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"THE STAFF OF MOSES"

Three Views on Leadership

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This is the season when leadership -- its prerequisites and problems, its promises and prospects -- appears uppermost in the minds of the public. In less than two weeks our country will inaugurate a new president who made the issue of leadership paramount in his campaign, and promised to move the nation onward to new frontiers. This is an era in human history when, because of the complexity of civilization, leadership is all the more a precious commodity. At a time when Russia is led by clever brutality, when Cuba is led by clever hysteria, when some of the world's great democracies are led by an unclever sincerity; at a time when wrong leadership can doom the human race to sudden extinction -- it is important that we seek in the sacred Torah for insight on the phenomenon of leadership.

Allow me therefore to draw largely upon the comments of the Malbim on a significant passage in this morning's Sidra. In the fourth chapter of our portion, we find Moses receiving the divine charge to lead his people Israel out of Egypt. At this point we read the following intriguing dialogue: Va-yomer elav ha-Shem: Mazeh be'hadekha? Va-yomer: mateh. "And the Lord said unto him, what is that in thy hand? And he said -- a staff."

Our rabbis were puzzled by this exchange. Did not G-d Almighty know what Moses had in his hand? Must the Creator of the universe ask a mere mortal for a bit of information? Of course not, explains the Malbim. For he continues, there are three words in Hebrew for a stick. One is makel -- a rod, used to whip sheep or strike cattle. The second is mishennet -- a cane, used to lean upon for support. The third is mateh -- a staff, a symbol of authority, like the scepter of a king.

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These three -- the makel, the mishennet, and the match -- represent three kinds of leadership. The makel, or rod, is the symbol of the power-hungry authoritarian, tyrannical leader who drives his people mercilessly. The mishennet, or cane, represents a self-seeking, conniving parasite who wishes to lean on the public in order to benefit himself and his family. He is the one who does not hesitate to dip his hand into the public till. And finally, the match, or staff, symbolizes the true, enlightened, selfless leader. The word match comes from natch -- to stretch forth the hand, to point to new horizons, to new and higher goals. A match kind of leader will lead his people onward, go before them, and take them along with him.

The leader represented by makel dictates; the one of mishennet exploits; the match individual truly leads. The makel leader overuses the gift of leadership; the mishennet leader misuses the gift; the match person uses it properly.

The makel represents leadership that satisfies the desire for power; it fills a psychological need. The mishennet is leadership that satisfies the desire for personal gain; it fills the leader's material needs. The match is the kind of leadership that satisfies a deep spiritual yearning; it fills not a need of the leader, but the need of the people for great ideals.

Thus, the Malbim tells us, we can understand the dialogue between G-d and Moses. G-d turns to Moses and says to him: "What is this in thy hand?" -- What kind of stick are you holding? What kind of leader will you be? Will it be the leadership of the rod, the cane or the staff? And Moses answers: Match. It shall be the leadership of the

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staff -- now power hunger, not an appetite for personal advancement, but a desire to lead for the sake of the people and the glory of G-d. I aspire to be the kind of leader who will stretch forth his hand, extend himself, raise his staff and point it to new horizons, urging his people on to greater achievement. I want to infuse them with a sense of purpose, of grandeur, of destiny. Match -- it is the staff that I desire to carry.

So that the Torah's insight on leadership tells us that it ought not to be despotic or exploitative. It must be neither the makel, nor the mishennet. It must be the leadership of the staff of Moses.

But indeed it is not enough to know what leadership must not be. It is important to learn its positive qualities. The first of these we have already implied. Match-leadership must point to new goals. It must involve natch -- urging one's followers to stretch and extend themselves until they achieve greater height.

The second positive prerequisite is that this leadership must be exercised with respect, with love and with patience. Never must the match be used with disdain and contempt. Listen to the rest of the conversation which the Torah reports after the verse we have taken as our text: "And He said: 'Cast it on the ground,' and he cast it on the ground, and it became a serpent; and Moses fled from before it." Moses, G-d was saying to the newly designated leader, look at the dangers inherent in leadership. Cast the staff upon the ground, treat your followers with ridicule and deprecation. Look down upon them, and you will see what happens -- the staff will turn into a serpent. Leadership becomes deadly and dark and dangerous and evil. So much so that Moses flees from before it -- he fears the potential evil in leadership. Treat

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the people with contempt and you have converted the staff into a snake. "And the Lord said unto Moses: 'Put forth thy hand, and take it by the tail' -- and he put forth his hand, and laid hold of it and it became a rod in his hand." Moses, if you wish to convert the serpentine forces that lurk in the breast of the leader into a true staff of leadership, then you must bend down even unto the ground, you must lower yourself to your people, stretch out your hand and hold on to them like a father holding on to his child. Take the staff of leadership in the palm of your hand and give it of the warmth of your being. If you wish to be the true leader then you must lead resolutely but mercifully; urgently but gently; strongly but safely; passionately but also compassionately.

The third prerequisite for leadership, primarily Jewish leadership, is implied in an old Jewish tradition. We are told of this staff of Moses that Shem havayah chakuk alay -- it had come down to him from Adam through Jacob and down through the ages, as upon this staff there was engraved the Holy Name of G-d. The leader, our tradition meant to teach us, must never delude himself into thinking that he is utterly independent. He must always remember that he is responsible to G-d who has given him his leadership as a trust. The Jewish leader must always seek to imitate G-d, never impersonate Him. He must be ethical in his means and strive for righteous ends, so that his leadership will be an honor to Torah. When we understand leadership in this manner -- as requiring the urging on to new levels, the exercise of respect and affection, and a sense of responsibility to G-d; when leadership is so conceived, then it can indeed as Moses showed us, perform miracles. With such leadership you can forge a nation. With such leadership you

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can lift beams. With such leadership you can free slaves. With such leadership you can lead people on to a promised and holy land.

This past week we have seen an example of leadership exerted in the State of Israel when Prime Minister Ben Gurion gave the opening address at the World Zionist Congress. There was a speech which caused a world-wide reaction, causing the Prime Minister to be denounced from pulpit and platform in almost hysterical terms.

This congregation know that I have often criticized Ben Gurion in the past when I thought that from a Torah point of view he was deserving of such censure. I shall not refrain therefore from commenting upon his most recent address and testing his leadership by the standards we have set down.

Let it be said that Ben Gurion, however much we may disagree with him, has shown that his leadership is not of the makel or nishannet variety, but that of match. He is not a tyrant. He has certainly never sought personal profit.

What, however, of the three positive qualities of match leadership which we have mentioned?

In his speech, Ben Gurion taunted American Jews, particularly Zionists, and most especially Orthodox Jews, challenging them to emigrate to the State of Israel. In the course of his talk, he quoted a talmudic dictum that "he who lives outside the land of Israel, it is considered as if he had no G-d." It is this attack that has caused such unpleasant reactions in the United States and elsewhere.

Let me say then, that to my mind, all his critics notwithstanding, Ben Gurion has performed a valuable service. He has passed the first of

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the three tests very well indeed. It is true that the talmudic statement he mentioned was misunderstood. The rabbis did not maintain that he who lives outside of Israel has no G-d, but is considered as if he had no G-d.

This is not really a serious matter. What is serious is the question he has raised. It is true that it is silly to expect even all Orthodox Jews suddenly to pack their belongings and fly to Israel. It is true that our religious tradition does not demand of us as an absolute obligation to leave the Diaspora and settle in Israel despite any and all conditions. It is, truly speaking, very strong recommendation, not legal obligation. Nevertheless, it is a worthwhile criticism directed especially at Orthodox Jews.

We Orthodox Jews must not be hypersensitive to any and all criticism directed at us from the other camp. We must listen carefully and try to understand sympathetically. Here is the case where a non-Orthodox Jew has irritated us by pointing to a lapse between our ideal and our real. And it is true: once we Orthodox Jews wrestled with the problem of being under-adjusted to American life. We were not acquainted with the idiom, with the language, with modern methods and techniques. Now our great problem is that we may have become over-adjusted. We have possibly become so much at home in America, that we may, heaven forbid, forget our obligation to Israel. We may forget that living in Israel, if not an absolute requirement, is certainly a noble mitzvah -- a noble virtue. If Ben Gurion will have accomplished just this, of reminding us that Israel must be more than the object of our charitable intentions, more than the place supported by U.J.A. and Israel Bonds, but also the great homeland to which we are bound by personal ties, then he has stretched his hand out



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toward us and pointed the staff of his leadership to new goals which we must take to heart.

But I find that unfortunately Ben Gurion has failed the other two tests.

His attitude toward American Jews, especially Orthodox Jews, has been one of unmitigated contempt, of a harsh and cold lack of friendship. He has often stated that he is concerned by the Sabra's derisive attitude to Diaspora Jewry. Let him then investigate his own soul and he will find that he has set himself as a bad example for his people. He has not had the patience to understand the particular and peculiar conditions of American Jewry. He has turned to us in derision and with contempt. And when a leader casts his staff upon the ground it stands a chance of turning into a serpent and destroying where there should be building.

More important, he has neglected the third prerequisite of the staff of Jewish leadership. He has forgotten the name of G-d engraved on his staff. He has forgotten that the staff of Jewish leadership must be handled reverently and in awe, and not merely as a stick with which to poke politically or playfully at the eye of your opponent. How undignified and in what bad taste it is for an avowed atheist to challenge a believing community to a duel choosing as his weapon isolated talmudic texts torn out of context. How offensive and absurd for an avowed secularist to quote Talmud -- like the devil quoting Scriptures. We must remind Ben Gurion that Jews all over the world are still smarting from his affrontery when after the recent Yom Kippur fast the press in Israel reported that the Prime Minister had fasted for the day, and the Prime Minister thereupon hurriedly called a conference and declared to the press that he wished to

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deny the vicious rumor spread about him ... . We should remind Ben Gurion that we would rather live in the Diaspora, worship and serve G-d, and have it said about us that we are "as if" we had no G-d; than live in Israel, abandon G-d and neglect Torah, and have it said about us that it is "as if" we did have a G-d. We want to be real Jews. We do not want to be "as if" Jews.

We hope and pray that the leadership of Israel will learn completely the lesson of the staff of Moses. Even as it has proved itself gallant in so many facets of its leadership, so may it achieve the totality of the Jewish concept of the staff.

And as our country America inaugurates a new administration, it is our hope and prayer that the country will move forward, that the administration will learn patience and loyalty to the citizenship, and that there will always be a sense of responsibility to Almighty G-d. May the new administration act also with understanding and sympathy for the State of Israel -- for we have learned that only where there is no understanding will there be no sympathy.

For only by great and excellent leadership can we reach the blessings that G-d has promised us. For as our rabbis taught, Ha-match ha-seh atid ha-melekh ha-mashiach li-sao. That staff of Moses is one that the Messiah will bear with him when he arrives in the world. With true leadership of the kind we have described, both in America and in Israel and all over the world, will all mankind experience the blessings of the messianic age which we hope will now dawn upon us -- the blessings of justice, plenty, and above all -- peace.