Leadership: The Jewish Take

What are the characteristics of a good leader?

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American Jews preparing to enter the voting booths were bombarded by an array of (often conflicting) opinions as to which candidate was better on so-called "Jewish issues." Partisans on all sides were quick to assert that their candidate's views on everything from Israel to church-state relations, from anti-Semitism to education, were in the "best interest" of the Jews.

More than any particular policy stance, however, our tradition suggests the ultimate "Jewish issue" is a candidate's *ability to lead*. Classical Jewish teachings offer valuable insight into how to measure the efficacy of leadership, what we should seek in our leaders, and the optimal relationship between leaders and followers. Jewish voters, therefore, would do well to consider these precepts as they engage in the electoral process.

Not surprisingly, Judaism's wisdom on effective leadership is diverse and complex. Though impossible to encapsulate it all, it is possible to extrapolate several overarching principles that can serve as guideposts in helping to evaluate those who wish to be our leaders.

On the Use and Abuse of Power

For reasons both theological and historical, Judaism always maintained a certain distrust of human leaders. Jewish sources recognize there is a direct relationship between high office and the likelihood of abusing the power accompanying that post. As a result, power was circumscribed. Strict limits were placed upon those who held positions of authority, from kings and judges to rabbis and philanthropists.

While human societies have benefited greatly from what Sa'adia Gaon of the 10th century called the "aspiration toward leadership" ("On Dominion," *The Book of Beliefs and Opinions*), Judaism insists that power remains a dangerous allure. To lead effectively, one must avoid being ensnared in the infatuating trap of leadership. The ability to overcome the intoxication of prominence, triumph over the tendency toward grandiosity, and embrace the virtue of limited powers–these are the hallmarks of effective leadership.

Power-sharing/Power-hoarding

One of the ways in which Judaism seeks to protect against leadership abuses is to insist that power be shared and not hoarded. Throughout history, Jewish communities have been governed by a tripartite system in which religious, scholarly, and political leaders share responsibility for the welfare of the people. Singular individuals claiming to have all the answers, who insist on aggregating power, are viewed with suspicion and disdain. Far from glorifying the model of a charismatic leader who solves problems unilaterally, Jewish sources prefer leaders who are willing to share responsibility and empower others.

Serving/Ruling

In asserting qualifications for office, it is popular for would-be leaders to emphasize their strength and toughness, above all else. Attention is focused repeatedly on heroism, militarism, and boldness. Much of what passes for leadership throughout the world is a form of machismo, the leader-as-alpha-male, dominant and overbearing. Instead of embracing this top-down, command-and-control style, classical Jewish sources insist that successful leaders function not as rulers, but as servants. "One who is appointed over a community becomes the servant of the community," insists the Talmud (*Horayot* 10a). In this view, leadership is not about superimposing personal will, or coercing others to "follow the leader." Neither is it about amassing power in the name of ego or cause. Rather, leaders must see themselves as *serving* the needs of their followers by enhancing their capacity, by motivating and empowering them, and by developing leadership in others.

This is why since the time of Moses and Joshua, Judaism has insisted that truly effective leadership must include the identification, preparation and training of the next generation. To be sure, it is difficult for those ensconced in power to think beyond themselves. The rabbis understand this basic principle. "It is easy to go up to a dais," they taught, "tough to come down" (*Yalkut, Va'ethannan*, 845). Nevertheless, only those who transcend their own agendas in order to serve the long-term needs of the people meet Judaism's test of effective leadership.

Humility

While conventional wisdom associates leadership with self-assurance, single-minded determination, bravado, and certainty, Jewish sources offer a dramatically different view, one which identifies *humility* as the essential attribute of effective leaders. Humility, the recognition of one's limitations regardless of position, is a natural consequence of Judaism's worldview that only God has absolute authority, and that human leaders, however powerful, can never be above the law.

Jewish sources insist that the arrogance and inflated sense of self, often found in people with power, are, in fact, antithetical to effective leadership. While acknowledging the unparalleled majesty of the king, for example, Moses Maimonides insisted that only when the sovereign is able to "cultivate a humble and lowly spirit … and deal graciously and compassionately with the small and the great" would his leadership be successful (*Mishneh Torah* , Law of Kings). Despite the popular notion, therefore, *humility is not a sign ofweak leadership*. Indeed, the Torah and later Jewish sources insist that the most effective of all leaders–Moses–was, at the same time, the most humble. Rather than precluding vision, tenacity and decisiveness, humility is essential for their realization. In Judaism, exaggerated claims and self-aggrandizing speech are anathema to good leadership.

Behavior, Not Position

The Hebrew word for leadership is *manhigut*. It derives from the root found in the word "behavior." For Judaism, effective leadership is not about position; it is about behavior and action. The rabbis were clear: one can lead effectively without holding a title or an office, so long as one behaves appropriately. "Be rather a tail to lions than a head to foxes," they insisted (*Avot* 4:20). In evaluating those who would be our leaders then, Judaism suggests that we would

do well to consider their behaviors, not their resumes or their press statements. Do they, for example:

– Think of themselves as *humble servants* of the people, or are they egocentric rulers seeking to maximize the perquisites of power?

– Demonstrate an understanding that *power must be restrained and shared*, lest it be abused, even by good people?

– Have the proven ability to *see beyond their own agenda*, and their own time?

– *Empower others* and *identify future leaders* with a similar commitment to serving?

As we contemplate our choices in this and subsequent elections–indeed, as we consider the leadership of our communal institutions, congregations, and businesses–Judaism challenges us to answer these questions, and to keep in mind that *how* a person leads is at least as much a "Jewish issue" as the policies he or she espouses.