

## "SHEEP AND SHEPHERDS"

### Ruminations on Leadership in Jewish Thought and Practice

Let me begin by clearing up the title of this talk, "Sheep and Shepherds: Ruminations on Leadership in Jewish Thought and Practice." Sheep and shepherds, צאן ורועה, are the Biblical metaphors for followers and leaders. I prefer that particular symbol because of the relationship between sheep and lambs... And both, after all, are classified as ruminants, hence the beginning of the subtitle...

Puns aside, I am concerned that in our own מחנה, especially in the ranks of the RCA as well as YU, the spurning of leadership roles has become a generational phenomenon. When I got סמיכה, leadership was something we were naturally expected to exercise; it was a self-understood element in the responsibilities that רבנות imposed upon us. Whether and to what extent my generation, and the one before mine, executed this duty, is beside the point; the fact is that we knew we were expected to be leaders and that leadership was part and parcel of the functioning Rabbinate.

That does not seem to be the fact any longer. For years now, young men have been choosing education over the Rabbinate, and that is not only because of their love of Torah or the scathing criticism of the American Orthodox Rabbinate in some circles (and by people who, ironically, now regularly bemoan the decline of the Rabbinate), but also because they fear the responsibilities of leadership--communal or halakhic--and prefer a profession which keeps them linked to Torah but limits their "leadership" to 20-30 children! The result is fewer men in the Rabbinate and, of those who do enter, hardly any assumption that a Rav must be a leader, a doer, a mover and shaker and challenger of the status quo. Such leadership is evident in some other Orthodox circles--witness the aggressive outreach programs and the entrepreneurial enthusiasm of groups such as Lubavitch and some of the "Yeshiva" circles.

I am concerned because the problem is far more than theoretical. It touches on the very destiny of our community--the community defined by YU, the RCA, the UOJCA, Young Israel, Mizrachi, Poalei Agudah, and similar groups--and is both cause and effect of our perceived weakness. Indeed, all the talk about our supposed weakness is a self-fulfilling prophecy, especially in the absence of vigorous, confident, and influential rabbinic leadership.



The metaphor of **צאן ורועה** holds because in our sacred literature we often refer to God as our Shepherd, hence Leader. Thus, on **יום כיפור**, we say to Him, **אנו צאנך ואתה רוענו**, and this, in turn, is based upon the Midrashic statement, **אמר הקב"ה לישראל אתם צאני** (Ex. R. 34:3). Hence, it is God Himself who sets the pattern for such implied leadership, and human leaders therefore are involved in act of *imitatio Dei*, of **והלכת בדרכיו**.

When such leadership is absent, it is therefore an ominous sign that some element of **אמונה** is missing from those who have the personality and the intellectual capacity for leadership in the community but fail to exercise it. Shepherds who do not lead are, in effect, abandoning their sheep, the Almighty's **צאן קדשים**. It is a problem that requires urgent attention, and one which we ought not dismiss cavalierly.

What are the causes of this failure of leadership? There are, I suppose, many contributory causes, but I shall single out three of them: intimidation; the fear of controversy; and self-doubt. Let us begin with intimidation.

The obvious reason for this change in our own camp is that we have allowed ourselves to be intimidated. We have absorbed and internalized the criticism by our ideological adversaries in our own Orthodox camp. And when you feel uncertain, diffident, indecisive, and waffling, you abandon any pretensions to leadership, you retreat within yourself, you do things that will attract the least criticism and avoid any semblance of controversy. In a word, you surrender your rights as rabbinical leaders, your autonomy as thinking individuals, your duties as **מנהיגי העדה**, and you become self-proclaimed victims and ecclesiastical wimps. Instead of being **רועי צאן**, we have ourselves become sheepish, afraid to move out of the flock, and so have abandoned our sacred responsibility of being shepherds of our own flocks.

Much of Orthodoxy today is in the grips of a contempt for personal autonomy and independent thought imposed on even the most learned and distinguished who yield all too easily to blatant terrorism, to a *diktat* backed by intimidation rather than by persuasion. How else explain the scandalous absence of so many of the leading Roshei Yeshiva of other yeshivot at the funeral of the Rav, **זצ"ל**? Or at the **הספד מר** conducted at Yeshiva? Did none of them appreciate and respect the Rav's commanding **גאונות**? Or how explain the outrageously condescending obituary-article on him in the magazine of an organization that arrogantly pretends to speak for all of Orthodoxy? I give credence to the report--and it is more than mere rumor--that those who wanted to attend the funeral or the **אזכרה** were warned not to, and that the begrudging and nasty "eulogy" in the magazine I mentioned was done at the behest of the same source despite the feelings of many distinguished, learned **רבנים וראשי ישיבות** who were, at least some of them, aghast at the pressure but afraid to protest it.



Some example of Jewish rabbinic leadership! Some models of the esteem for true **גדולוי תורה** and the self-esteem that Torah should instill in a **בן תורה**! Some example of **לא תגורו מפני איש**!

I prefer the example of our own great Rebbe, The Rav **זצ"ל**, who spurned controversy whenever he could, who always tried to avoid polemics, but who never, never compromised on principles. If we consider ourselves his **תלמידים**, then we must not revel in his **חידושים** and his **דרשות** and his **מחשבה** alone, but must learn to adopt in our own individual and communal lives his **בקשת האמת**, without fear and trepidation and compromise.

There is a hidden dimension to the story of the **מרגלים** which we read this past Shabbat and which relates directly to our theme.

When the majority of the espionage team reported that the conquest of Canaan was impossible, they uttered four rather unremarkable words: **כי חזק הוא ממנו**, normally translated as, "for [the people that inhabits Canaan] is stronger than us." **חז"ל**, however, gave the verse a different twist that casts an entirely new light on their character and disposition. That comment (cited in slightly different versions in Bavli and Yerushalmi, but most clearly in Lev. R. 16:11), in the name of Resh Lakish, is: **הטיחו דברים כלפי מעלה**, they referred to the **רבש"ע**, and the word **ממנו** means not "than us," but "than Him," i.e., the Canaanites are more powerful than God!

Now, were these **השבטים** **נשיאי** so primitive that they really thought that in a contest of strength the Creator of heaven and earth would be defeated by humans--giants or no giants?

No, I do not believe that that was the case. What then did Resh Lakish mean by this rather bold statement? I believe he meant this: *that they were intimidated by the giants into giving up on their most cherished principles!* Facing adversity, they simply threw in the towel, they surrendered their beliefs, they turned heel and ran, leaving their ideals behind them. And anyone--especially a **נשיא** or **מנהיג** or **רב**--who is so easily cowed that he gives up his ideals of the right and decent and noble and worthy, is guilty of sheer blasphemy, as if he had abandoned his faith in an omnipotent Deity.

I often think about this chronic timidity which afflicts us, and in a bitter-sweet mood amuse myself with reflecting on what future historians will have to say about us and how we have acquitted ourselves. Two examples come to mind--two examples of things that make me laugh and cry at the same time.

A few years ago, I was looking for a Rosh Yeshiva for our Gruss Kollel in Israel. One man--let's call him "Rabbi Y"--accepted the offer. A great and renowned **חכם** **תלמיד**, he invited the class to his home in Jerusalem. That, I thought, was a warm and welcome gesture. Later, I discovered that they were meeting in his home *regularly*, and that he had never set foot on our campus. When I next visited Israel I spoke with him and asked him for an explanation. He was honest: If his colleagues and students



--even his own children--found out that he was teaching at a YU campus, they would break his windows! Of course, that ended his career at YU. I told him that YU was prepared to marry him, but not to be his פלגש, one of whom he must be ashamed...

Now, this was not the first time I heard this defense of spinelessness, what I call the "Plate Glass Argument." זיי וועלן מיר פֿענסטערס or צוברעכן די פֿענסטערס is almost a cliché in Orthodox circles. We have become dulled to the absurdity, the immorality, of this crumbling before religious terrorism. Some archeologist, poking around ancient records of the Orthodox community of the late 20th century, will present a paper to a learned society and conclude that the most important factor in the destiny of Orthodoxy, the most critical element that accounted for theological and communal positions, was neither halakhic differences nor arguments in hashkafah, but: *the chronic shortage of plate glass for windows in Orthodox neighborhoods.* A new version of the Marxist materialistic philosophy of history!

A second example is a bit more recent than the first, but one which I've heard more often these days. (Indeed, I am told it came up at a recent Board meeting of the RCA--and occasioned no comment whatever from the members present!) Rabbis will be reluctant to be forthright in advocating or disapproving of a policy or idea or person because he fears it will some day prejudice his children's chance for a proper "shidduch!" This is no less than mind-boggling. What kind of people are we, what kind of רבנים are we, to what levels of pseudo-leadership and spinelessness and self-contempt have we descended, if this is a concern that silences us so effectively? What kind of person will want a מחותן who will disqualify his son or daughter because their father speaks his own mind honestly and respectfully? Anyone who submits to this kind of threat ought to get out of the Rabbinate and seal his mouth forever from uttering any opinion on anything other than the weather. The Rabbinate must never become a sanctuary for moral cowards.

Permit me one more comment on the מרגלים story which can shed similar light on our theme of leadership. On the verse וְנָהִי בְעֵינֵינוּ כַּחֲגָבִים וְכֵן הָיִינוּ בְּעֵינֵיהֶם, the Talmud (Sotah 35b, quoted by Rashi) tells us that the spies encountered a funeral and climbed up the cedar trees, and felt--and appeared to the giants at the funeral below them--like mere grasshoppers. And whose funeral was it? Who is it who died that very day? None other than --Job: אִיּוֹב נָח נִפְשִׁיהָ וְאֶטְרָדוֹ כּוֹלָא עֲלֵמָא בְּהַסְפָּדִיהָ.

Now, what did the Sages have in mind when they chose דּוֹקָא Job as the one who expired that very day that the spies came to Canaan?

I believe that it was in answer to an unasked but real question: Is it possible that other than Joshua and Caleb, not one single one of these eminent princes of Israel felt they were betraying both Moses and God in giving this devastating report? Is it conceivable that each and every one of them-- כּוֹלָם... כל נשיא בהם--had no qualms, no inner doubts, no hesitation about what he was reporting? Only two of twelve under-



stood their responsibility to God and Moses? (Or, worse yet, according to the Yerushalmi, R. Akiva held there were 24 spies, but the Torah mentioned only the 12 who were **נשיאים**!)

I cannot believe that. Certainly they had more religious intelligence than that. Surely at least one or two or five felt that they were making a dreadful, historically tragic error. What then? *They failed to talk up and speak on behalf of their true feelings, their deepest convictions; they allowed themselves to be intimidated by their colleagues with the loudest and most strident voices and the greatest self-confidence and self-righteousness.*

That is what the Sages meant by saying that Job died that very day. According to the Talmud (*Sotah* 11a), Job lived during the Pharaonic persecutions of Israel and failed to protest them, for which he was punished with his terrible travails. Thereafter, he learned his lesson, and Job became the classical Biblical case of a man who would not allow his conscience to be silenced, who spoke up in defiance of his colleagues, his society, his friends who tried to intimidate him with their pat answers. Job was a man who was willing to argue with God, to debate the **רב"ע** Himself, and he was not about to let himself be pushed around by well-meaning friends who had nothing more to offer than tired cliches and conventional platitudes which Job knew were empty and dishonest. In the name of honesty, he who was ready to strive with the Creator was not going to yield to mere mortals who had no real insight.

That, I believe, is the significance of the **אגדה** that Job died when the **מרגלים** arrived in Canaan. When you silence a man as independent, as honest, as clean as Job, you make place for moral cowards and spiritual weaklings who can be intimidated into giving up their holy missions on behalf of Israel and Moses and God Himself. In a sense, the spies were responsible for Job's death. Job could not abide the likes of people who were the polar opposites of what he stood for, who had no inner core, who substituted excuses for principle, fear for faith, compromise for conviction--people who were supposed to lead but who declared their bankruptcy as leaders, who failed their people and themselves.

The second cause that I discern for this paralysis of leadership is an innate fear of controversy. We have become too delicate, too gentle, too timid in the face of criticism. Some of our most angry critics of "Peace Now" practice that self-same philosophy of submissiveness when it comes to principles we have cherished all our lives.

I can appreciate that some of us, indeed all of us, are reluctant to get involved in controversies. **מחלוקת** is, after all, an **איסור**. **דאורייתא**. But we must remember that not all **מחלוקת** is forbidden. The Sages (in **פ"ה**, **אבות**) warned against **מחלוקת לשם שמים**, such as **מחלוקת קרח וכל עדתו**, whereas a genuine, non-personalized argument **הלל ושמאי** such as that of **לשם שמים** is not only not banned, it is encouraged! Listen to **ר'בנו יונה**'s comment on this



Mishnah: כל מחלוקת שהיא לש"ש סופה להתקיים, הכוונה שלעולם יתקיימו במחלוקת, היום יחלוקו בדבר אחד ולמחר בדבר אחר, למחלוקת יהיה קיום ונמשך ביניהם כל ימי חייהם, ולא עוד אלא שאורך ימים ושנות חיים יוסיפו להם. So, controversy, if it is not ad hominem, not political, not a grab for power, not for the sake of winning an argument, but literally for God's sake, is a great virtue.

Of course, even the most elevated controversy involves criticism; that is in the very nature of intelligent debate. But so what? Didn't Hillel criticize Shammai and Shammai criticize Hillel? Wasn't Moses the most criticized and unpopular Jew of his day? If what we believe and what we say is לשם שמים, we should not hesitate to enter the fray, come what may. It is the only way to attain, as Rabbeinu Yonah indicated, intellectual longevity and vitality.

I am reminded of the story of the young man who came to "shul" one weekday morning, donned his tallit but refrained from putting on his tefillin. His neighbor broached it to him, the Gabbai approached him, the Shammash reproached him... all too no avail. No tefillin. Finally the Rabbi, noticing the commotion, asked him for an explanation. He replied that before his father died he instructed him never to get involved in מחלוקת, and since there is an old ור"ת מחלוקת רש"י on what kind of tefillin one must lay, he might as well refrain altogether from tefillin.

The final reason for our abandonment of our leadership role--and perhaps the most fundamental cause--is our own self-doubt. We suffer from an inner failure of philosophic nerve. We have been bullied into doubting our own shittah, the one on which we have built our personal and professional lives. When one or another of the sides that surround us shouts loud enough and long enough, we begin to wonder if maybe, maybe we were wrong all along, that others are right and we are in error. And there is nothing more deadly than that kind of pernicious self-doubt. It kills a man's initiative, his dignity and, finally, his integrity.

This, then, is a time for us to reaffirm our faith in our own most fundamental principles, and our confidence in the correctness of our convictions. Assailed by Right and Left, we must stand up with strength, with both the courage of our convictions and the conviction of our courage.

There is a time for self-questioning, even for a degree of self-doubt. But now is not such a time. The kind of Yiddishkeit we stand for must be reasserted when it is assaulted.

The letter ע in the word שמע of ישראל שמע is writ large, it is an עין רבתי. Why so? R. Samson Raphael Hirsch explains: It is large in order not to be mistaken for an א, for the word שמא means "maybe," "perhaps"; it is the sign of self-doubt, of hesitation, of unsureness. Such שמא is the very opposite of שמע, which connotes a commanding certainty and rightness.



We are attacked for being true to the Torah heritage, supposedly marking us as Neanderthals and as benighted advocates of anti-democratic intolerance. At the same we are assailed from the other side and are disqualified and delegitimated for not being authentically Orthodox because we do not pay obeisance to a political organization which lays claim to be the annointed apostle of the the Absolute Truth of Sinai to the exclusion of non-members or non-sympathizers; or because we believe in Torah U-Madda; or because we affirm that the State of Israel is no exception to the principle that everything in this world is brought about by the השגחה עליונה; or for our insistence that כלל ישראל includes those who do not necessarily agree with us on every count. But no matter where the attacks come from, we must have the strength and the courage to proclaim שמע for our principles--שמע and not, Heaven forbid, שמא.

Kenneth Clark concluded his massive study, *Civilization*, by stating, "It is lack of confidence, more than anything else, that kills a civilization." If what we have cherished as our interpretation of our "civilization," is to thrive and flourish, then we must rid ourselves of our שמא stance and return to a firm and self-respecting שמע attitude.

When I was a young Rabbi, almost 40 years ago, I delivered a sermon (I believe I had it printed in an *RCA Sermon Manual*) entitled "The Leaning Jews of America." One Yoreh Deiah analogy I mentioned then may still be of some relevance. I pointed out that the halakhic test for a questionably kosher spine of an animal, to determine if the חוט השדרה is kosher or treifa, is to hold the spine at its base and see if it wavers. If it leans to one side or another, it is treifa; if it stands erect, it is kasher.

That, in sum, is what I am pleading for to you, my friends in the RCA: even a Rabbi has to be kosher, has to have backbone, a spine that doesn't crumble or bend over submissively. Such backbones have been in short supply in recent years and it is time we kept kosher kitchens in our rabbinic households. Nothing less than erect backbones will qualify us as self-respecting מנהיגים and רבנים.

Can we do it? Can we overcome our timidity, our fear, our inner doubts?

Of course we can. No, more than that--we have done so, we have proven ourselves.

RCA members are the ones who alone manned the ramparts in defense of Orthodoxy when Reform and Conservatism were riding high, mocking us, and proclaiming that we had no future, that we were doomed to ideological extinction, that we were being swept into the ocean of oblivion by the undertow of the inevitable and inexorable triumph of modernity and the non-Orthodox varieties of Jewish life.



But we did not submit--that is, those of us who possessed adequate backbone did not submit. We--you and your predecessors for two or three generations of רבנים--resisted all intimidation, overcame the distaste for controversy, and stilled our considerable doubts in order to survive and prevail. We cleaned up and built מקוואות, we wrote openly about טהרת המשפחה, we set up a system of communal כשרות, we built day schools, we learned to speak English properly and be as or more educated than our "baalebatim"--and thus transmitted to them the eternal lessons of Torah in an idiom they understood and a manner they could respect. We engaged in a heroic ideological-cultural campaign against heterodox forces not by angry polemics, though there was plenty of that; not by personal denunciation; not by *ad hominem* attacks--but by constructive work in building קהילות with adequate חינוך and enhancing every aspect of Torah life.

And all this while, we were under relentless attack from the Right--from the Agudas Harabonim and others--who denied that we were authentic רבנים, who "passeled" us in every way, who ridiculed "moderne yunge rabbonim," and who made life unpleasant for us. These critics were numerically fewer than our critics from the Left.

Today, the same groups are still at it--and at us--even though the tables are turned in terms of power and passion and vitality.

We showed then that we had a kosher spine. *And we must show now that we have the proper backbone!*

Not everything we do is right, and not everything we say is necessarily the dogmatic truth. We are not beyond or above criticism. But our basic principles, our fundamental שיטה, is one we inherited from our גדולי עולם, from Dr. Revel and Dr. Belkin and the Rav, זכר צדיקים לברכה, and we have no need to seek approbation and הסכמות from anyone else.

I cannot conclude without telling you that there's a dimension that we ought not neglect, namely, the many of you who have demonstrated superb leadership abilities. There are amongst you those who have been forthright in speaking up for our beliefs, who have organized שיעורים לזכר הרב, who are מרביצי תורה ברבים, who have represented us with great efficiency and effectiveness, with both daring and dignity. All the rest of us--particularly our new רבנים--must learn from you the meaning of authentic rabbinic leadership.

So, no more intimidation, no more fear of advocating a cause we consider right and righteous and in consonance with Torah, and no more gnawing self-doubt as to the justice and rightness of our cause.

That is the only way to reassert our genuine roles as leaders, as רבנים who are מנהיגים, as קדשים רועי צאן קדשים.

Because if ונהי בעינינו כחגבים then, invariably, וכן היינו בעיניהם. If we do not respect ourselves, no one else will.