

Hayyei Sarah 5772 - Leadership Transitions
Rabbi David Lerner

Shabbat shalom.

I am a big lover of sports. Watching sports is one of the few things that I almost have to do each week in a religious way – well, beyond things like Shabbat!

There are many reasons for this. I enjoy playing sports and the strategy behind the game. I have a wealth of memories of going to sporting events as a young boy: My zayde took me to Madison Square Garden when I was quite young. I will never forget the grandeur of the space; it seemed larger than life itself and, to top it off, I came home with a Knicks-signed championship basketball. Oh, how I treasured that ball!

Baseball games were a particular treat; the hours sitting with my father, learning how to keep score, following the game, smelling the grass and feeling the crowd were all particularly enjoyable. But, of course, the most powerful moments were the white space, the moments between, the place where father and son could have a meaningful conversation in a way that doesn't always happen in other settings.

There was one other element that I love, one that can be accessed even when I'm sitting at home watching a game alone. That is the drama, the suspense, the sheer pleasure of not knowing what will happen; in fact, no one knows what's going to happen.

It's better than any TV show, any movie, any opera or any play, where even if I don't know the story, the actors do; but in this performance no one knows what's going to happen – not the actors, not the umpires, not the owners – no one.

There is a sense of excitement that everyone feels. No one knows the future.

I was fortunate enough to turn on the sixth game of the World Series and watch unbelievable events unfold. The Cardinals were down by two runs with two outs and two strikes in the bottom of the ninth – their backs were up against the wall. The Rangers were about to win the game and the

world championship, but somehow, seemingly miraculously, the Cardinals came back to tie the game.

I sat in front of my TV dumbfounded.

And then in the next inning, the 10th, the same thing happened. The Rangers scored two runs in the top of the inning, and then the Cardinals, down to the last strike, came back to tie again. I remember watching Lance Berkman at the plate, fouling off two pitches, and then he hit the single that tied the game before the Cardinals won the game in the bottom of the 11th.

Sports are not the only thing that has suspense and drama. Politics can be quite similar, which is probably why my father tracks the political polls the way others memorize batting averages and follow their fantasy players stats.

Even when we think someone is going to win an election, it doesn't always happen that way. Think of the famous Chicago Tribune headline of November 3, 1948: "Dewey defeats Truman." (For the younger among us, Truman actually won!)

In more recent times, Al Gore was picked to be the winner in the state of Florida and thus win the presidency. But the hanging chads and the Supreme Court's decisions resulted in a different outcome.

Over the last year we have seen surprising, exciting and dramatic new developments in political realms around the globe. The "Arab Spring" has reshaped the landscape of several countries.

A year ago, who could have imagined that revolutions would bring about total transformations of the political landscapes of Tunisia, Egypt and Libya? To date, civil uprisings have occurred in Bahrain, Yemen and Syria; major protests have occurred in Algeria, Iraq, Jordan, Morocco and Oman.

Not all of these revolutions have brought about positive democratic developments. The new government in Egypt, for example, is considering renegeing on its peace treaty with Israel and has brought much instability to the Sinai, which has led to the destruction of the natural gas pipeline to Israel and Jordan six times and a terrorist attack on Israelis in August.

Not all political transformations are good; even democratic movements can create new problems, nor do they necessarily solve old ones. While we are firm believers in democracy, given the history of the region and its attraction to fundamentalist Islam, it is unclear if these democratic changes will be better than what they supplanted.

I must tell you that while it is exciting to see dictators overthrown, the ensuing potential for chaos leaves me quite wary. And we should also bear in mind how these transitions occurred: thousands of people were killed, and even when the forces of “good,” won out, as we were told they did in Libya, their violent and savage behavior, such as the murder of Qaddafi, is a reminder of how dangerous leadership transitions are – especially for the outgoing leaders!

And, we continue to see this in Syria, for many of the civilians as well.

Today's Torah portion, *Parashat Hayyei Sarah*, is a reading that is about a major transition: the mantle of leadership is being passed from Avraham to *Yitzhak* – from Avraham to his son Isaac. While he has an older son, *Yishmael* – the chain of the tradition will not pass to him. In some respects that was determined in last week's reading. God declared that Sarah's as-yet-unborn son would receive the blessing. Thus, this week does not contain a battle about who will succeed Avraham.

But, it does contain the narrative of how Isaac will be able to carry on his parent's mission. At the beginning of the parashah, things are challenging: Sarah dies and Avraham seems able to mourn and then move on. As the Torah states: “Avraham proceeded to mourn for Sarah and to bewail her. Then Avraham rose from beside his dead[he purchases a burial plot for her and buries her] And God blessed Avraham in all things.” (Gen. 23:2,3; 24:1)

The commentators jump on the last phrase: “*bakol* – in all things.” How could he be blessed with all things? Surely, he does not have everything? And besides, he just lost his wife?

One interpretation that I appreciate is from the Or La'Yisharim, a 19th century Lithuanian rabbi, who wrote that it wasn't that Avraham had everything – no one can, but “God blessed Avraham with the quality of

“all,” of being content with whatever he had, and never feeling that he was lacking anything.”

Avraham was able to move on, he mourned, and then he lifts himself up from that experience. He focuses on the future; ensuring that his son has a wife and that future generations will come into the picture. He remarries and dies “*b’sivah tovah* – well contented.” (Gen.25:7)

His son, *Yitzhak*, on the other hand, has a very different experience; he is not able to move on. We find no mention of him at his mother’s death, presumably he is too bereft to function. In fact, he is still mourning years later – three years later, according to the Midrash – when he marries Rebecca. Only after he lovingly marries her – which is the first mention of love between partners in the Torah – does the Torah state: “*Va’yinahem Yitzhak aharei imo* – Isaac found comfort after his mother’s [death].” (Gen 24:67) Finally, Isaac is able to move forward, and then the next generation – Isaac and Rebecca – assume the mantle of leadership.

Thus, the parashah as a whole is about a transition of leadership and a fairly good one. There are challenges – the death of Sarah, finding a wife for Isaac – but those are overcome so that the new leaders are able to assume their new identity fairly easily.

Let’s juxtapose that with our *haftarah*. There we find King David as an older man – he does not seem content. He seems overly concerned about his own pleasure, and we have a leadership transition crisis. Who will be the next king? Which of his sons will take over: Adoni’yah, who seems to be already taking on some of the functions of a king, such as offering many sacrifices, or Solomon, whose mother, Batsheva, was promised that he would be king?

There is tension. The people are already shouting “Long Live King Adoni’yahu!” (I Kings 1:25) Who is going to be the king? It’s a bit of a mess.

The rabbis, when setting the cycle of readings, often chose a *haftarah* that relates to the Torah reading, or treats the same theme. This week, both discuss leadership transitions. But Torah and *haftarah* usually come at a theme with different perspectives. Most commonly, the Torah presents an idealized picture without all the complicated details that life contains. The

haftarah, on the other hand, presents things as they are - messy, real and complicated.

Leadership transitions are hard. It's hard enough to find a good leader, one who has the characteristics of integrity, empathy, emotional intelligence, vision, judgment, courage and passion. But as hard as it is to find someone with those traits, it may be even harder to work your way through the transition from leader to leader.

Not only do you need to worry about choosing a leader and saying goodbye to the old leader, but there are many potential pitfalls that the previous leader can leave behind.

She can close off the next leader's options. He can leave the next leader a mess. The old leader can ignore the issue of new leadership altogether. As you can imagine, that can leave much chaos in its wake. A good leadership transition allows the new leader the ability to steer the ship on his own.

And I am deeply grateful to Rabbi Eisenman for having made the space for my smooth transition eight years ago.

It seems to me that the Torah is reminding us how hard transitions are. They are often complicated and messy – whether you are starting a new religion, choosing the next king, finding the next CEO of Apple, or leading a country into democracy.

The Torah offers us insights about how to best do that. We are being taught not to head in the direction of King David, but rather to follow Abraham's lead. He spent time mourning the passing of his wife, and he helped his son find a wife and thus find comfort after the death of his mother. He set his affairs in order to such an extent that Isaac and Rebecca were able to be the next generation of leaders.

That isn't to say that they were perfect; we know where the story is going and they most certainly are not. But that said, Abraham did a good job, he did the best he could. It was not clear to him what would happen and how he would navigate the choices and decisions yet to be made, but he did them thoughtfully, not like David.

Maybe that's why I like watching sports so much. There is real drama. And no one knows what's going to happen; kind of like life. But, it is not real life; it is just a game, which is how I can more easily recover from sports losses.

But still, getting over a bad sports loss, like this year's Red Sox collapse, becomes a paradigm, a model of how we can recover during more significant unexpected transitional complications.

May we all follow the model of Avraham who had the positive attitude that helped him through uncertainty in his own life, helped him become pretty effective during his time of loss and gave him the foresight and vision to plan for the future.

Shabbat shalom.