

The Perils & Pitfalls of Leadership

Parshat Shemot
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The opening chapters of the book of Exodus provide important insight into the perils and pitfalls of political leadership.

The Torah describes the passing of Joseph separately from the passing of the rest of his brothers: “Joseph died, and all his brothers and that entire generation” (Exodus 1:6). R. Hama bar Hanina explains that “Joseph died earlier than his brothers, because he held a position of leadership” (BT Berachot 55a). Echoing this teaching elsewhere in the Talmud, in self-reflection on the perils of their own leadership, the rabbis warn “Woe to the rabbinate which buries its bearer” (BT Pesachim 87b).

Only a few verses later, we read that “A new king arose over Egypt, who did not know of Joseph” (Exodus 1:8). Here the rabbis focus on a very different pitfall of leadership. According to Rav this was an entirely new king. Shmuel however argued that this was the same king who had known Joseph all along, yet the king’s decrees had changed so drastically that the king himself was no longer recognizable.

Rav’s interpretation is a sober warning about the power of a charismatic leader who through the cult of personality can radically transform a society in ways that undercut longstanding political alliances and relationships (“who did not know Joseph”).

Shmuel’s explanation perhaps offers a more nuanced insight into the corruption pitfalls awaiting those who hold on to power too long. The king, who had served in this position with no time limit or end, now takes for granted the very political advisor, Joseph, who helped solidify the foundation of his reign. Absolute power corrupts, and a political position lacking an expiration date will inevitably lead to political spoil and ruin.

Perhaps it could be argued that Pharaoh’s inability to recognize Joseph’s past contributions to his political success (did he ever really need the help of this Hebrew cellmate?) is closely connected to Pharaoh’s inability to properly assess the political threat posed by women. Pharaoh foolishly trusts the midwives to carry out his evil decree, for after all what threat do women pose?! He orders the murder of Hebrew sons and not daughters, for after all what threat would these daughters ever pose?! Certainly, this very blindness prevents the Egyptian king from seeing his own daughter’s disobedience and radical rebellion as she succeeds to raise a Hebrew son in the palace, right under his nose.

Yocheved and Miriam’s role in saving Moses’ life serves as another example of the underestimated power of women in the story of Exodus.

The rabbis shed a powerful light on all these women’s example, noting that “redemption was made possible through the merits of righteous women.” Leadership here is not defined through positions of power but rather through acts of righteousness. Not through the power of might, but rather through the force of being right.

As Exodus unfolds, Pharaoh’s blindness turns into the hardening of his heart. This is an issue that I hope to focus on in the coming months through rabbinic exegesis. This very phenomenon and its malevolent consequences, however, do not require the illuminating words of our rabbis. Sadly, the blindness of eyes, the hardening of the heart, and the vitriol of lips all played out in the very assault that threatened the heart of America’s democracy this past week.

In our daily prayers, we recite the words:

“Restore our judges as before and our counselors as at first. Remove sorrow and sighing from us, and reign over us You, Adonai, alone with kindness and compassion; and make us righteous with justice, Blessed are You, King, Lover of righteousness and justice.”

Let us have our leaders in mind as we say this prayer in the weeks and months to come. Let us have the welfare of America in our prayers in the weeks and months and even years to come, until democracy, peace and justice, and the law of the land prevail.