

Shabbat Shalom.

This morning I want to talk about leadership, change, and humility.

Let's start with leadership. On Thursday, I had the privilege of attending the Jewish Theological Seminary's ordination and graduation ceremonies in New York. Close to 150 students received bachelors, masters, and doctorates or were invested as cantors or ordained as rabbis at this central institution of Conservative Judaism. It was a day of seeing the next generation of Jewish leaders.

My cousin Elie Kaunfer was among the ordainees, and my hevruta, my study partner, from rabbinical school and close friend Josh Karlip was receiving his PhD.

The days included two meaningful ceremonies, though at 5 and a half hours, a bit long. During those hours, I heard some insightful remarks from the graduates and even received a text message that friends of ours in Chicago had a baby. I wrote them back a message and, apparently, that did in my phone, and I ran out of power. The phone calls scheduled for my trip back had to wait, and I had some time to reflect on the day and its messages.

This is a time of change in the world; fifteen years ago, I did not have a cell phone, could not conceive of text-messaging and did not have an email account. Surfing was something I did not do in the ocean, not via the computer, and had only a black book to make appointments, not a PDA. The world felt safer before 9-11, Afganistan and Iraq, and Israel seemed more certain of its path.

This is also a time of change in Judaism. Conservative Judaism in particular is undergoing rapid change. This was evident at the graduation ceremonies where a new Chancellor, Arnie Eisen, presided. JTS as an institution and the movement that surrounds it face critical challenges. The Conservative Movement is trying to come to grips with the fact that it is, overall, a shrinking movement, while the other movements in Judaism are growing. How does one manage such a moment? What are the leadership skills required to help us get through this difficult period? The Conservative Movement has been struggling with the issue of homosexuality and Halakah, Jewish law. Back in December two rabbinic responsa dealing with this issue were approved and this has lead to many major changes including an open admission policy for those who are gay. How will these changes reverberate and what will their impact be on the future of Conservative Judaism?

When one looks at Conservative Judaism, it is the movement all about tradition and change. Many of the speakers during this day of graduation spoke about that theme. It was Rabbi Mordechai Waxman, zikhrono l'vrakhah, may his memory be blessed, my wife Sharon's rabbi in Great Neck, who popularized that phrase in his book by that title. We are a movement that is committed to the tradition, but at the same time it is not a tradition that is frozen in time. It continues to evolve.

The Midrash in Seder Eliyahu Zutta 2 contains a related story:

"Once I was on a journey, says the author, and I came upon a man who was a heretic. Now, he accepted the Written Law (the Torah) – but not the Oral Law (the rabbinic tradition.) He said to me: 'The Written Law was given us from Mount Sinai, the Oral Law was not given us from Mount Sinai.'

I said to him, 'But were not both the Written and the Oral Law spoken by God Who is everywhere? Then what difference is there between the Written and the Oral Law, between the Torah and the interpretive tradition?'

To what can this be compared? To a human king who had two servants, both of whom he loved. He gave each of them a measure of wheat and a bundle of flax. What did the wise servant do? He took the flax and spun a cloth. Then he took the wheat and made flour. The flour he cleansed, and ground, and kneaded, and baked, and set on top of the table. Then he spread the cloth over it, and left it like that, waiting for the king's return. But the foolish servant did nothing at all. After some time, the king returned from a journey and came into his house and said to them, 'Bring me what I gave you.' One servant showed the bread on the table with the cloth spread over it, and the other servant showed the wheat still in the box, with a bundle of flax upon it. 'Alas for his shame, alas for his disgrace!'

'Now,' the rabbi concluded, 'when the Blessed Holy One gave the Torah to Israel, God gave it only in the form of wheat, for us to extract flour from it, and flax, to extract a cloth.'"

The Revelation at Sinai is our wheat, but our Torah is living bread. Ours is a tradition that needs our participation in its shaping. It is constantly undergoing change and renewal. This midrash reminds us that while we appreciate the gifts that God and our nature provide us, it is not enough. We must improve upon what we were given – seek new understandings: for example, we must strive to find the cure for cancer and learn how to be better people and renew our tradition and culture. Like the world, Judaism needs to undergo a continual process of evolution.

For me, as a Conservative Jew, that means constantly revisiting the tradition and trying to innovate within it. That doesn't mean, however, leaving it

behind. Old forms must still be recognizable in their new contexts, and that, my friends, is the real trick. How can we continue to change and evolve while maintaining that direct link, that chain of tradition, that has been passed down to us from one generation to another, all the way back to Moses and Sinai?

At our own shul, this issue of change comes up in many different ways. What changes should we make to our tefillot, our services? What about changes in our observance of Shabbat? Of kashrut? Of women and ritual garb, such as tallit, tefillin, and kippah? What about the changes we've made in nusach, in the melodies that are appropriate for different services? As a movement, these changes are coming at a fast pace. How do we both innovate and be modern and at the same time retain that traditional core that is so essential to who we are as Jews?

One of the key ways by which we help manage change is through leadership. On a certain level, all of us are leaders. Each of us leads in different ways and in different places – in our homes, in our places of work, with our families, in social settings, in our synagogues, in our schools.

This week's Torah portion, Parashat B'midbar, begins a book that is devoted to the question of leadership. We are now in the midbar, in the wilderness, and it is at times fraught with anxiety, difficulty, and challenges. How will the children of Israel eat? How will Moses get along with an uprising from Korah and his allies who revolt and try to mutiny against Moses' leadership? How will Moses deal with his own struggles with his siblings? How will he provide the leadership to help deal with new questions, such as the inheritance of land by women, a question raised by the daughters of Tzelofhad? How will they handle issues of plague and disease that will affect them? How will they deal with the zealousness of Pinhas? Is this a good thing? Is this a bad thing? And, most importantly, how will they handle the issues of transition in leadership, which we see in the end of the Book of Numbers as Moses passes on the baton to Joshua? B'midbar is a book filled with issues of leadership.

One of the stark realizations is that we have a dearth of strong leaders today. Just a few weeks ago, Lee Iacocca was quoted in The Boston Globe magazine lamenting the lack of leaders in American society, government, and business today. Look at what is going on in Israel, where its leaders have mishandled last summer's war with the Hezbollah and have been indicted for corruption. They have a real lack of inspiring and inspired leadership in a country that so desperately needs it.

If we want to find leadership, one excellent criterion is, in my mind, one's personality and characteristics. In particular, one characteristic that stands out is anavah - humility. Moses is described in B'midbar as "anav me'od mikol adam asher al pnei ha'adamah – a very humble man, more so than any other man on

earth.” This is striking. Why would Moses, the greatest leader, be also the most humble? It seems odd.

Our tradition would argue otherwise: humility is at the core of great leadership. Humility helps us appreciate that there is a world beyond us and that we need to interact with that world in healthy ways so that we can function. If one is humble, one appreciates and values others and trusts and values their perspective. The Talmud states that “anavah mevee’ah leday .... kedushah” – humility leads to other traits like holiness; it is one of those critical characteristics that redeems the world.

At the end of this morning’s reading, there is a strange law about the Levites. One group, those descended from Kehat, is in charge of the schlepping – the carrying of the ark. This does not feel like such a critical task, and we might ask why the Torah adds that the priestly descendents of Kehat cannot go in and see all the sacred objects in the Tabernacle. A medieval commentator, the Malbim, highlights the phrase the Torah uses to describe their assignment: “ish ish,” from one to another. God wants them to model a sacred spirit of cooperation. They must carry the ark, but constantly share it with each other and share the burden and the privilege of moving the ark. God presents this group of Levites with a seemingly mundane task, but offers a process that contains a central value – cooperating with others. This model of relationships is more important than viewing the sacred objects.

These Levites carry the ark as partners and they model collaboration. In a fast changing world in critical need of leaders, we need to cultivate a spirit of collaboration and partnership that helps people ask the right questions and work together to find solutions.

To be a leader is to be infused with a sense of humility, to appreciate the changes that are constantly occurring and utilize the wisdom of others so that we can move forward. That is something that is so important in our shuls, in the larger Jewish world, for Israel, for America, and for the entire world.

May we together create nurturing kehillot - communities that engender humility and foster collaboration so that we can help ourselves and our children become the leaders that the world so desperately needs.

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