

Jewish Sources on Leadership (Different Facets of Moses)

Who am I to Lead? (Exodus 4:10-17)

When God calls to Moses at the Burning Bush and tells Moses that he will lead the Israelites out of Egypt, Moses protests:

But Moses said to the Lord, 'Please, O Lord, I have never been a man of words, either in times past or now that You have spoken to Your servant; I am slow of speech and slow of tongue.' And the Lord said to him, 'Who gives man speech? Who makes him dumb or deaf, seeing or blind? Is it not I, the Lord? Now go, and I will be with you as you speak and will instruct you what to say.' But he said, 'Please, O Lord, make someone else Your agent.' The Lord became angry with Moses, and He said, 'There is your brother Aaron the Levite. He, I know, speaks readily. Even now he is setting out to meet you, and will be happy to see you. You shall speak to him and put the words in his mouth—I will be with you and with him as you speak, and tell both of you what to do—and he shall speak for you to the people. Thus he shall serve as your spokesman, with you playing the role of God to him, and take with you this rod, with which you shall perform the signs.'

Discussion questions:

- Recap the source – what happens? Why does Moses contest the mantle of leadership given to him by God? What is the solution God offers?
- If you were Moses, would this solution comfort you?
- Can you think of an example of leadership that requires both a Moses and an Aaron? What are the strengths of having both of the brothers? What might be some of the challenges?

Stepping into the Water First (Pirkei DeRabbi Eliezer 42:1-6)

This source is available as a short, animated video from G-dcast, and tells the story of Nachshon, who stepped first into the Red Sea. This video is written and narrated by Rabbi Jonah Dov Pesner, Director of the Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism (the RAC). The RAC is based in Washington, DC, and advocates on behalf of the Reform Movement to Congress and the administration and works alongside Jewish, faith-based, and secular issue-expert organizations to pursue a more just world, and, guides community organizing in Reform Jewish communities across the country.

[The story of Nachshon, narrated by Director of the Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism, Rabbi Jonah Dov Pesner](#)

Discussion questions:

- Briefly recap the story and the point of view Rabbi Pesner is drawing from it. What can we learn about leadership from Nachshon?
- We are often used to the Exodus story being focused on G-d and Moses, but we also see that Nachshon had an important role to play. Can you think of other leadership examples when a situation called for a Moses and a Nachshon? What do we learn from the two?

- Nachshon walks into the Red Sea until it covers his nose and he cannot breathe, then the waters part. What do you think the significance of this is?

Delegating Responsibilities (Exodus 18:13-24)

After leading the people to freedom from enslavement in Egypt, Moses brings them to the desert where they encounter his father-in-law, Yitro. In the wilderness, Moses still attends to his many responsibilities as leader of the Israelites. Yitro watches this in action, and offers an opinion:

Next day, Moses sat as magistrate among the people, while the people stood about Moses from morning until evening. But when Moses' father-in-law saw how much he had to do for the people, he said, 'What is this thing that you are doing to the people? Why do you act alone, while all the people stand about you from morning until evening?' Moses replied to his father-in-law, 'It is because the people come to me to inquire of God. When they have a dispute, it comes before me, and I decide between one person and another, and I make known the laws and teachings of God.' But Moses' father-in-law said to him, 'The thing you are doing is not right; you will surely wear yourself out, and these people as well. For the task is too heavy for you; you cannot do it alone. Now listen to me. I will give you counsel, and God be with you! You represent the people before God: you bring the disputes before God, and enjoin upon them the laws and the teachings, and make known to them the way they are to go and the practices they are to follow. You shall also seek out from among all the people capable men who fear God, trustworthy men who spurn ill-gotten gain. Set these over them as chiefs of thousands, hundreds, fifties, and tens, and let them judge the people at all times. Have them bring every major dispute to you, but let them decide every minor dispute themselves. Make it easier for yourself by letting them share the burden with you. If you do this – and God commands you – you will be able to bear up; and all these people too will go home unwearied. Moses heeded his father-in-law and did just as he had said.

Discussion questions:

- Why does Yitro tell Moses he needs to change how he acts as magistrate? Is it only for Moses' sake? Who is Yitro concerned about in Moses' leadership?
- What qualities of leadership is Yitro concerned about?
- Why might Moses not have thought to share his duties as magistrate? What does Yitro see that he does not or cannot?

Acting out of Frustration (Numbers 20:2-13)

Moses leads the Israelites closer and closer to the Promised Land over forty years, and on the way, his sister Miriam dies. Miriam, who midrash¹ tells always was followed by a well. When she dies, the community loses its source of water:

The community was without water, and they joined against Moses and Aaron. The people quarreled with Moses, saying, "If only we had perished when our brothers perished at the instance of the Lord! Why have you brought the Lord's congregation into this wilderness for us and our beasts to die there? Why did you make us leave Egypt to bring us to this wretched place, a place with no grain or figs or vines or pomegranates? There is not even water to drink!" Moses and Aaron came away from the congregation to the entrance of the Tent of Meeting, and fell on their faces. The Presence of the Lord appeared to them, and the Lord spoke to Moses, saying, "You and your brother Aaron take the rod and assemble the community, and before their very eyes order the rock to yield its water. Thus you shall produce water for them from the rock and provide drink for the congregation and their beasts." Moses took the rod from before the Lord, as He had commanded him. Moses and Aaron assembled the congregation in front of the rock; and he said to them, "Listen, you rebels, shall we get water for you out of this rock?" And Moses raised his hand and struck the rock twice with his rod. Out came copious water, and the community and their beasts drank. But the Lord said to Moses and Aaron, "Because you did not trust Me enough to affirm My sanctity in the sight of the Israelite people, therefore you shall not lead this congregation into the land that I have given them." Those are the Waters of Meribah—meaning that the Israelites quarreled with the Lord—through which He affirmed His sanctity.

Shortly after this episode, Aaron dies. Moses continues to lead the Israelites until the border of Israel, when he dies looking out onto the promised land, and Joshua leads the people onward.

Discussion questions:

- What happens in this source? What does Moses do, and what are the consequences? Do you think the consequences are fair? What does Moses "do wrong"?
- Do you agree with Moses' actions? How would you have reacted? (Also, think about the length of the journey they have been on and how long Moses has been leading and caring for the Israelites.)
- Do Moses' actions change if we take into account the loss of his sister? What about the actions of the Israelites? Miriam was not just important to Moses, but was a figure in the community in her own right. Do our perspectives change on their actions and reactions if we consider the recent death of Miriam?

¹ Biblical exegesis, spanning from the era of the Tanna'im (0-200 CE) to the early Middle Ages.