding the great miracle,

*Moses and the children of Israel sang this song to G-d, saying:*

*I shall sing to G-d for He is most exalted;*

*Horse and rider He cast in the sea.*

*G-d is my strength and song; He is my salvation*

*This is my G-d, and I shall glorify Him*

*The G-d of my fathers, and I shall exalt Him...*

This song, known as Shiras HaYam—Song at the Sea—goes on to describe the great miracles that G-d performed for His people, G-d’s promise to bring them to the Holy Land and reveal His presence among them in the Beit HaMikdash (Holy Temple) in Jerusalem, and Israel’s goal to implement G-d’s eternal sovereignty in the world. Its forty-four verses express the gist of our relationship with G-d and our mission in life, and thus occupy a most important place in the Torah and in Jewish life.

Our sages focus on the prefatory line to the Song at the Sea. The Torah introduces it as a song sung by “Moses and the children of Israel.” Moses was obviously one of the “children of Israel,” so the fact that the Torah singles him out implies that Moses took a leading role in the composition and delivery of this song. But the exact nature of Moses’ role is a point of much discussion by our sages. How exactly did three million people sing the same song?

The Talmud (Sotah 30b) relates no fewer than three different opinions.

According to Rabbi Akiva, it was Moses who composed and sang the song, while the people of Israel merely responded to each verse with the refrain “I shall sing to G-d” (Ashirah L’Hashem).

Moses sang, “For He is most exalted,” and the nation answered, “I shall sing to G-d”; Moses sang, “Horse and rider He cast in the sea,” and the people answered, “I shall sing to G-d”; and so on with all forty-four verses of the song. After each stanza, they declared “Ashirah LeHashem.”

Rabbi Eliezer, however, is of the opinion that the people repeated each verse after Moses: Moses sang, “I shall sing to G-d for He is most exalted,” and they repeated “I shall sing to G-d for He is most exalted;” Moses sang “Horse and rider He cast in the sea,” and they repeated, “Horse and rider He cast in the sea,” and so on.

A third opinion is that of Rabbi Nechemiah: according to him, Moses simply pronounced the opening words of the song, following which the people of Israel all sang the entire song together. Each of them, on their own, composed the entire, and very same, forty-four verses!

### Three Forms of Leadership

It is a strange debate. Do we have to argue about everything?

What is the logic behind these three opinions? What is the difference if Moses sang the entire song himself and the nation merely shouted out the chorus, or if the people repeated each stanza after Moses; or if Moses merely began the song and the people sang the rest of it on their own?

What is more, this is a story that occurred more than 3,330 years ago. Why argue about something that seems irrelevant today?

The truth is that what seems to be a merely technical argument is a profound meditation on the nature of leadership, and on the ability of a leader to inspire a sense of unity and purpose within a fragmented people.

What is the role of a leader? To inspire loyalty and submission, to create pupils, or to mold leaders? The three versions of how Moses led Israel in song express these three different perspectives on leadership.

Rabbi Akiva describes a situation in which Moses inspires an entire generation to surrender their egos, to transcend their differences, to submit their individuality to the collective identity embodied by the leader. Rabbi Akiva sees Moses as the *embodiment of the collective consciousness of Israel*, the one in whom each Jew finds their truest and deepest identity as a fragment of the Divine. Moses alone sang the nation’s gratitude to G-d. The people had nothing further to say as individuals, except to affirm their unanimous assent to what Moses was expressing.

Moses marched, and the nation declared: “Yes, we are in!” It was a moment of absolute loyalty and unity, as the Torah states right before the song, “and they believed in G-d and in Moses His servant.”

Note the critical words: “Moses his servant.” Throughout history, many a dictator inspired radical submission and loyalty, through fear, charisma, or genius, but the objective was the worship of an individual. In contrast, Moses, “the humblest man on earth” was completely dedicated to G-d; he could unite and embody the *zeitgeist* of the nation because of his ego-lessness, seeing himself as nothing but a conduit for an infinite G-d. Thus, he could inspire a few million hearts to melt away in the ecstasy of “we.”

Rabbi Eliezer, however, argues that the phenomenon of two million hearts and minds inspired to yield to a single vision and a single leader will not endure. It is electrifying and transformative, but it is short-lived, and not very meaningful in the long run. Have you ever been at a concert or a speech in which thousands congealed into one entity, embodied by a singular figure inspiring

magnetic electricity? It is deeply powerful, but short-lived. Sooner or later their intrinsic differences and counter-aims will assert themselves, and the unity will fade. Moments of radical transcendence, when the individual “I” melts into the collective “I,” are powerful, but not enduring. When the “I” resurfaces, the unity remains but a memory.

Rabbi Eliezer thus argued that the model employed was very different: Moses inspired students rather than loyalists. The people of Israel repeated each verse after Moses. They did not suffice with an affirmation of *his* articulation of Israel’s song. Rather, they repeated it after him, running it through the sieve of their own understanding and feelings, finding the roots for an identical declaration in their own personality and experience. The very same words assumed two million nuances of meaning, as they were absorbed by two million minds and articulated by two million mouths.

Moses created a generation of pupils and students who listened to his song, and then integrated it into their own lives. His vision became theirs. They did not submit themselves to Moses; they made his vision theirs. For Reb Eliezer, Moses is more like the conductor of a symphony, inspiring each musician to use his or her own instrument to produce the music. They are playing the same song, but each person is using his or her own instrument,

Rabbi Nechemiah, however, felt that this vision of leadership was still lacking. This type of leadership is meaningful as long as the teacher is there to teach and to inspire his or her disciples. When the leader is communicating his passion and song, his students can “repeat it,” absorb it and follow it. But what occurs when the captain disappears, when the teacher is silenced, when the conductor is no longer directing the symphony? Now that there is nothing to repeat, and nobody to direct, does the symphony die?

No, argues Rabbi Nechmyah. If Moses truly captured and embodied the quintessence of Israel, rather than his own ego, they would be able to find his song within themselves and would not need to hear their song from his lips before they could sing it themselves. The real leader, argues Reb Nechmyah, creates not followers but leaders. He shows people how to discover the leader within themselves—how to find within their own heart the infinite light and the song of Moses.

The way it happened, argues Rabbi Nechmyah, was that Moses pronounced the opening words of the song, commencing the play, identifying the goal, marking the destination, beginning the march. But following that each and every Jew sang the entire song by himself (or herself). Moses inspired not submission, nor did he create disciples; Moses knew how to kindle the spark within each and every one of his people so that they on their own can continue his song.

This view is suitable for Rabbi “Nechmyah” whose name means comfort and solace (similar to the names Menachem, Tanchuma, or Noach.) For a generation that would not see and hear Moses sing, Rabbi Nechmya taught that the greatest leaders of Israel lead their people in their absence sometimes even more than during their presence. Their greatest gift is that the people touched by them become ambassadors of love, light, and hope.

To be sure, all three opinions are valid and vital, depending on the circumstances. There are times when leaders inspire the surrender of the individual “I” to the collective “we.” Yet the true leader must learn how to mold real disciples, and the greatest of leaders learn how to empower leaders.

### **The Rebbe’s Influence**

The above marvelous explanation I heard myself from the Lubavitcher Rebbe, during an address on Shabbat Parshas Beshalach, Shevat 11, 5748, January 30, 1988. (It was a few days before the

sudden passing of his wife, Rebbetzin Chaya Mushka, and a few short years before the Rebbe's own passing in 1994.[1])

The above insight of the Rebbe taught me much about the role of a genuine parent, an authentic pedagogue, and a great leader. It also helped me understand the Rebbe himself.

This coming Shabbos, 10 Shevat 5785 (Feb 8, 2025), the Jewish world celebrates 75 years of the Lubavitcher Rebbe's leadership. People often ask me: In the absence of the Rebbe's physical presence, what inspires Chabad? What holds it together? What motivates it? What keeps it focused and united? How long can it continue?

But the Rebbe's name was "Menachem," and he embodied the vision of Rabbi Nechmyah. The Rebbe did not seek people who will submit to him—even as a person dedicated completely to G-d and His Torah. The Rebbe did not even want to mold followers. The Rebbe aspired to create leaders, persons who will identify within themselves the power and confidence to change the world.

Chabad has sometimes been accused of being a cult. I always find this humorous, because I know of no other Jewish figure who urged his students to be more independent, ambitious, individualistic, creative, revolutionary, and innovative than the Rebbe. He loathed when people squandered their talents and gifts, and truly believed in the infinite power of each individual to compose his or her unique song that will set the world on fire. I still recall a public address of the Rebbe, in the summer of 1988,[2] when he expressed frustration that some of his followers feel they are inept to become the authors of their own biography and are always waiting for orders.

And I know of no other leader who urged all of his students to go live amongst people who will **challenge their beliefs on a daily basis**, in order to build bridges between all Jews and to introduce every soul to the depth and love of Judaism. This is not how cults operate.

The Rebbe keenly understood that you can't transform a world with followers, only with leaders.

## The Match

The late Yehudah Avner, a veteran Israeli diplomat, served as an adviser to four Israeli prime ministers: Golda Meir, Yitzchak Rabin, Menachem Begin, and Shimon Peres. He was also Israel's ambassador to Ireland and Australia. Once, he related, during a conversation with the Lubavitcher Rebbe, the Rebbe spoke of his own work.

"Let me tell you what I try to do. Imagine you're looking at a candle. What you are really seeing is a mere lump of wax with a thread down its middle. When do the thread and wax become a candle? Or, in other words, when do they fulfill the purpose for which they were created? When you put a flame to the thread, then the candle becomes a candle."

"The wax is the body, and the wick the soul. Ignite the soul with the fire of Torah and a person will then fulfill the purpose for which he or she was created. And that is what I try to do – to ignite the soul of our people with the fire of Torah."

"My candle – has the Rebbe lit it?", Yehuda Avner asked.

"No," the Rebbe said, clasping Avner's hand. "I have given you the match. Only you can light your candle." [3]

---

[1] A few days later, at the farbrengen of 15 Shevat, the Rebbe spoke at length about the fact that he will henceforth minimize giving direct answers to people because after decades of teaching Torah people are empowered to find their

own way.

[2] Shabbos Parshas Shlach 5748, June 1988.

[3] My thanks to Rabbi Yanki Tauber for his rendition of the above address by the Rebbe, published on [www.meaningfullife.com](http://www.meaningfullife.com)