

Thirsty for Leaders

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This is the first of two *Divrei Torah* about leadership. When you hear the next one in 2-3 weeks, you may think they are completely opposite of each other. But they are not.

This morning, after yet another difficult week, beginning with the mourning in Dallas and the demonstrations in St. Paul and ending with the terror in Nice and the attempted coup in Turkey – I am craving a leader.

Most of the time, the way I say it is: I am looking for *leadership*. We all know that it's not one leader, not a president or the leaders of the G-8, who can fix this world. Leadership comes from many places and all directions, from the top and from the ground up.

But today, I am looking for leaders. For someone, some group of powerful and inspired people, who we can all look to at the same time. To get the ground to stop shaking. To orient us all at the same time to where we are, and the hard work we need to do ourselves or stand as spotters behind others as they do it.

I articulate this as the two weeks of presidential nominating conventions are about to begin. And as we read in the *parasha* of a scary moment, when the people are thirsty for water, and leadership is about to be lost with nothing said about who will lead next.

In the Torah, the people came to Kadesh, and they experienced three things. They lost Miryam. They thought they would all die in the desert. They were thirsty for water.

First, they lost Miryam. She was the first leader they ever had in Egypt. She was the one who could see the redemption coming without any doubt. Even when the babies were being born under Pharaoh's threat, when every adult leader of the community saw only slavery for all time. In the desert, Moshe solved problems, and helped the people think and plan. Miryam helped them perceive a common beat, a national heartbeat through her tambourine. She showed them how to notice the times when their many different rhythms landed together. Now she was gone.

Second, the people saw the world they were in as a world of death, for themselves and their beasts. A collapsing world. People were dying, this is true, in battle and as the slave generation was reaching the end of life. But they feared death everywhere.

who turn out to be corrupt, to seek their own fortunes or the fortunes of their friends, who coax us with their promises and their promise and then let us down, who betray their own families. Leaders who underestimate us -- who only seem to ask of us great things but demand no real commitment.

So we doubt leaders, and the idea of leadership. And yet we are frightened of that moment, when Miryam is gone and Moshe and Aharon too, and that is unbearable.

I believe, in fact, that we need leaders, as hard as they are to find.

We need people in our world who seem larger than the average person. Without leaders to admire, we shrink ourselves too small, and settle for small things from our society and from humanity. Instead of appreciating the small scale differences we can make, we will settle for them. They become the ceiling of humanity, rather than the spur to more. We lose hope for *tikkun olam*, for a real transformation. We forget that human beings can be larger than ourselves.

Without great leaders, we will help some small number of people climb out of poverty, but we will still rage against a world where so many are still poor. We will build one great school, with other people committed to the same vision, but we will not not feel closer to a just world where every young person has the opportunity to develop. We will insulate our buildings and buy local food, but the global climate disaster will still loom. We will take in refugees but do nothing about the violence that pits religion against religion, or wipes out entire tribes or peoples.

God tells Moshe that his job as a leader is to show holiness to the group where they can see it. Holiness, *kedushah*, is an awe in the presence of someone whose integrity and achievements for the world are beyond my own. When I meet people like this, their presence does not make me feel small or insufficient, but fills me with appreciation and hope. These leaders do not tell us that we regular people will figure everything out on our own. They don't leave us with the cliché that enough little acts of goodness add up to transformation. Great leaders respect us not by pretending that we are just like them, or they are just like us. They help us see how our smaller work fits specifically into the bigger picture. They don't have an emotional need to lead us; they need our citizenship and remind us that we need it to.

Margaret Mead's famous quote is that we should never doubt that a small group of committed people can change the world. But she was wrong that it is the only thing that ever does. Yes, we absolutely need to be leaders on our own whenever we can. But we need large leaders as well.

I want a leader who has compassion for all people, not just in a crisis. Compassion not in the abstract but up close, for every subgroup among us. Even when those groups quarrel, and even when she has to criticize some of us at a moment when she is standing up for someone else.

I want a leader who spends time, real and not symbolic, outside his own comfortable, identified group. I want to see the candidates for president take two days at a time in a community farthest from the base. In a state that's unwinnable, because she or he will have to be the leader of all of us as president. Two days in an inner city for the Republican, two days in a small Bible-belt town in the deep South for the Democrat.

I want a leader who enlarges me – who helps me stretch out what I can do as a citizen, beyond what I realized. And who uses the large power of being president to do more of what I would do, in a way that makes me feel as though I had a hand in that too.

I say these words of longing for leadership, even though we stand, like the Israelites, in a time without leadership like that. But we don't stop needing it. And I would say, we have to practice being *followers* of the best leadership. We have to find ways to be followers in the highest sense. If you discover a great moral voice, you should follow it. You should find someone in the public arena you disagree with, but who has integrity and true compassion, and follow that person in some way.

Because while we are afraid, and people are dying, we are not all dying. We are thirsty for an end to violence and terror, and thirsty for answers – but also thirsty for vision and leadership. For being all together despite and with all our difference.

And I still believe there is hope for this kind of leadership, and this kind of following. Because we read this morning that the Israelites, after losing Miryam and hearing they would lose Moshe and Aharon, were suddenly able to start walking forward.

They said: We will walk straight, we will walk toward our promised land, and we will not steal along the way. *B'derekh hamelech nelech* – We will walk the way of a people following a leader – in the highest sense.

May we not lose our hope that leaders like these are possible. May we, even in our doubts and frustration, tell those who would be our leaders that this is what we want from them. And may we merit this year for our country some group of powerful and inspired people, who we can all look to at the same time – to get the ground to stop shaking, to orient us all at the same time to where we are, and to the hard work we need to do ourselves or stand as spotters behind others as they do it.