

The Challenge of Leadership in a Privileged Generation

In 1825, there was only one synagogue that served the religious and communal needs of all the Jews living in the New York City area. It was Shearith Israel, the Spanish and Portuguese Synagogue, which was founded in 1654.¹ By this time in early American Jewish history, newly arriving immigrants were predominantly Ashkenazim from German-speaking lands.

Representatives of this growing constituency approached the Board of Directors of Shearith Israel and requested to hold an earlier minyan on Shabbat mornings, during which the full service would be accompanied by English explanations of the prayers. This group had consented not to change the *nusach ha'tefilah*, the Sephardic traditional liturgy, which was used by the synagogue. They explained that their primary goal was that their children would understand the prayer service. They expressed hopes of positive change and avoided any indication that this reflected grievances. The committee representing this group was comprised of prominent members of the community. They included:

- Haym M. Solomon, the namesake and son of the financier of the American Revolution



Rabbi Dr. Kenneth Brander

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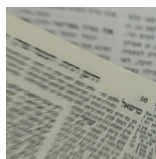
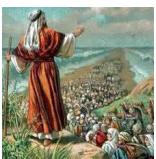
Yeshiva High School of South Florida

- E.S. Lazarus, the interim chazan after Gershom Mendes Seixas' death, as well as co-editor of the Hebrew-English prayer book
- S.H. Jackson, publisher of Judaic texts
- J.B. Kursheedt, a Jewish scholar involved in the relief efforts of Jews in the Holy Land
- H. Myers, the builder of the Newport Synagogue

The representatives presented a formal proposal to the Board including a printed constitution and by-laws to govern the members of the society, which would initiate the new minyan. The document specified the goals of this service and expressed a firm commitment to remain fully affiliated with the Spanish and Portuguese Synagogue. They called their association: חברה חנוך נערים, "The Society for the Education of the Children."

Their request for the earlier

explanatory minyan was denied twice by the Board of Shearith Israel. There was an opportunity, briefly, to appease a group of Jews who had come to feel disconnected or underserved by the synagogue, but such a compromise did not happen. There was no trust between the divided parties. Instead, there was complete rejection and resistance by the leadership against the innovative, but by no means transgressive, proposed prayer service. The lack of interest in accommodating the new immigrant constituency resulted in the immediate creation of a new synagogue, B'nai Jeshurun. That was the second synagogue built in New York City. However, within the next twenty-five years, twenty-five synagogues split away from Shearith Israel and B'nai Jeshurun. The proliferation of houses of worship was not due to a massive increase in the New York Jewish population but demonstrated that "the center could not hold" in New York City in that



LEADERSHIP IN TRANSITION

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era. The absence of mutual respect and cooperation had a negative impact on almost every aspect of Jewish communal life: united worship, kashrut supervision, marriage (and divorce), and political initiatives in pursuit of shared Jewish interests such as combating anti-Semitism and rescuing Jews. All of these proved to be beyond the capabilities of an aggregate of Jews that could not act as a community of Jews.

Now let us shift our attention to a troubling story in Sefer Bamidbar.



Title Page: חברה חנוך נערים, The Society for the Education of the Children

We are told (ch. 25) that after years of wandering in the desert, the Jewish people engaged in acts of idolatry and brazen behavior with the daughters of Moav. In particular, a prince of Israel from the tribe of Shimon, Zimri, and Kozbi, a princess of Midyan, are specifically described as committing lewd acts in public. They are killed for their heinous conduct. Shortly after these events, a Torah passage narrates that Moshe will not lead the people into the Promised Land. Moshe will die prior to their entry into the Land

of Israel and someone else will lead them in his place:

וַיֹּאמֶר ה' אֶל-מֹשֶׁה, עֲלֵה אֶל-הַר הָעֵבְרִים הַזֶּה; וּרְאֵה, וּרְאֵה-אֶת-הָאָרֶץ, אֲשֶׁר נָתַתִּי, לְבְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל. וּרְאִיתָהּ אַתָּה, וּנְאֻמְסָפֶת אֶל-עַמִּידָם גַּם-אַתָּה, כְּאֲשֶׁר נֹאסַף, אֶהְרֹן אָחִיו. כְּאֲשֶׁר מָרִיתָם פִּי בְּמִדְבַר-צֹן, בְּמִרְיַבַת הָעֵדָה, לְהַקְדִּישֵׁנִי בְּמִיַם, לְעֵינֵיהֶם: הֵם מִי-מִרְיַבַת קֹדֶשׁ, מִדְבַר-צֹן.

And Hashem said to Moshe: "Go up onto this mountain of Avarim, and behold the land which I have given to the children of Israel. And when you see it, you shall also be gathered unto your people, as Aaron your brother was gathered; because you rebelled against My commandment in the wilderness of Zin, in the strife with the congregation, to sanctify Me at the waters before their eyes. These are the waters of Merivat-Kadeish in the wilderness of Zin.
Bamidbar 27:12-14

However, this was not a new decree; Moshe was already told that he would not be able to enter the Land of Israel. As we are all aware, when Moshe struck the rock instead of speaking to it, Hashem declares:

וַעֲן לֹא-הָאֵמַנְתֶּם בִּי, לְהַקְדִּישֵׁנִי לְעֵינֵי בְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל--לְכוּ, לֹא תְבִיאוּ אֶת-הַקֶּהֶל הַזֶּה, אֶל-הָאָרֶץ, אֲשֶׁר-נָתַתִּי לָהֶם.

Because you [Moshe and Aaron] did not believe in Me, to sanctify Me in [front of] the eyes of the children of Israel, therefore you shall not bring this community into the land which I have given them.
Bamidbar 20:12

What is the connection between the episode of *Ba'al Peor*, the events in *Parshat Pinchas*, and the decree that Moshe will not lead the Jewish people into the Land of Israel? In fact, this decree — the doom against Moshe, is repeated after each crisis event in the second half of Sefer Bamidbar and several times in Sefer Devarim.

For example, we hear of Moshe's fate hinted to in Matot (32:12) and clearly mentioned in Sefer Devarim (ch.3) after the description of the incident with the tribes of Gad and Reuven. The repetitions of Moshe's doom suggest that it is not just the act of striking the rock that prevented him from leading the Jews into the Land of Israel. Rather, that event was a symptom of how Moshe engaged with a new, second generation of Jews. It is his difficulty with them that prevents Moshe from entering the Land and brings about the necessary change in leadership over the people. In the words of the Gerrer Rebbe, R. Yehuda Aryeh Alter, commenting on why Moshe couldn't enter Eretz Yisrael:

כי לא היה זה עונש רק הוכחה וראיה שאין דור הזה של באי הארץ נמשכים אחר הנהגתו הגבוהה של משה רבינו ע"ה.

This was not a punishment, but an indicator and proof that the generation about to enter the Land was not well-matched with the transcendent leadership of Moshe Rabbeinu, may he rest in peace.

Sefat Emet, Chukat 5647

The generation of Jews who were about to enter the Land were born in the desert into a life of freedom and experienced an unusual solicitude from Heaven. Moshe somehow does not connect with this new generation with the same degree of empathy that he displayed repeatedly toward the first generation of Jews, the group that had been born into slavery but who left Egypt and received the Torah. After all, that first generation had been robbed of so much normal life. They had grown up in slavery under the lash of the taskmaster's whip, with the daily possibility of death as a threat for disobedience. The members of the first generation had their marital

lives disrupted and remembered the terror of helplessly seeing male babies cast into the waters of the Nile by the oppressors. Moshe was able to forgive many of the shortcomings of that generation; their peculiar indulgences and rebellious behavior could be understood in light of their harrowing life experiences. Moshe's concern was almost exclusively focused on protecting the people from themselves, from understandable limitations and cultural defects, and when necessary, even from Hashem's judgments.

The second generation was born into freedom. They witnessed the miraculous existence of living in the desert and signified to Moshe the hope of a new and glorious possible future. At our distance from them, we can hardly imagine the desert reality of experiencing the presence of the protective cloud by day and the pillar of fire by night. The Torah tells us (Devarim 8:3-4) of the desert generation that their clothing grew with their bodies. Their food and drink rained down from Heaven. What did they know of the silence of God during years of oppression? Moshe had high hopes for the new generation. He created a whole plan and schedule for how they would use their time to study Torah and how Divine knowledge would be imparted to them. This generation had not been robbed of their childhood or young adulthood. They were given all the creature comforts available at that time. Instead of achieving greatness, the generation that seemingly had everything, continued to struggle and to rebel. It seemed impossible, incredible that the vision of a redeemed community proved unattainable to the people of Israel under those circumstances. Moshe's

frustration and anger with this second generation seeped into the language he increasingly used in addressing the people. In his disappointment, Moshe was unable to effectively communicate with this new generation.

The demand for water that led to the judgment against Moshe was not a new or especially terrifying challenge. The people had complained about water early on in their desert journey. In Shemot (15:23; 17:6) we read that the Jews cry out for water. There, Moshe responded by taking the steps needed to provide water. Yet at the event described in *Parshat Chukat* (chap. 20), with the repetition of the complaining, Moshe feels a deep sense of alienation from the people. They should know better! With daily miracles sustaining them for years, how could the nation continue to complain and challenge Hashem? This time, when they whine about water, Moshe just walks away:

וַיָּבֹא מֹשֶׁה וְאַהֲרֹן מִפְּנֵי הַקָּהָל, אֶל-פְּתַח אֹהֶל מוֹעֵד, וַיִּפְּלוּ, עַל-פְּנֵיהֶם; וַיֵּרָא כְבוֹד-ה', אֲלֵיהֶם.

Moses and Aaron moved away from the community to the entrance of the Tent of Meeting, and they fell on their faces. [Then] the glory of the Lord appeared to them.

Bamidbar 20:6

Moshe does not seize the initiative. He is too frustrated with their conduct. This paralysis is again seen when the prince of Israel engages in an idolatrous lustful public act with a princess of Midyan. Moshe was the leader who first faced down the individuals directly involved in the sin of the Golden Calf and then, practically in his next breath, took up the defense of the community of Israel before God, boldly saying that if You, G-d, destroy the Jewish people, “מחני”

”נא מספרך אשר כתבת — please remove me from Your book, which You have written (Shemot 32:32). But here, Moshe weeps at the sins of Israel with the daughters of Moav at Ba'al Pe'or. Moshe cannot believe his eyes. This is the second generation, the generation for whom he has labored to teach Torah, the generation born into freedom and advantage. Even when God intervenes and instructs Moshe on what to do, Moshe delegates carrying out the Divine instructions to the appointed Judges of Israel:

וַיֹּאמֶר ה' אֶל-מֹשֶׁה, קח אֶת-כָּל-רֹאשֵׁי הָעָם, וְהוֹקַע אוֹתָם לַה', נֶגֶד הַשָּׁמַשׁ; וְיֹשֵׁב חֲרוֹן אַף ה' מִיִּשְׂרָאֵל. וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה, אֶל-שֹׁפְטֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל...
And Hashem says to Moshe: “Take all the chiefs of the people who were engaged in these activities, and hang them up in front of Hashem in face of the sun, that the fierce anger of Hashem may turn away from the Jewish People.” And Moses says to the judges of Israel ...

Bamidbar 25:4,5

Similarly, when the tribes of Gad and Reuven request not to enter Israel proper but instead want to stay on the other side of the Jordan, Moshe again displays his frustration and anger:

וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה לְבָנֵי גַד וְלְבָנֵי רְאוּבֵן הַאֲחִיכֶם יָבֹאוּ לְמִלְחָמָה וְאַתֶּם תֵּשְׁבוּ פֹה: ... וְהָיָה קַמְתֶּם תַּחַת אַבְתֵּיכֶם תִּרְבוּת אַנְשֵׁים חַטָּאִים לְסָפוֹת עוֹד עַל חֲרוֹן אַף ה' אֶל יִשְׂרָאֵל:

And Moshe said to the children of Gad and Reuven: “Shall your brothers go to the war, and you shall sit here? ... You are the progeny of sinful men (spies), and have increased the anger of Hashem toward Israel.”

Bamidbar 32: 6, 14

Moshe recognizes that he cannot negotiate their needs, he cannot offer any compromise. This is not the Moshe of the past who was able to see the silver lining in clouds much darker than this. As new problems arise, Moshe is

no longer the active protector of the Jewish People before Hashem. Moshe feels that he can no longer suffer Bnei Yisrael's impudence. At that moment, Moshe turns to God using language only found in this one location. Moshe demands that Hashem find a leader who appreciates the needs of all:

וַיְדַבֵּר מֹשֶׁה, אֶל-ה' לֵאמֹה: זָקַדְתָּ אֵלַי הַרְוֹת לְכָל-בָּשָׂר, אִישׁ, עַל-הָעֵדָה. אֲשֶׁר יֵצֵא לְפָנֶיהֶם וְאֲשֶׁר יָבֵא לְפָנֶיהֶם וְאֲשֶׁר יוֹצִיאֵם וְאֲשֶׁר יְבִיאֵם וְלֹא תִהְיֶה עֵדֶת ה' כְּצֹאן אֲשֶׁר אֵין לָהֶם רֹעֵה.

Moshe speaks/demands (not vayomer) to Hashem saying: Let Hashem, the God of the spirits of all flesh, set a man over the congregation who can tend to the diverse needs of all people. A leader who may go out before them, who will bring the people together, who will lead [the people] out and bring them in and the congregation of God will not be like sheep that don't have a shepherd.

Bamidbar 27:15-17

At times, the challenge of leading the Jewish people must have been so great to indeed bring Moshe to such a point of near despair. In modern times, the challenge has not lessened. Today, we need leaders who can inspire the Shomer Shabbat Jew and the serious Jew who is not Shomer Shabbat. We seek leaders who can embrace the complexity of the Jewish people. Our leaders need to celebrate individuation

and genuine spirituality, empower our community, and challenge our people, as Elie Wiesel once said, "to think higher and live deeper."² Our new generation needs leaders who will celebrate both young men and women who study Shas and Poskim as well as those who find their connection with God through a passion for justice and social action. The best Jewish leaders respond to and inspire not just a segment of the Jewish community, but take responsibility for the whole of the Jewish people.

Moshe offers a principled comment on the kind of leadership that can rightfully follow him in leading the Jewish people:

אֲשֶׁר-יֵצֵא לְפָנֶיהֶם, A leader who may go out before them.

Our community looks to our leaders to create halakhically appropriate opportunities for our women to play meaningful leadership roles in our communities.

וְאֲשֶׁר יָבֵא לְפָנֶיהֶם, Someone who will bring the people together.

In our generation, this means leaders who protect the community by speaking out against all forms of abuse and immorality which destroys families.

וְאֲשֶׁר יוֹצִיאֵם וְאֲשֶׁר יְבִיאֵם, Who will lead [the people] out and bring them in.

In our generation, this means opening doors to the most vulnerable and needy among us. This includes leaders who will engage with those living on the periphery or in environments that we have been unaccustomed to, yet wish to stay connected with our *kehillot*. We need to help to create a context for inclusion, while still protecting halakha and the norms and mores of our community.

Who does Hashem choose to take Moshe's place? Moshe's prize student, Yehoshua. He was raised in the tent of Moshe, he understood the *mesorah* (tradition) and the values of his rebbe. Yehoshua's communal experiences are similar to Moshe's. Both cross bodies of water with Knesset Yisrael and celebrate a national communal rendezvous with God. However, Yehoshua handles the experiences with this second generation differently than Moshe did with the first.³ He is a new leader for a new generation. Bolder in the way he engages, yet steady in the recognition that his epicenter is the *mesorah* from his rebbe, Moshe.

One of the most famous Italian Renaissance painters of the 15th and 16th century is Giovanni Bellini. Interestingly, when he depicted religious personalities in his masterpieces, he often painted the personalities barefoot, or sometimes

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wearing one sandal, or both sandals.⁴

Bellini seemingly borrowed from the leadership initiations described in Tanach regarding Moshe and Yehoshua. Both Moshe and Yehoshua, as they accept their responsibility as leaders at the beginning of their journey as Jewish community leaders, have an encounter with Hashem. Both Moshe and Yehoshua are told that they are standing on sacred ground and must remove their shoes.

If we examine the description of the removal of the shoes in the initiation of Moshe and Yehoshua, it seems that each description was reflective of their unique leadership paradigm. Shoes symbolize our treading and engagement with the everyday. When we wish to step back, be detached and reflective, we remove our shoes. When we sit shiva, we remove our shoes. When Kohanim participated in the service of the Beit ha'Mikdash, they removed their shoes. When a Jew entered the Temple, he/she removed shoes. We remove our shoes in situations in which we focus on transcendent ideals and not on momentary mundane worries.

Moshe as a leader was totally connected to the Divine, in ways that are unparalleled. As we are told:

וְלֹא קָם נְבִיא עוֹד בְּיִשְׂרָאֵל כְּמֹשֶׁה אֲשֶׁר יָדָעוּ
ה' פְּנִים אֶל פְּנִים.

And there was no other prophet who arose in Israel like Moshe, who Hashem knew face to face.

Devarim 34:10

At the burning bush, at his moment of initiation as leader, Moshe is told by God: “*shal na’alecha* — remove your

shoes” (Shemot 3:5). This is symbolic of Moshe’s leadership paradigm.

Moshe needed to constantly communicate with the Divine in order to move his people from a slave nation to a chosen nation and to formally bring *HaKadosh Baruch Hu* into this world. Moshe is removed from the everyday.

When Yehoshua is initiated as leader, he has a similar, yet slightly different experience. He is told:

וַיֹּאמֶר שָׂר צָבָא ה' אֶל יְהוֹשֻׁעַ שֶׁל נַעֲלָךְ מֵעַל
רַגְלֶךָ כִּי הַמָּקוֹם אֲשֶׁר אַתָּה עֹמֵד עָלָיו קֹדֶשׁ
הוּא וַיַּעַשׂ יְהוֹשֻׁעַ כֵּן:

And the captain of the Lord’s host said to Yehoshua, Remove your shoe (shal na’alcha, one shoe only) from your foot; for the place upon which you stand is holy. And Yehoshua did so.

Joshua 5:15

Yehoshua is not told to remove both shoes, but to remove just one shoe. Leave one shoe on and one shoe off. His leadership paradigm must be rooted in transcendent values (one shoe off), but also in the immediate struggles and opportunities of the people (one shoe on). Leaders need to be able to live in both worlds simultaneously.

There are so many important issues that now require courageous leadership. We need a collaborative conversation with Roshei Yeshiva, Rabbinic leaders, educators, and community thinkers. It is something that we must do together, recognizing that one foot must be firmly fixed in the unique challenges and opportunities that our community faces, and a second foot resolutely

planted in the ideals of our *mesorah* and halakha. Change can only happen when we are willing to be bold and steadfast simultaneously.

Today, as in 1825, we continue to be a community far better at dividing into non-cooperating groups than multiplying into a force for collective accomplishment. Today we need to cultivate a more united, trusting leadership who can engage once again a diverse aggregate of Jews, which will help guarantee the immortality of our people and the eternality of the Divine.

Endnotes

1 See <http://shearithisrael.org/history>. However, most scholars believe it was not earlier than 1695. See Hershkowitz, Leo. “New Amsterdam’s Twenty-Three Jews” in *Hebrew and the Bible in America: The First Two Centuries*. Ed. Shalom Goldman. Hanover, NH: Brandeis UP, 1993. 171-183 and “The Mill Street Synagogue Reconsidered” in *American Jewish Historical Quarterly* 53.4 (June 1964): 404-410; Sarna, Jonathan. *American Judaism: A History*. New Haven: Yale UP, 2004. 10; Snyder, Holly. “Rethinking the Definition of ‘Community’ for a Migratory Age.” in *Imagining the American Jewish Community*. Ed. Jack Wertheimer. Waltham: Brandeis UP, 2007. 3, 4; and Marcus, Jacob Rader. *Studies in American Jewish History; studies and addresses*. Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College, 1969. 41.

2 <http://www.eliewieselfoundation.org/thinkhigherfeeldeeper.aspx>.

3 For further elaboration see the following Eli talk <http://elitalks.org/collaborative-leadership-prosumer-generation>.

4 See “Agony in the Garden,” where Bellini depicts all three variations. Available at: <https://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/paintings/giovanni-bellini-the-agony-in-the-garden>.



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