



Healing Leadership • Parshat Ha'azeinu

We usually think of leaders as ambitious drivers, people who stand in the front of the room, take charge, and direct others towards a particular goal. If they are kind and respectful, they engage followers with that kindness and respect. If not, their service can be fueled by the need for dominance and authority. Thoughtless ambition can result in callousness, ruthlessness, narcissism, and exploitation. In this week's Torah reading, we find a remarkable description of God that challenges this dominant paradigm: "See, then, that I, I am the One. There is no god beside Me. I deal death and give life; *I wounded, and I will heal*. None can deliver from My hand" (Deut. 32:27).

God's singularity, tied into life and healing, models a different leadership modality – that of Healer. In this verse, when God hurts people, God also brings solace and comfort. If God acknowledges that God hurts people, how much more so can be do the same. Now, we, too, must heal the wounds we create.

Our sedra is not the first or only place to refer to God in the 'first-person' as a Healer. "You shall serve the Lord your God, and He will bless your bread and your water, and I will take sickness away from among you" (Ex. 23:25). God says to the Israelites that He will have a sustaining and therapeutic presence throughout their wilderness years.

In the book of Isaiah, God is also described as binding up the wounded: "And the light of the moon shall become like the light of the sun, and the light of the sun shall become sevenfold, like the light of the seven days, when God binds up the wounds of this people and heals the injuries it has suffered" (Is. 30:26). Malbim explains that when someone breaks a bone, the bone must first be set properly and only then can the injury be healed. The broken bone is on the inside, thus the recovery must begin on the inside first. Healing, he suggests, is both physical and emotional.

Later, we read a similar sentiment twice in Jeremiah. The first is a simple yet powerful request that God heal: "Heal me, O Lord, and I shall be healed; save me, and I shall be saved, for you are my praise" (Jer. 17:14). Later, God promises future healing: "Behold, I will bring to it health and healing, and I will heal them and reveal to them abundance of prosperity and security (Jer. 33:6). In Psalms, we also find a verse that expresses human pain in need of repair: "Be gracious to me, O Lord, for I am languishing; heal me, O Lord, for my bones are troubled" (Ps. 6:2). God is also described as the One to heal that pain: "He heals the brokenhearted and binds up their wounds" (Ps. 147:3).

Nicholas Janni, in his book, *Leader as Healer*, discusses an abiding notion of leadership that is increasingly out of date: "In the old leadership model 'great' leaders are drivers of action, their

goals primarily instrumental – maximize profit, growth and shareholder returns – and their relationships transactional. Dominated by a rational modality divorced from feeling and sensing, their power rests in the wielding of a metaphorical sword on the battlefield of relentless competition.” But today, especially post-pandemic, he contends that leaders cannot be effective if they are overly transactional. People need and are demanding a more humanizing path forward. “Healers are leaders who have highly developed rational minds but have also raised their emotional and physical ‘bodies’ to a similar pitch. They have explored and integrated wounded parts of themselves and developed higher levels of consciousness...”

Leaders should not only heal the wounds of others, but they should also find ways to name and integrate their own wounds into their leadership. The theologian Henri Nouwen acknowledges as much in his book, *The Wounded Healer*: “Our service will not be perceived as authentic unless it comes from a heart wounded by the suffering about which we speak.” We are, all of us, the walking wounded. We are bruised by difficult life circumstances, losses, transitions, family challenges, insults the injustices of the world. We cannot pretend these do not exist. Recognizing our own wounds opens pathways of empathy for the wounds of others. Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, in *To Heal a Fractured World*, gives us this very charge: “If I were to sum up what faith asks us to be, I would say: a healing presence.”

The Talmud relays a remarkable and unexpected dialogue between the sage Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi and Elijah about healing leadership.

“When will the Messiah come?” Rabbi Joshua ben Levi asked the prophet.

Elijah replied: “Go ask him yourself.”

Rabbi Yehoshua asked: “Where can he be found?”

He replied: “At the entrance of Rome.”

Rabbi Yehoshua asked: “By what sign will I be able to recognize him?”

He replied: “He sits among the poor who suffer from various ailments; untying and tying their bandages” (BT *Sanhedrin* 98a).

If you want to know where the Messiah is right now, look to the poor and the one who bandages the poor. If we want the Messiah to come, we should do the same. The grand, dramatic gestures of leadership will be surpassed by the gentle and tender touch to the wounds of those who require healing.

Name a leader who healed you in some physical or emotional way. What could you do to pay the kindness forward today and help heal someone else?