

The Third Path to Jewish Leadership

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The Jewish Center

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This past week I met with two candidates running for US congress. One is running here in the City and one is running in Westchester. Both are facing incumbents. Both are facing almost impossibly long odds. And both are almost sure to lose. “So why are you doing it,” I asked them. And each said the same thing: “I’m in it for the kavod!” No – I’m only joking. Each of them said they perceive a vacuum – a crisis in our national leadership and they’d like to contribute to the solution.

Leadership an important topic, but it seems especially resonant now – particularly as elections loom in Israel and we’re already talking about the 2020 races in this country.

But there are no elections in the Torah. So how does one become a leader?

And the specific issue that I want to think about with you this morning is the question of succession.

It’s in these parshiot in Bamidbar that we get a sense from the Torah about the models that are possible.

The first model is Aharon. It couldn’t be more explicit and it couldn’t be more straightforward. Right before Aharon dies, Moshe takes the priestly vestments from Aharon and uses them to dress Elazar. The son inherits the position of the father.

The next one that comes to mind comes up in our parsha. It’s not as straightforward as the first model, but the conclusion is unambiguous. Moshe is thinking about his own demise and he asks Hashem to appoint a successor.

יִפְקֹד יְהוָה, אֱלֹהֵי הַרוּחַת לְכָל-בָּשָׂר, אִישׁ, עַל-הָעֵדָה. יוֹ אֲשֶׁר-יֵצֵא לְפָנֵיהֶם, וְאֲשֶׁר יָבֹא לְפָנֵיהֶם, וְאֲשֶׁר יוֹצִיאֵם, וְאֲשֶׁר יְבִיאֵם; וְלֹא תִהְיֶה, עֲדַת יְהוָה, כְּצֹאן, אֲשֶׁר אֵין-לָהֶם רֹעֵה.

Rashi tells us that Moshe was secretly hoping one of his children would inherit the mantle of leadership, but Hashem had other plans.

Of course ultimately it's Yehoshua.

And so we have a clear second model.

If the first model is succession by way of inheritance, the second is succession by way of initiation. It's not the son who inherits the position of the father, it's the student.

And intuitively it makes perfect sense. Maybe it even makes more sense. The child may or may not have the talent and the knowhow to fill the shoes of the parent. At least the student has been trained and mentored.

If he's never done the job before, at least he knows what the job entails.

But there's a problem. Because there's a gap in the narrative. There are three great leaders of the dor hamidbar: Moshe, Aharon and Miriam.

The Gemara is very explicit about the effects of their respective deaths.

- Aaron dies: ananei hakavod disappear
- Miriam dies: the באר – the well that accompanied the Jewish people in the wilderness – suddenly runs dry.
- And eventually when Moshe dies, the מן stops falling from the heaven.

So if Elazar succeeds Aharon, and Yehoshua succeeds Moshe, who succeeds Miriam?

I want to suggest that Miriam didn't have one successor. She had five. And of course I have in mind the five daughters of צלפחד: the five women who change the very nature of what it means to be an heir – the five women who insist that their father's name not be lost simply because he was a victim of circumstance.

And I want to share with you a midrash that I find nothing less than extraordinary.

ותקרבנה בנות צלפחד, כיון ששמעו בנות צלפחד שהארץ מתחלקת לשבטים לזכרים ולא לנקבות נתקבצו כולן זו על זו ליטול עצה אמרו לא כרחמי בשר ודם רחמי המקום בשר ודם רחמיו על הזכרים יותר מן הנקבות אבל מי שאמר והיה העולם אינו כן אלא רחמיו על הזכרים ועל הנקבות רחמיו על הכל שנאמר טוב ה' לכל ורחמיו על כל מעשיו

This is an amazing text on many levels.

I just want to zoom in on one.

These women freely recognize that left to their own devices, human beings may have prejudices and human beings may leave people behind. But they also recognize that in an objective world – in the eyes of Hashem – there's really no room for prejudice. And no one can get left behind.

What I want to argue is that the בנות צלפחד pick up where Miriam leaves off. It's not just she was a model of women's leadership and so are they. Of course that point shouldn't be lost on us; but there's something more.

What was Miriam's great contribution in the Torah?

She had a knack for bringing people together.

It started way back at the beginning of שמות when she reunited Moshe with his mother.

It continued after Yam Suf when she brought all the women together in song.

And even in the complicated story where she said something she shouldn't have: What was her goal? To reunite Moshe with his wife. At moments in Jewish history where someone was in jeopardy of being along or being left out, Miriam stepped up and brought people together.

(And of course we have Rashi's famous comment about how she brought her parents back together.)

And both locally and globally, this is exactly what the בנות צלפחד do.

Remember the story? To whom do they ask their question?

Of course it's Moshe who answers them, but in the text we find something stunning.

וַתַּעֲמִדְנָה לְפָנַי מִשָּׁה, וְלִפְנֵי אֶלְעָזָר הַכֹּהֵן, וְלִפְנֵי הַנְּשִׂאִים, וְכָל-הָעֵדָה--פָּתַח אֹהֶל-מוֹעֵד

I'm not aware of another pasuk like this in the Torah. And I don't know how they organized it. But somehow they've managed to get an audience with the entire Jewish people!

And it fits perfectly. If their goal is to ensure that no one gets left out, what better strategy than to make that point explicitly in front the leadership and membership of the Jewish people.

But it goes even further.

As Rashi already mentions, what's the consequence of the new set of rules that they've set into motion? Because women inherit, what might happen if they marry out of their shevet? The land could ultimately pass over into another shevet. Which is why the pasuk uses the word וְהֵעֲבֵרָה. To prevent that from happening, everyone in their shevet will have an extra incentive to make sure they marry within the community. And so once again, they'll have brought everyone together.

And maybe that's even what they mean when they go out of their way to say that their father was not part of עֵדֻת קָרָה. He wasn't one to sow division – and neither are they.

And so what emerges is a third model.

- You could be Elazar and just inherit leadership.
- You could be Yehoshua. Through study and mentorship you could be a Jewish leader.
- Or you could be Bnot Tzelofchad.

You don't have to be the child of great Jewish leader.

You don't even have to be the student of a great Jewish teacher.

You can model greatness all your own and you can rewrite the story in the process.

Three thousand years before Cheryl Sandberg said lean in, the Torah already told us: וְתִקְרַבְנָה. Step up and lead.

I'm not suggesting that everyone in this room run for congress. I wouldn't wish that upon any one. But I am suggesting that each of us step up and lead. When summer turns to fall and the year begins in earnest in September, what are the ways in which we want to contribute?

We love to sit around our Shabbat tables and discuss the problems and challenges that face our community and our city and our nation. It's not an accident that all the founders of psychotherapy were Jewish. We've

been sitting around listening to people complain for thousands of years. They just found a way to monetize it.

But we have an equally long history of Jewish activism. And it's particularly true in the history of our shul. Our members have been founders and leaders of dozens and dozens of outstanding causes.

So whether it's here at The Jewish Center or at another inspired venue, let's turn crises into opportunities and problems into possibilities.