



In praise of the really great leaders

"Make for yourself a teacher, acquire for yourself a friend, and judge each person favorably."

By Dr. Hal M. Lewis

Over the years I have become increasingly concerned about our communal emphasis on exclusivist listings of "great" leaders – *Forward* 50's, "40 under 40s," "36 under 36s." My fear is that these contests convey a distorted understanding of what it means to be an effective leader. It is not that I begrudge either the organizers or the winners of such competitions, many of whom are, indeed, women and men of great influence and vision. My discomfort with these parades of glory is the way in which they advance, perhaps unwittingly, an antiquated notion of leadership, often referred to as The Great Man Theory.

The idea of the Great Man Theory, most associated with the 19th century Scottish historian, Thomas Carlyle, holds that only certain individuals, certain *men* at that, are blessed by God with natural abilities that make them great leaders. As Carlyle himself said, "The history of the world is but the biography of great men." Even allowing for the fact that, thankfully, today's lists of contemporary Jewish leaders celebrate the invaluable contribution of women, as well, and even if we might imagine renaming the concept to say, the Great Person Theory of Leadership, the misconceptions emerging from such an approach remain significant.

Carlyle, and the scores who embrace his approach even in our own day, insisted that leadership is exclusive and exclusionary, that either one is born with the 'right stuff' or not. That only certain "beautiful people" are capable of being effective leaders. Whether they intend to do so, our elite registers of "superstars" employ a similarly reductionist view of what it means to lead. They suggest that people who don't make the cut are not leaders or that those who lead but are not so acknowledged, must not be as effective or noteworthy as those who are. It is one thing to fete volunteers or professionals for their accomplishments, it is quite another to suggest, however subtly, that only these chosen few are destined for leadership greatness.

I am thinking about these issues now, not only because we are about to commence a new Jewish year, but because I recently had occasion to spend some time with my

high school youth advisors, Richard and Sherry Skolnik at a family *simcha*. Why, you ask, would a man significantly closer to seventy than seventeen be ruminating about his relationship with people he first met as a high school freshman? And what could that possibly have to do with leadership?

Originally my USY fieldworker, Richard worked with me and so many teenage Jews on Long Island, as we grew into young adulthood and began formulating our Jewish identities. From the very start, it was clear that Richard and Sherry were much more than youth workers. They were transformative, if unsung, Jewish leaders who probably wouldn't have made anybody's who's who list at the time but who changed my life and the lives of countless others forever.

From them I learned how to be a Jewish leader: from the mechanics of planning an agenda and running a meeting to the imperative of being a role model and moral exemplar. They taught me how to treat people with dignity, *mentschlikhkeit* and good humor, regardless of their place in the organizational hierarchy. From them I also learned the complexities of Jewish community and the nuances of synagogue life. They deepened my love for Israel both in theory and in practice. And, perhaps, more than anyone besides my parents (who themselves loved the Skolniks) they encouraged my youthful passion for the joys of Jewish learning and living. It is they whom I think about every time I study the *mishna* in [Avot \(1:6\)](#), "Make for yourself a teacher, acquire for yourself a friend, and judge each person favorably."

In an era in which horrible and shattering things have come to light about teens and their youth leaders from long ago, it is unusual, to say the least, that a relationship between a young man and his advisors should blossom and sustain over the course of more than five decades. It is more unusual that that relationship should renew itself over time, assuming new dimensions, as my childhood youth directors now have independent relationships with my grown children, and someday, perhaps, with my grandchildren. And yet even more unusual than all of this is the degree to which my own evolution as a communal leader and an educator has been so deeply inspired by their examples.

I think of the Skolniks every time one of my students questions whether her work as a Jewish educator is making a difference. I tell her that while I cannot predict the future, I know from personal experience that lives can be influenced by what you do, and even more so by who you are.

Even though to me, my long-ago youth directors are one in a million, I have come to understand that there are many "Richards and Sherrys" in Jewish life. Hundreds of unassuming leaders who rarely receive the popular acclaim they deserve. Countless individuals who have an enduring impact without ever making it onto a list of so-called great leaders. But they are great leaders – great Jewish leaders. Because, simply stated, they transform Jewish lives every day and over the course of lifetimes. They are

the teachers and youth workers, faculty, educators and heads of school, clergy, Hillel professionals, camp counselors and many more, who may never be nominated to this list or that, but who lead by example, who embody and inspire, who take people to places they never knew they could go. Individuals who manifest the humility Judaism treasures in those who lead. In short, they are the ones who leave an abiding impression and who make leaders out of others. And we owe them all our gratitude. Because of them, we who lead must begin this New Year by redoubling our efforts to follow their example and walk in their ways, list, or no list.

Dr. Hal M. Lewis is past president and CEO and current chancellor of Spertus Institute for Jewish Learning and Leadership and is the principal consultant for Leadership For Impact LLC, an executive coaching and organizational consulting firm specializing in nonprofits.

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