

# Feature Section: Leadership

Editor's note: One of the themes of the holiday of Shavuot is leadership. It celebrates the day that Moshe Rabbeinu became the teacher par excellence of the Jewish people and assumed new responsibilities as their leader. It also commemorates the birth of King David, another great Jewish leader, through the reading of Megillat Ruth. While all of the articles discuss certain aspects of leadership, we are proud to include a section dealing specifically with the question:

**What are the traits of good leaders?**

# Ben Zoma and the Qualifications for Leadership

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This past spring, I found myself in a Paris hotel lobby with my eyes fixed on the front door awaiting the CEO of a major public company. We share a close friend and he had suggested we all three meet while I was passing through Europe on my way to the Middle East. Despite a long e-mail correspondence exchanging views on economics and politics, I had resisted the temptation to Google him. I therefore had no way to recognize my guest.

And so I found myself scanning a succession of males emerging from the revolving glass door (there are many women business leaders today but I knew to expect a man). I eliminated most of them: too young, too hip, wrong nationality. After about a dozen good candidates walked past me to the elevators, I experienced a moment of self-awareness that I found alternately amusing and fascinating: I was only focusing on tall individuals. Why was I so certain that the leader of a corporate giant would himself tower over others?

As it turns out, there is evidence that my unconscious prejudice may in fact be justifiable. When the journalist and social commentator Malcolm Gladwell surveyed Fortune 500 CEOs a few years ago, he discovered that 58 percent of his male respondents were 6-footers; the corresponding percentage of males in the general population is less than 15 percent! (See Gladwell's *Blink*, chapter 2)

What are we to make of the correlation between height and success in the corporate world? We cannot fairly conclude that taller people possess greater leadership qualities since we have no indication that their disproportionate selection for corporate office is warranted. If Gladwell's sample is sufficient to draw any conclusion, it can only be that tall men are more frequently chosen by corporate boards for leadership positions than we could fairly predict from their percentage in the general population. Taller men appear to be perceived more favorably than their shorter colleagues.

That tall men are disproportionately perceived as leadership material is an idea of great antiquity. The Aristotelian heroes of the Greek tragedies are depicted as tall men. The fall from grace of the head that stands above the crowd resonates with the audience in a way that bringing low a shorter man would not. Sophocles' Oedipus is tall as is Shakespeare's Othello. Both are noble men with an unfortunate tragic flaw that is exploited by circumstance or the unprincipled to bring them low.

We should not be very much surprised to find rabbinic tradition ascribing better than average height to its heroes. The greatest of our leaders, Moshe Rabbeinu, was a tall man. So teaches the Talmud, *Shabbat* 92a, in passing, in its discussion of the laws of carrying on Shabbat. The B'nai Kehat, a branch of the Levi'im, carried the boards of the Mishkan as it traveled through the desert. One suggestion is that they were tall because they were of the tribe of Levi and would, like their cousin Moshe, be tall as well (the tradition cites another verse to demonstrate Moshe's height).

Here is where the discussion takes an unexpected turn. The Talmud suggests that Moshe Rabbeinu may have been tall for another reason altogether. It cites an anonymous statement that the *Shekhina* (Divine Presence) rests only upon individuals with a particular set of characteristics:

*The Divine Presence rests only upon one who is wise, strong, wealthy and tall.*

**Shabbat 92a**

אין השכינה שורה אלא על חכם גבור ועשיר ובעל קומה.

**שבת צב.**

Perhaps Moshe was exceptionally tall and not typical of the members of his tribe.

There is something unsettling about this Talmudic statement. It is one thing for human beings to lean unconsciously toward those who project an aura of power; it is another for the Divine Presence to seek out the privileged. Why should the prophetic mantle rest only upon the wealthy and the powerful? I am not certain what is more disconcerting to most of us: learning that leadership is the province of the beautiful people or discovering that we will never be one of them.

And yet the discussion in the Gemara, *Shabbat*, ends there, without a word of protest: the Divine Presence rests only upon one who is wise, strong, wealthy and tall. The *baalei ha-sugya* move on to a new topic, the halakhic status of carrying objects on one's head. Isn't there a sage somewhere, in Eretz Yisrael or in Bavel, who would challenge this elitist model of Heavenly favor?

But there is something that catches our eye. We have seen these adjectives before: wise, strong, and wealthy ... grouped together and in the same order. They form the questions of Ben Zoma in the fourth perek of *Pirkei Avot*:

Ben Zoma would say: *Who is wise? Who is strong? Who is wealthy?*

**Avos 4:1**

בן זומא אמר איזהו חכם ... איזהו גבור ... איזהו עשיר.  
אבות ד:א

In this realization is the beginning of insight. Shimon ben Zoma, the second-generation *tanna*, possessed such mastery of the halakha that the Talmud says his mere appearance in a dream promises the acquisition of wisdom. Ben Zoma possessed such personal wealth that tradesmen flocked to his door to serve him (*Berachot* 58a). It is precisely this sage who redefines for us the qualifications for spiritual leadership stipulated by the anonymous authority in the Gemara, *Shabbat*. His answers are proverbial:

*Who is truly wise? One who learns from everyone ... Who is truly strong? One who conquers one's own appetite ... Who is truly wealthy? One who is happy with one's own lot.*

איזהו חכם הלומד מכל אדם ... איזהו גבור הכובש את יצרו ... איזהו עשיר השמח בחלקו.

While these are among the most oft-quoted sayings in rabbinic literature, they take on a new (and perhaps original) meaning in the context of the Talmudic discussion of spiritual leadership. They are Ben Zoma's redefinition of qualifications for leadership. **They shift the focus from privilege to character.**

Ben Zoma's words are even more powerful when we consider his own career. His name is synonymous with scholarship, not only in the context of dreams mentioned above but throughout the entire Talmud. In the first perek of *Sanhedrin* (17b), we learn that whenever the rabbis say a matter was discussed before the sages without specifying to whom they refer, they mean Shimon ben Zoma and his four colleagues on the court in Yavneh.

Despite his achievements in scholarship, rabbinic tradition reports that Shimon ben Zoma (and his colleague Shimon Ben Azzai) were never ordained. They remain in the rabbinic imagination as *talmidim*, disciples par excellence, so much so that the Gemara in *Kiddushin* 49b declares that if one stipulates during betrothal, "You are betrothed on condition that I am a disciple," one need not be as erudite as Ben Zoma and Ben Azzai to fulfill the condition. The two are in a class by themselves. The Yerushalmi (*Sotah* IX, 16) laments:

*When Ben Zoma died, discipleship disappeared from Israel.*

משמת בן זומא פסקו התלמידים.

Ben Zoma nevertheless remains an outsider. This may have been due to his obsession with the mysteries of metaphysics. His own rebbe, R. Yehoshua ben Chananya, once encountered Ben Zoma on the *Har ha-Bayit* (the Temple Mount). Deep in thought, Ben Zoma did not notice him and continued to sit, normally an act of disrespect before one's teacher. R. Yehoshua aroused him from his trance by asking him what he was doing. Ben Zoma replied that he was gazing at the space between the upper and lower waters. R. Yehoshua turned to his disciples to explain: Ben Zoma is still outside. It was not much later that Ben Zoma left this world (*Chagiga* 15a; Tosefta *Chagiga* II, 6)

That this brilliant mind chose to pursue the mysteries of the creation to the detriment of his own position within the hierarchy of sages endows him with a unique measure of credibility on

questions of status and privilege. Ben Zoma's lessons on leadership have not been adequately learned by we who need them most. We continue to honor privilege over character. Choosing successful business people to manage the secular affairs of Jewish institutions makes good sense. To be sure, I would rather have men and women who have achieved real-world success responsible for the fiscal health of a yeshiva or a synagogue than rabbinic scholars with little understanding of economics and finance, no matter how brilliant. Jewish leadership, though, is only partially about business and management. The secular leadership of Jewish institutions sets policy and it needs to be informed by Jewish values. One of these, Ben Zoma teaches, is to know when material success is enough (who is truly wealthy?). Another is to consider even the humblest individual's views as a potential source of wisdom (who is truly wise?). Another is to eschew power for character (who is truly strong?).

A close reading of the perennial student's prescriptions for leadership can guide us in other directions as well. We should note that every one of the characteristics he described is attainable by anyone of any social rank in the community. Political and organizational leaders do not have exclusive rights to the mantle of leadership. In fact, it might be argued that religious groups suffer when their organizational leadership is confused with their spiritual mission. Jewish groups across the entire spectrum of religious expression often make this mistake, ceding spiritual leadership to their rabbis rather than working to improve their own spirituality. In other spiritual communities, the problems of the clergy can obscure the group's broader mission. This is a corollary of the discredited axiom that leadership is confined to the privileged. Such an approach relieves the group's laity of its own responsibility to lead.

Shavuot, the holiday commemorating the day when we all became students, is an opportunity to remember that we still need to study Ben Zoma's words. The power to which a potential leader should aspire is not the physical strength of an Achilles but the self-restraint of an Aharon ha-Kohein. The wealth to which a potential leader should aspire is not the treasure of a Midas but the balance and contentment of a Moshe. The wisdom to which a potential leader should aspire is not the acknowledged public wisdom of an Oracle but the intellectual openness of Ben Zoma, the student who continues to teach.