

MORASHAH
THE RABBINIC FELLOWSHIP OF THE UTJ
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Rabbi Shlomo Segal

Parashat HaShavuah Series

Vaera

“These were the men who told Pharaoh king of Egypt to let the Israelites leave Egypt. It was this same Moses and Aaron.” (Exodus 6:27).

The Torah tells us about the genealogy of Moses and Aaron. It then goes on to say that Moses and Aaron were well suited for their mission of liberating the Hebrew slaves, and they were men whose families were prominent in Israel.

Rashi, the great medieval commentator, explains that Moses and Aaron remained steadfast in their mission from beginning to end. This statement of Rashi is quite puzzling. Why should we expect otherwise from such great men like Moses and Aaron? Why should they not remain righteous in their mission? Is this not an affront to their credibility as authentic Jewish leaders?

There is a very important lesson to be gleaned from Rashi's remarks. Very often a leader will commence his career with great sense of sincerity and devotion and as his work progresses his strong sentiments of idealism begin to wane. We have seen this unfortunate pattern of behavior repeated throughout Jewish history. For example, King Saul began his career as king with great humility and devotion, and in the end he became a murderous tyrant.

In contrast, The Talmud (Megillah 11a) tells us that King David followed the example of Moses and Aaron. He maintained his humility from beginning to end. He, too, remained righteous and did not let the title and his position go to his head. Perhaps this is the reason why the messiah is said to come from his ancestral line, as opposed to King Saul. A leader needs to emulate these characteristics.

Moses and Aaron remained faithful, righteous and devoted from beginning to end. Aaron remained a great high priest, loyal to God throughout his days. Moses was not only a great leader who courageously assumed an important role but he is the consummate shepherd. At the end of his career, all he cares about STILL is the people: Make sure they have a RO'EH (a shepherd) to lead them after I'm gone. These were truly men of God, People who merited leadership. Power did not go to their head.

Today we are in desperate need of leaders like Moses and Aaron. All too often we learn of leaders, both political and spiritual alike, who begin their leadership roles with tremendous devotion and idealism yet over a period of time they undergo a transformation and end up clutching the reins of power with arrogance and haughtiness.

I would like to share with you an anecdote about Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook ZT"l, the first Ashkenazic chief rabbi of Palestine. This story is one that will truly illustrate some exalted qualities of leadership:

Rabbi Shlomo Segal serves as the spiritual leader of the Flatbush Jewish Center in Brooklyn, NY.

The Union for Traditional Judaism is a trans-denominational organization dedicated to bringing the message of open-minded Halakhic Judaism to the widest possible audience.

All Divrei Torah can be found at <http://www.utj.org/Torah/HaShavuah>.

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Rabbi Kook began his career as the rabbi of Zoimel, one of the small villages in Lithuania. In Zoimel, there lived a poor shoemaker who earned a meager living from his small shop. The man worked very hard, from Saturday night when Shabbat ended to Friday afternoon, when Shabbat began. One Friday afternoon it was almost time for the Shabbat to begin and he had nothing with which to celebrate the arrival of Shabbat: no challot and no wine for kiddush. He looked across the street. All the Jews had finished their business. Their stores had closed, one by one, and their owners hurried home to complete their Shabbat preparations.

The shoemaker, however, was still standing at the entrance of his shop. The passersby were amazed. "What chutzpah! How dare he leave his shop open on Shabbat"

Rav Kook stood at the shul eager to usher in Shabbat. The worshippers excitedly told him what they had just seen and asked Rav Kook to punish the shoemaker for his sin. The Rav tried to calm the people, "Wait a while and let's see what happens."

When the prayers came to a close, Rav Kook went to the shoemaker's shop. He did not scold or berate the man for his wrongdoing. He simply turned to the shoemaker with a smile on his face and greeted him, "Shabbat Shalom, my dear Jew!" The shoemaker was ashamed. Rabbi Kook said Don't be ashamed. Tell me what is troubling you. "The man cried out bitterly and began his story: "I lead a hard and bitter life. Customers have not come to my shop for a long time now. I am embarrassed to go home to my wife and children for Shabbat empty handed." So, I stayed in my shop until now. Maybe someone would come to have his shoes repaired. Then I could save my family from starving!"

Rav Kook listened to the words of the shoemaker and replied "Do not be troubled any longer. From now on, every month you will receive enough money to support your family. You will be able to feel the same happiness and Shabbat peace, as every other Jew."

After Shabbat concluded, Rav Kook gave his precious silver candlesticks to the shoemaker. The shoemaker sold them and lived on the money for a long time. From that day on, no Jew kept his store open on Shabbat in Zoimel.

Rabbi Kook was the leader of the community. It would have been very easy for him take the direction of the irate people and admonish the shoemaker for desecrating the Sabbath, citing his power and authority. Instead he took the time to sit and listen to the man, and even come up with a solution TO THE EXTENT THAT HE GAVE THE MAN HIS OWN SILVER so that his Sabbath needs would be provided for. That is what makes a great leader. It is not about the leader's personal needs, it is not about the title of his position, it is not about self advancement. Authentic Jewish leadership is about doing everything necessary for the enhancement of one's flock.

May we be inspired by the greatness of Moses and Aaron, to lead moral, noble and productive lives til our very end.

Shabbat Shalom!

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