

# JEWISH RELIGIOUS LEADERSHIP

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I still remember a talk given by the late, beloved Rabbi Joseph Lookstein, *zakeber Tzaddik li-vrakhab*, to our entering class in the *Semikhab* Program, the Ordination Program of the Rabbi Isaac Elchanan Theological Seminary of Yeshiva University, about the Rabbinate as vocation. Rabbi Lookstein began by saying that when you read rabbinic *Responsa*, letters responding to technical legal questions, you find that there are two general styles for the way Rabbis sign their names at the end. Some sign as “Rabbi so-and-so, who sits upon the throne of the Rabbinate in the town of such-and-such.” Others sign as “Rabbi so-and-so, servant to the servants of God in the town of such-and-such.” Rabbi Lookstein paused and commented: “make sure you are the second kind of Rabbi.”

## I. The Telos of Leadership

The notion of leader as servant lies at the heart of Judaism, and is subversive by design. Upending the way political leadership is often framed in terms of power and prerogative, Judaism offers an alternative vision of religious leadership: as responsibility actualized through service.<sup>1</sup> This vision has proven influential in Western civilization, in the concept of the “public servant,” if often only given lip-service and honored in the breach.<sup>2</sup> Issuing from the core national experience of oppressive enslavement to Egypt transfigured into liberating

enslavement to God,<sup>3</sup> a process commemorated in Scripture and in daily liturgy, Judaism conceives of the ideal spiritual posture as service: service of God, and service of man that is itself a way of serving God.<sup>4</sup> Many of the greatest leaders of the Bible are explicitly praised as servants in this sense.<sup>5</sup>

Service orients us towards care for the other in suspension or effacement of self interest. In such service the full transcendental potential of human being is realized, in the phenomenological sense of the capacity of consciousness to open in intentionality beyond ourselves, towards the other and towards the Infinite.<sup>6</sup> Service, in truth, is a spiritual virtue for all Jews. What is distinctive about a Jewish leader is that he or she takes Jewish Tradition seriously and feels called to help realize the Tradition, to make it come alive, to be taken more seriously by other Jews.<sup>7</sup>

### Question:

In a leader we see the goals and purposes that belong to all the faithful in a focused, intentional and concentrated way. Is this true for all traditions?

A leader's job in general is to articulate the core narrative of the group and make its tradition real, vivid and vital for its members, through rhetorical skill, but more significantly by embodying and personifying its ideals.<sup>8</sup> The Jewish leader, in word and in action, points to transcendence, not merely as an ideal but as a real living path, as a way of being. This is possible because he or she has been personally touched by transcendence in some way, and has integrated that contact into their personality. The experience of the transcendent destabilizes the personality, throws it off the self as center. This shift alone may produce a person of faith and spirit, but it does not necessarily produce a religious leader. The religious leader is one who internalizes this sense of God as real, abiding and inexhaustible, and reorganizes his personality as constantly pointed towards God. This engenders a posture of service, but it also engenders a sense of confidence, which is a hallmark of all leaders, political or religious. Confidence is not just faith, it is faith transmuted into a purposeful attitude and mode of social interaction. People love to follow a confident person, for better and for worse. Whereas the political leader's source of charisma is rooted in self-confidence expressed in his commitment to a social principle or ideal and his ability to project that confidence, the religious leader's charisma comes from awareness of the abiding presence of God and the transcendent, a confidence rooted and projected beyond the self.

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While the role of the Jewish leader is to confidently inspire and move people, this is accomplished without becoming oneself the focus of that movement. The authentic leader uses his or her own self-example delicately, with restraint, as a tool to point others towards transcendence, to the reality of God and the impact of that reality:

*A young rabbi who was a student of Rabbi Pinchas of Koretz once realized that his mind had become subject to doubts about faith in God and to heretical ideas, specifically regarding strange questions about how God could know the thoughts of human beings. Since this rabbi had been immersed in Torah and piety since his youth, these thoughts caused him much anguish and affliction, so he travelled to Rabbi Pinchas to express his problem and ask his teacher to remove this perversity from his heart. When he came close to Rabbi Pinchas' house, Rabbi Pinchas saw him through the window and recognized from his form at a distance all the false thoughts he was thinking. When the rabbi entered the house to greet Rabbi Pinchas, before he could even begin to express himself, Rabbi Pinchas said to him, "Can it be that God doesn't know, if I know?" Immediately, the young rabbi turned around and returned to his home in wholeness of mind.<sup>9</sup>*

Here Rabbi Pinchas of Koretz uses his psychic abilities, characteristic of many

leaders of the mystical movements of Judaism such as Kabbalah and Hasidism, not for his own aggrandizement, but to drive home the reality of God, to expand his student's sense of the mysteries and the possibilities of reality.

Ultimately, Judaism characterizes God Himself theistically as a leader directly involved in guiding and caring for the world in complete detail, described in the Bible and in Jewish liturgy as the "King" of the world.<sup>10</sup> On the national level, the Jewish People understand themselves to be led by God Himself, infinitely and eternally present but hidden, making His Will known through the Torah, and, throughout the biblical period, guiding His people directly through His prophets. The history of Jewish leadership tracks a process of routinization of this charismatic prophetic leadership into more tangible and predictable human political institutions, to apply Max Weber's formulation.<sup>11</sup> When the elders of Israel petition the prophet Samuel to appoint a king over them, Samuel is displeased, but God responds "Hearken to the voice of the people in all that they say to you, for they have not rejected you, but they have rejected Me, that I should not reign over them (1 Sam. 8:7)." The ideal human leader in Jewish tradition remains someone who points man back to God through service.

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The traditional Jew lives his and her life with a sense of being immersed in the intimate presence of God. Triangulating this intimacy with divine infinitude and divine hiddenness yields a characteristically Jewish theological and spiritual modesty, in the words of the prophet: "He has told you, man, what is good: and what does the Lord require of you, but to do justly and love kindness, and walk modestly with your God (Micah 6:8)." While the Jewish philosophical and mystical traditions have developed a profound and complex theology and theosophy that engages dedicated scholars, normative Jewish life, in all denominations, tends to walk modestly when it comes to explicit theologizing, and to focus rather on devotional, intellectual and ethical practices that foster a sense of the immediacy of God's presence and attunement to His Will.

Jewish devotional life cultivates a continual mindfulness of God through daily prayer services evening, morning and afternoon, and through innumerable occasions for blessing God, using eloquently formulated benedictions praising and thanking God for gifts of sustenance, health and pleasure as we encounter them throughout the day. The cognitive dimension of Jewish spirituality is pursued through Torah learning, the intensely disciplined study of Bible and Talmud and their vast and ongoing commentary and codification traditions as an intellectual, devotional and spiritual practice. Traditional Jews regard the Torah, in this living, expansive sense, as the revealed Will of God, and in some influential rabbinic formulations, to study the Torah is to immerse oneself in the active Will and Word of God.<sup>12</sup> In the realm of practical

action, the Will of God is understood to be conveyed in Mitzvot, divine commandments specified in the Written and Oral Torah, that instantiate the service of God and man, through actions expressing “what is good: ...to do justly and love kindness.” The focus of a Jewish leader’s life is to guide fellow Jews in these devotional, intellectual and ethical practices, through overseeing communal prayer, extensive and intensive teaching of Torah, and inspiring, exhorting and directing the congregation to proper ethical behavior and spiritual growth.

The Jewish leader’s service begins with offering assistance on a familiar, though far-reaching, interpersonal level, such as teaching and helping other Jews in their own spiritual service, offering social assistance such as hospitality, psychological guidance and emotional support, organizing charitable aid, and working to maintain cohesion, promote reconciliation and foster growth in the community. The ideal of service, however, can extend to the most demanding sense of responsibility for the welfare of others. In one formulation, the Tzaddik, the authentic community leader in the mystical pietistic movement of Hasidism, is expected to take thorough responsibility for all that goes on in his domain, not limited to a congregation:

*Rebbe Mordechai of Neshkibizh said to his son, the Rebbe of Kovel, “my son, my son. He who does not feel the pains of a woman giving birth within a circuit of fifty miles, who does not suffer with her and pray that her suffering may be assuaged, is not worthy to be called a Zaddik.”*

*His younger son Yitzchak, who later succeeded him in his work, was ten years old at the time. He was present when this was said. When he was old he told the story and added, “I listened well. But it was very long before I understood why he had said it in my presence.”<sup>13</sup>*

The deep empathy and compassion spoken of here is cued clairvoyantly: the true Tzaddik in the Hasidic tradition is expected to have his psychic antenna, his highly refined consciousness, constantly attuned to what is going on among all the people around him, and to pray for their highest good.

The leader, though attuned to the group, also stands slightly apart, by temperament and by the authority role into which he or she is placed. This position helps him rise above the interpersonal sturm und drang to guide the community to its higher purpose, to promote communal self-awareness, to provide constructive criticism and to correct course when necessary.<sup>14</sup> While the primary mandate of the Jewish leader is to guarantee the authenticity of traditional communal practice, some leaders are able to use their position apart to think outside the communal box, and use their authority to be agents of carefully calibrated change and transformation when necessary.

**Question:**

In what way does the dynamic of being both an outsider and an insider play out in different traditions?

The seasoned Jewish leader is able to discover and present such change as inevitable and implicit in the Tradition itself, and Jewish Tradition makes room for innovation and growth rooted in precedent.<sup>15</sup> The archetypal Jewish leader is Moses, and the Torah emphasizes his outsider status: born an Israelite, but growing up outside the community and maturing in exile, he returns to lead the nation as an outsider, able to point and direct the people beyond their immediate conditions, towards God and towards their transformational Jewish destiny. Other biblical leaders, such as prophets, priests and kings, are also described as standing inside yet outside the community.

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As both insider and outsider, the leader is also in a unique position to value all members, maintain a benevolent impartiality and further communal well-being by promoting forgiveness and reconciliation among members. Maimonides acknowledges this role in his conception of leadership in the Guide of the Perplexed, weaving Platonic and Aristotelian political theory together with traditional Jewish political thought. He notes that human beings are highly diverse in temperament and moral sensibility, and this diversity threatens communal stability:

*The well-being of society demands that there should be a leader able to regulate the actions of man; he must complete every shortcoming, remove every excess, and prescribe for the conduct of all, so that the natural variety*

*should be counterbalanced by the uniformity of legislation, and the order of society be well established... It being the will of God that our race should exist and be permanently established, He in His wisdom gave it such properties that men can acquire the capacity of ruling others. Some persons are therefore inspired with theories of legislation, such as prophets and lawmakers: others possess the power of enforcing the dictates of the former, and of compelling people to obey them, and to act accordingly.<sup>16</sup>*

For Maimonides, the role of the leader is to be a moderating influence to help maintain the cohesiveness of society from his unique position. While there are religious leaders who use emotional intensity and narrow thematic focus to energize and unify their communities, sometimes to extremes, my own experience as a communal Rabbi confirms Maimonides' theory that balance, impartiality, tolerance and a light touch are more effective in guiding a community over the long haul.

## II. Types of Leadership

The Jewish people, through the perdurable course of its history, has organized itself in a variety of social and political structures and experimented with a corresponding variety of leadership models. From nomadic and agrarian tribes through kingdoms, occupied nation, exilic Diaspora and modern statehood, Jews have sought communal guidance from successive combinations of prophets, priests, tribal judges, kings, rabbinic scholars and professional politicians.

## *The Rabbi*

In terms of sheer institutional longevity, it has been the rabbinic scholarly elite, with biblical roots blossoming into a distinctive culture during the Second Commonwealth period and surviving its demise, who provided innovative leadership approaches that proved resilient enough to help shape and maintain the integrity of Jewish identity and nationhood for two millennia, through the severe challenges of the ancient, medieval and modern global Diaspora.

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The traditional Rabbi is preeminently the custodian of the Torah in its full sense, comprising the Written Law, the Oral Law that elaborates Torah into a full system of positive law, and an extensive tradition of legal, moral and spiritual commentary. He is pre-eminently the teacher, the interpreter and the jurist of the Halakhah, the Jewish legal tradition as such. Judaism in its ancient and medieval form is not a religious faith, in the modern American sense of a religious belief system. Judaism is a national cultural and religious identity, and the heart of a nation is its legal system that regulates relationships. Prior to the destruction of the Second Temple and ensuing dissolution of the

Sanhedrin, the Jewish High Court, the Halakhah functioned as a complete positive legal system, representing all rubrics of law, civil, criminal and public, with the added category of religious ritual law. Through the balance of the ancient period and the Middle Ages, Jews ran their own legal and social affairs within their own legal and social institutions in all the host cultures of the Diaspora. In this context, the Halakhah still served as the unifying legal system of the Jewish people in exile, its complex corpus was effectively promoted as the core curriculum of the Jewish educational system world-wide, and the Rabbis served as the teachers and jurists of the law.

Halakhah as a whole is understood to be a moral and spiritual system: it embodies the human practice and actualization of God's Will. The divine revelation at the very heart of Judaism is that it is the discipline of Law that helps guide all relationships and heal and save the world. The attunement of man to man and man to God is facilitated by the justice and compassion revealed in the Law of Torah. The spirituality of the Law applies not only to its more overtly religious aspects, but also to its civil, criminal and public dimensions, all of which are not only legal rules but moral principles and divine commands that are intended to cultivate spiritual sensibility and a thoughtful and disciplined way of life, to fulfill God's Will. In this regard, the rich corpus of the Written and Oral law contains ethical and spiritual exempla and narratives, as well as technical positive law.

It is still the primary role of the Orthodox Rabbi to master and teach the

Halakhah understood in this spiritual sense. His credentials and communal authority are based on his apprenticeship to the Tradition and its teachers and his detailed mastery of the vast, complex knowledge base of the Halakhah and its methodology. In the Reform and Conservative denominations, halakhic practice is de-emphasized and other principles of Torah, such as social action and social justice along with communal prayer and ritual practice, also generally understood as divinely ordained or affirmed and deeply rooted in Jewish tradition, serve as the organizing ideals of the community. The Conservative and Reform Rabbi is trained in the principles, methods and knowledge base of the denomination in its relation to Jewish Tradition and he or she is expected to be a resource to the community for detailed knowledge of the Tradition. Rabbis of all denominations frequently enrich their teaching with more explicitly theological and spiritual literature from the Jewish philosophical and mystical and ethical traditions, and Hasidic leaders in particular have an extensive mystical corpus from which to draw material for teaching and inspiration. The nuts and bolts of communal teaching, however, for most congregational Rabbis and Rabbis of the Seminaries or Yeshivot, are the legal and ethical traditions of the Torah.

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### *The Faithful Shepherd*

It is also possible to find traces of other biblical leadership models internalized within the rabbinic persona, in the ways Rabbis themselves perceive the values and functions of their mission. The nomadic roots of the Jewish people are still evident in the way rabbinic leadership conceives of its own telos as personal responsibility for the community and its individuals. Though the socio-economic culture of the Talmudic period was agrarian and urban, even cosmopolitan, the rabbinic ideal of leadership, expressed in the Talmud and Midrash, is often drawn from the romanticized image of the biblical shepherd,<sup>17</sup> as in the following passage about the Tzaddik, the righteous leader, from Shemot Rabbah:

*Who does God test? The Tzaddik, as it says "God tests the Tzaddik (Ps. 11)." And with what does He test him? With shepherding sheep. He tested David with sheep and found him a good shepherd, as it says "and He took him from the sheep folds (Ps. 78: 70)." What sheep folds (lit.: sheep restraints)? As it says "the rain was restrained (Gen. 8:2)." He restrained the adult sheep for the sake of the lambs, and would bring out the lambs to graze in order that they would graze on soft grass. Then he brought out the old sheep to graze on moderate grass. Then he brought out the young sheep to graze on the hard grass. Said the Holy One, blessed be He, "he who knows how to shepherd sheep, each according to their ability, let him come and shepherd my nation, as it is written "from following the ewes that give suck, He brought him to be shepherd of Jacob His people and Israel His inheritance (Ps. 78:71)."*

*Similarly, Moses was tested specifically with flocks. Our Rabbis say that when Moses shepherded the flock of Jethro in the desert, one of the goats fled from him. He ran after it until he reached a shady place. When he reached the shady place he happened upon a pool of water, where the goat was standing, drinking. When Moses reached it he said “I didn’t realize that you ran because of thirst. You are tired.” He placed the goat on his shoulders and walked. Said the Holy One, blessed be He, “you have mercy to guide flocks belonging to flesh and blood this way, by your life, you shall shepherd my flock Israel.” This [explains why it says]: “And Moses was shepherding... (Ex. 3:1).”<sup>8</sup>*

This rabbinic Midrash points to King David as modeling the leader as shepherd, who cares for the needs of his community, his flock, in a manner responsive and sensitive to the specialized needs of the major distinct social groups of the community. Though Moses precedes King David chronologically, he is highlighted second in the Midrash, as advancing even further the ideal of leadership that is responsible and responsive to specialized needs. Moses as nomadic shepherd exerts great effort to save, care for and empathize with a single goat, modeling a leader who is ceaselessly responsible, understanding, compassionate and, as in this case, forgiving, and though responsible for a group, is yet attentive to each individual.

There is a Hasidic narrative that offers a more modern take on this model, and articulates a further refinement to the qualifications for leadership:

*After the death of the Yebudi (Rebbe Yaakov Yitzhak of Pruszytscha), for a time his*

*Hassidim did not know whom to choose for their Rebbe. They asked Rebbe [Simcha] Bunam to advise them. He said “a shepherd was pasturing his sheep near the edge of a meadow. He grew very tired, lay down on the ground and fell asleep. Such a thing had never happened to him before. He awoke at midnight. There was a full moon high in the Heavens, and the night was cool and clear. The shepherd drank some water from the brook and felt better. But at that moment he remembered his sheep and his heart skipped a beat. He looked around and saw his animals lying a few steps off, one crowded up against the other, as if they were in the fold. He counted them and not one was missing. He cried “dear God, how can I repay you? Entrust your sheep to me and I shall guard them like the apple of my eye.” Find such a shepherd and make him your Rebbe.” Rav Abele Neustaedter, who long before had instructed the Yebudi in the Kabbalah and whom many among those present regarded as his former student’s successor, rose from his chair and seated Rebbe Bunam in his place.<sup>19</sup>*

The punch line of the story is that God is the ultimate shepherd, guarding the flock constantly and covering the lapses of its human shepherd. The worthy religious leader is one who recognizes this.

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## *The King*

In the absence of dedicated political statesmen from the end of the Second Commonwealth to twentieth century and the establishment of the State of Israel, rabbinic leaders were also called upon to exercise political power, even as stand-ins for a very limited kingship. Besides the Patriarchate and Exilarchate themselves, actual remnants of the Jewish royal lineage functioning inside and outside the Land of Israel, respectively, the rabbinic elite occasionally arrogated to themselves an air of royal authority. David Biale argues that in this respect the Rabbis and the Kehillah, the Jewish communal structure, became surrogates for full political sovereignty and helped maintain the integrity of Jewish communities through the vicissitudes of the Diaspora.<sup>20</sup>

The Rabbinic approach to exercising authority has been one of the great experiments in the history of political leadership. From the early first millennium of the Common Era to 1948, the Jewish people have been guided not by politicians or soldiers, but by a highly educated scholarly class.

### Question:

Is communal leading by scholars a viable model for contemporary religions, including Judaism?

While Plato's vision in the Republic of a philosophically-enlightened political leadership has remained an unrealized ideal for Western societies, the Jewish version,

with Rabbis in charge, really worked, at least for the degree of autonomy granted to the Jewish communities. In the Gaonic period, from the eighth to the eleventh centuries, capitalizing on the stability brought by the Muslim conquest of the Middle East, North Africa and Spain, the Rabbis of Babylonia developed a highly centralized, efficient and effective political and educational bureaucracy. Officiating in the two great Academies at Sura and Pumbeditha, in present day Iraq, and working with the Exilarch in Baghdad, the rabbinic leaders, called Gaonim, handled the political and economic affairs of the Jewish communities in Muslim lands, and organized a sophisticated educational system that attracted and supported students from all over the Diaspora. This program promoted widespread literacy and firmly established the study of the Talmud and Halakhah as the core curriculum of the Jewish people.<sup>21</sup>

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Eventually, the success of the Gaonim in training competent students from communities around the Mediterranean basin allowed those communities of the Western Diaspora to develop their own educational institutions and become self-reliant. With the economic decline of the Gaonate in the tenth and eleventh centuries, the highly decentralized Jewish communities of Western Europe developed their own institutions to maintain cohesion and identity, led by their

local rabbinic authorities. These Rabbis exerted authority without violent coercion, without a police force or military or any of the executive institutions of enforcement, and without the abuses of kingship, but rather through moral and spiritual persuasion and social pressure. Their strongest instrument of communal discipline was the threat of herem: a member of the community who does not abide by the laws of the community would no longer be entitled to the social, economic and religious privileges of the community, similar to what is known as “shunning” in Amish communities in the United States.<sup>22</sup> This successful experiment in non-violent, enlightened leadership has valuable lessons to teach us for our own time, plagued as it is by violence incited by religious demagoguery. Whether directed within the community or outside, in relation to other groups and communities, the true religious leader at his or her best appeals to our higher moral and spiritual natures, our “better angels,” those inner principles that move us to do the right and good thing without external coercion.

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#### *The Priest*

The role of the Kohen, the Priest, also contributes to the rabbinic conception of leadership. The Kohanim, members of a

specific Israelite lineage, officiated in the Holy Temple, and even after its destruction retain some limited sacerdotal roles in the Jewish community, to this day. In congregational prayer service, the Rabbi officiates in the recitation of certain communal prayers and performs or facilitates certain rituals, putting him in a somewhat sacerdotal position.

During the Temple period, his cultic ritual position would also put the Kohen in intimate contact with families and individuals seeking to make amends, interpersonally and spiritually, which opened up opportunities for going beyond ritual, to healing relationships. In Pirkei Avot, for instance, which is in part a mishnaic manual for rabbinic leadership values and best practices, Hillel takes the biblical Kohen Aaron as a model and advises his rabbinic students: “Be among the students of Aaron: love peace and chase peace, love people and bring them close to Torah.”<sup>23</sup> In the more expansive version of this text collection, Avot de-Rabbi Natan, concrete exempla of Aaron’s ministry are provided to illustrate Hillel’s dictum:

*Aaron would extend greetings to the rebellious of Israel, such that if one of them would seek to commit a sin, he would say “Woe is me! Tomorrow Aaron might come and greet me, so how will I be able to return the greeting?” In this way he would be embarrassed and not sin. Similarly, if a person was angry with his friend, Aaron would go to him and say to him “my son, why are you angry with your friend? Just now he came to me crying and remorseful saying ‘woe is me that have angered my friend, who is greater than me. I’ll stand in the marketplace, and you go and plead with*

*him for me.” Then he would leave this one and go to the other one and say “my son, why are you angry with your friend? Just now he came to me, etc.” When they both went to the marketplace and met each other they would hug and kiss.<sup>24</sup>*

Hillel’s lesson and its exempla drive home the point that the role of a Jewish leader, imitating the ideal Kohen, includes serving as a model of socially-engaged righteousness, actively reaching out to those who are morally challenged, and proactively working with people to promote mutual forgiveness and reconciliation. He is not just to love peace but to chase after it, even to the extent of serving as a negotiator who initiates the negotiations and resorts to a few white lies if necessary to bring together those who have become estranged.

The official position of a Rabbi, like that of a Kohen, places him slightly apart from the community, insulated, somewhat, by his professional persona, and this outsider status grants him a perspective that allows him to affirm each individual, even those who are otherwise disparaged by the community, and to serve as trusted, impartial negotiator to pursue forgiveness and reconciliation on everyone’s behalf. The Rabbi, from his own spiritual experience, also brings to his counseling a sense of the resilience of the human heart, a resilience and healing power that ultimately derives from God Who infuses us with vitality at every instant. The Rabbi, like the Kohen, understands this divinely refreshed resilience as the very basis of the possibility of forgiveness and interpersonal healing.

### *The Prophet*

The relationship between rabbinic and prophetic leadership is more complex, and its contemporary resonance more controversial. With Moses as model, the prophet is the ideal leader of Israel. God speaks to the prophet, man or woman, and with this divine authority the prophet guides Israel to follow God’s Will, the Torah expressed as divine Law, and chastises the people when they stray. The Rabbis recognized the unique authority of the bona fide prophet, but also declared the cessation of prophecy early in the Second Commonwealth.<sup>25</sup> In a famous dispute among Tannaitic authorities of the late first early second centuries of the Common Era, the consensus Rabbinic position asserts that legal guidance by supernatural inspiration and appeal to charismatic spiritual authority is no longer admissible, and the Rabbis have full authority to interpret and implement the Torah legal tradition by their own hermeneutical logic and rules of collective decision making.<sup>26</sup>

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Yet in a daring formulation, other Rabbis go so far as to arrogate the authority of prophecy to themselves, the hakhamim or sages:

*“Rabbi Avdimi of Haifa said, “since the day the Temple was destroyed, prophecy was*

*lost to the prophets and given to the sages... Amemar added: indeed, a sage is superior to a prophet, as it is written 'a prophet has a heart of wisdom (Ps. 90:12).' Who is compared to whom? Surely, the lesser is compared to the greater.'*<sup>27</sup>

In the thirteenth century, the great Talmud commentator Nahmanides offers what becomes an influential interpretation of this passage: “the Talmud means that although the prophecy of the prophets by means of image and vision was lost, the prophecy of the sages by means of the intellect was not lost. Rather, they know the truth from the Holy Spirit which dwells within them.”<sup>28</sup> Nahmanides distinguishes the prophet’s direct intuitive grasp of the divine message from the sage’s discursive intellectual grasp. Yet the Sage, too, retains some of the inspired divine authority of the prophet. In a more modern formulation, Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook interprets the comparison in terms of methods and goals: “that which prophecy did not accomplish with its fiery weapons, to cauterize idolatry from Israel and to uproot the lowest degradations of oppression and violent robbery, of murder and illicit sexuality, of the pursuit of bribery and graft, the sages accomplished through the expansion of Torah, by raising up many students and the sharp analysis of the particular rules and their corollaries.”<sup>29</sup> For Rabbi Kook, the greatness of the sages is judged in terms of the effectiveness of their approach to the moral repair of the body politic, through teaching and implementing Torah law, which builds upon but also surpasses in efficacy the prophetic approach limited to inspired rhetoric.

In the Jewish mystical tradition, the Kabbalah, in the thirteenth and sixteenth centuries, serious and sustained discussion of the psychology of prophecy indicates that these thinkers entertained the possibility that prophecy had not ceased entirely and under the right conditions could be revived. Other forms of ongoing divine inspiration were also widely acknowledged in the Talmudic and Medieval periods, such as the perception of a heavenly echo or a personal visit from the prophet Elijah, who had been translated to Heaven and can shape-shift at will to appear suddenly in order to inspire or assist a worthy person. These other forms of inspiration are conceived as less direct and less reliable than prophecy, but they still indicate that the Jews of late antiquity and the Middle Ages and even the early Modern period felt that direct communication with God is still possible at some level.

In Jewish communities today echoes of all these approaches to the comparison between rabbinic and prophetic authority continue to resonate. Most Rabbis of Modern Orthodox, Conservative and Reform communities have no prophetic pretensions, though an essential part of their job is using their rhetorical skills in the mode of the biblical prophets, to inspire, criticize and correct the community as necessary. They relate to their congregants as autonomous individuals, and exercise their authority through moral persuasion.

Hasidic and Haredi communities make stronger authority claims for their rabbinic leadership, with a concomitant shift in the leader-follower relationship. The Hasidic tradition, beginning with the

charismatic figure of Rabbi Israel ben Eliezer Baal Shem Tov in the eighteenth century, sees its rabbinic leaders, the Tzaddikim, as mediators of divine inspiration and endowed with spiritual powers usually ascribed to prophets and priests.

Question:

Are there parallels in other traditions to the tension between intellectual and prophetic authority, found in Judaism?

One of the clearest formulations of this view is expressed by Rabbi Elimelekh of Lizhensk:

*We have already indicated many times that the Tzaddik is called a man of God, as it is written, "Moses the man of God (Dt. 33:1)." For the Tzaddik is the master of the [divine] judgments. They are in his hands. He may direct them as he wishes, to subdue and to sweeten them. The Tzaddik is a judge, for judges are called elohim... He may therefore annul all judgments and all decrees against Israel. Therefore the Tzaddik is called a man of God, that is, master of divine judgment. Thus the Talmud says "The Holy One decrees and the Tzaddik annuls."<sup>30</sup>... It must be understood how it is that the Tzaddik heals the sick by means of his prayer and brings him vitality so that a man shall live... This is because the Tzaddik adheres to God, and therefore his life force adheres to the eternal and essential life, thereby rendering the Tzaddik's life eternal and essential too, for they have been united in one substance. Therefore the Tzaddik*

*has the power in his hands to bring life to the sick."<sup>31</sup>*

R. Elimelekh takes up a talmudic notion addressing the unique, pious individual, the Tzaddik, and implies that this charismatic, theurgic power can also be found in contemporary Hasidic leaders. The direct corollary of this enhanced authority of the Hasidic leader is the elevating of submission on the part of the Hasidic follower to a supreme spiritual virtue. Submission to Torah as a whole and the discipline of Halakhah in detail, and submission to the legal decisions of the Rabbi in halakhic matters, is regarded as a virtue in all Orthodox communities. Hasidism extends this submission to a deeply-felt compliance with the advice and guidance of the Rebbe or Tzaddik, the genuine Hasidic leader, in all areas of life, not just in halakhic practice, since all the pronouncements of the Rebbe are considered to be divinely inspired. This submission to the Tzaddik, however, is not a goal in itself, but instrumental to a higher purpose. In the words of a pivotal Hasidic authority, Rebbe Israel Dov Baer of Vileznik: "The connection to the Tzaddikim is so that with their assistance one can ascend and climb to draw close to [God], may He be blessed."<sup>32</sup>

In the nineteenth and the twentieth centuries this intensified reverence for rabbinic authority in the Hasidic communities also seems to have influenced the non-Hasidic Haredi communities. The Haredi movement of meticulous halakhic pietism grew out of Orthodox Judaism, which coalesced as a reaction against the Jewish Enlightenment and the Reform

movement of the late eighteenth and the nineteenth centuries. The Haredi communities, adopting an anti-modernist outlook, are associated with some of the major Yeshivot of pre-Holocaust Europe that were transplanted to Israel and the United States, before, during and after the Shoah.<sup>33</sup> One of the more explicit and influential formulations of their ethos is the concept of *emunat hakhamim*, “faith in the Sages,” articulated by Rabbi Eliyahu Eliezer Dessler (1892-1953) in his published correspondences. Rabbi Dessler begins by acknowledging that the ultimate goal of halakhic practice and the Torah life is spiritual self-reliance, to “become fit to judge ourselves.”<sup>34</sup>

Question:

If leadership seeks to empower the community, based on a commonality of purpose, how do we account for ways in which leaders are considered qualitatively different than their followers? Is this healthy? Necessary? Recommended? In need of reconsideration?

Until that time, however, which he claims is a long way off, we are characterized as blind, and need to depend entirely on the Sages, men of vision. He extends the definition of inspired Sages to rabbinic scholars of his own generation, connected as he was, personally and professionally, to some of the leading scholars of the Lithuanian Yeshivah and Mussar movements of ethical pietism. In this formulation the submission to the Sages is described as

voluntary: “Whoever wants to believe in them can utilize their clear vision, and they shall be his eyes.”<sup>35</sup>

In another iteration, however, R. Dessler is more unequivocal. He is responding to a questioner who repeated a devastating challenge that others had raised to the wisdom of the Rabbis of Europe in the years before the Shoah. In R. Dessler’s paraphrase: “if the Jews of Europe, may God avenge their blood, had immigrated to the Land of Israel before the war they would have been saved, and they placed this on the account of the great ones of the generation.” The questioner’s point was that the Rabbis revered by R. Dessler as visionaries upon whom one should rely for guidance in every aspect of life, the heads of the Yeshivot of Europe in the early twentieth century, were the very Rabbis who strenuously opposed Zionism and its spokespeople like Rabbi Avraham Isaac Kook, who had tried in vain to promote *Aliyah*, emigration to Israel, among the religious Jews of Europe before and after the First World War. These were the very Rabbis who actively dissuaded their students and communities from leaving Europe for then-Palestine as the storm-clouds of anti-Semitism and war were gathering. R. Dessler does not answer the charge directly, but launches into a strident defense of the infallibility of the wisdom of the “great ones of the generation,” the heads of the Yeshivot of pre-War Europe:

Question:

To what extent is leadership scrutinized and challenged in all traditions by appeal to problematic social and historical realities? Is this a universal phenomenon?

*From his honor's words I see that he holds that all the great scholars of Israel, whose deeds are for the sake of Heaven, together with the intellectual geniuses and nobles of righteousness, who, without doubt, in all their judgments and legal decisions God stands in their divine assembly... that all of them could err completely, Heaven forbid... Whoever merited to stand before them at that time was certain that he beheld the divine Presence in their actions, and that the holy spirit hovered in their gatherings... The Sages have already instructed us to obey the words of the Sages, even if they say that the left is right, and not to say, Heaven forbid, that they have made a mistake because I, the tiny little one, clearly see their mistake. Rather, my perception is null and void like the dust of the earth before the clarity of their intellects and the divine assistance they receive... This is the mind of Torah defined by faith in the Sages (da'at Torah be-geder emunat hakhamim)... The lack of recognition of our nullity in comparison to our Rabbis is the root of all sin and the beginning of all destruction, Heaven forbid. And no merit equals the root of all, which is faith in the Sages.<sup>36</sup>*

This defense of the infallibility of the Sages of the generation formulates what has become the current Haredi conception of rabbinic leadership. Rabbi Dessler himself, as a well-connected rabbinic leader and eventually the spiritual counselor of the Ponevezh Yeshivah in Bnei Brak, did much to propagate this ethos. It is noteworthy that R. Dessler supports his expanded reading of “faith in the Sages” without resort to typical rabbinic analysis, but rather with an appeal to

personal, emotional experience of an almost mystical quality.

### III. Systemic Challenges

#### Confidence and Violence

The charisma of leadership is based on a leader's confidence, but its quality depends on the source of that confidence. Confidence lies dangerously close to egotism.

The authentic Jewish leader's confidence issues from a sense of the reality of the powerful presence of God as infinite and inexhaustible, and the sense of living in constant relation to infinite transcendence through a life imbued with Torah. Confidence is cited in the Talmud as a necessary aspect of the character of the Torah scholar:

*Rav Ashi says, any Torah scholar who is not as hard as iron is no Torah scholar, as it says 'like a hammer that shatters a rock (Jer 23:29)'... Ravina said, even so, a person must conduct himself with gentleness, as it says 'remove anger from your heart (Eccles 11:10).<sup>37</sup>*

This Talmudic discussion acknowledges the importance of confidence, its dangerous proximity to violence, and the need to temper it with gentleness. True confidence rooted in transcendence is by nature gentle, self-effacing, renewable and self-correcting, on guard again degenerating into egotism. True confidence invites the other and does not impose. If the source of confidence is belief in a finite idea or principle, even a finite idea of God, or belief

in a social order or tradition, or just a feeling of robust selfhood or mastery of skills reinforced by submissive followers, the confidence itself is limited. Religious leaders can use strategies to stir emotion in their followers to boost limited confidence, such as kindling righteous indignation, zeal, resentment and self-generated enthusiasm, all of which can mimic confidence and give an impression of resolute direction. Such passions, imposing upon the other, dismissive of the other, often lead to violence in the essential sense defined by Emmanuel Levinas: “Violence is to be found in any action in which one acts as if one were alone to act: as if the rest of the universe were there only to receive the action.”<sup>38</sup> Levinas includes in this definition the violence of religious passion as well as of struggle and war. The world-wide crisis of our age is the spread of violence instigated by inauthentically-confident religious leaders, whether it is the violence of terrorism, the violence of sexual predation, or the violence of ideologies, values and behaviors rigidly imposed upon the other.

### **The Paradox of Authority and Service**

The position of the congregational Rabbi today, found in most Reform, Conservative and Modern Orthodox communities of the Western hemisphere and in some countries in Europe, is based on a traditional rabbinic model reaching back to late first-millennium Rhineland Jewry, in which the congregational Rabbi is a communal leader whose credentials are earned through study and training and apprenticeship to the Tradition and its

teachers, but whose practical authority over the congregation is granted by the congregation itself which selects him through democratic process.<sup>39</sup> This sets up an authority paradox that can be both challenging and instructive. Tradition mandates that the Rabbi be granted respect and stature in the community, and be authorized to direct, correct and constructively criticize the very congregation that pays his salary. Each Rabbi works hard to find the proper balance that acknowledges he is accountable to God in his role as guardian of the authenticity and vitality of the Tradition, yet practically accountable to the people he serves. This need not be a paralyzing contradiction. With experience, the Rabbi learns how to appeal to the will of his congregants to perfect themselves and grow spiritually. If that sometimes requires some tough love and telling his congregants something they don’t want to hear, his financial vulnerability helps assure that he will be respectful to the sensitivities of his congregants, and use gentle persuasion to achieve spiritual goals. In a healthy relationship, the financial dependence of the Rabbi is recalled only at contract renewal time.

#### **Question:**

Is the paradox of authority limited to the model of the communal Rabbi, or is it in some way fundamental to the very reality of religious leadership?

The political dimension of the paradox of authority and service is itself rooted in a deeper, existential paradox. While service of God and others is the essential spiritual path of the Rabbi, and such service implies a high degree of self-effacement, the position of communal authority puts the Rabbi in the position of being a focus of attention, someone to whom the congregation looks for leadership, for guidance, for inspiration, and to represent them publicly. The danger of this public persona is that the Rabbi, if somewhat successful, can come to believe his own press, and the resulting egotism can be dangerous to spiritual health and honest self-awareness. Numerous warnings are issued in rabbinic literature cautioning the rabbinic leader against the occupational hazard of arrogance and egotism.<sup>40</sup>

### Teaching Theology

The Orthodox Rabbi teaches Halakhah and Torah commentary, and depending on predilection and training, Jewish philosophy, ethics and mysticism. The technical demands and vast corpus of the Halakhah, and its centrality to Orthodox life, is such that it is possible for an Orthodox Rabbi to spend all his time teaching Jewish law, and be much respected for this by congregants and colleagues, without having any feel for Jewish theology or spirituality. The same is true, *mutatis mutandis*, of Conservative and Reform Rabbis, who can be very effective at teaching Torah with an exclusive focus on ethics and social responsibility, while not necessarily having a feel for spirituality. As a consequence the

spiritual dimension of Torah can come to be regarded as a facet, but not a necessary one, of Jewish identity, and can be forgotten.

#### Question:

Is spirituality in danger only due to the centrality of the law, or is the loss of spirituality and threat to all traditions, due to the human and political dimension of religion?

### Denominational Challenges

Leaders of the Reform and Conservative movements tend to stress to their congregants the importance of moral issues and social justice, and downplay the technical legal details and textual resources of Jewish tradition, which had for centuries strengthened the sense of Jewish cultural and spiritual identity. To remedy this situation, many communities have undertaken comprehensive and well-organized educational programs and developed private Day Schools modeled on Orthodox Day Schools for their children, designed to cultivate enhanced Jewish cultural literacy among their congregants.

The Orthodox approach to Halakhah as an enormously detailed legal system is systemically in danger of slipping into mere mechanical performance. Whenever a legal system stresses compliance over principled integrity, it risks becoming shallow and subject to cutting ethical corners, stressing ends over means. A recent series of financial and business scandals involving Hasidic and

Haredi rabbinic leaders in the United States has led to some soul-searching on just this point, and prompted some Rabbinic leaders to remind their colleagues and congregants of the traditional prophetic calls for greater attention to be paid to the moral principles and core values of Torah life, and to attempt to organize institutions for ethical oversight in the community.

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*The spiritual dimension of Torah can come to be regarded as a facet, but not a necessary one, of Jewish identity, and can be forgotten*

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### **Personal Spiritual Growth and Communal Demands**

The communal demands of a rabbinic leader often make it difficult to find time for personal spiritual growth, and this can have a deleterious effect on the Rabbi's continuing ability to inspire his congregation. A Rabbi's responsibilities to the community prevent him from indulging in spiritual self-absorption, but this can be a valuable spiritual lesson in itself. The following Hasidic story concerning Rabbi Hayyim of Zanz illustrates the creative tension Rabbis often feel in balancing these competing needs:

*A rather officious man once insisted on presenting a request to Rebbe Hayyim after the Afternoon Prayer. When he refused to take no for an answer, the Zaddik spoke roughly to him. A friend who was present asked him why he was so angry, and he answered that whoever*

*uttered the Afternoon Prayer was face to face with the world of Emanation. Why should he not be angry, coming from that world, to be annoyed with the petty troubles of a petty man?*

*His friend replied, "following the passage in the Torah that tells of God's first revelation to Moses on Mount Sinai, we read 'and Moses went down from the mountain unto the people.' Rasbi's comment on this is: "this informs us that when Moses left the mountain he did not return to his own affairs, but to the people." How are we to interpret that? What affairs in the desert did our teacher Moses, peace be upon him, renounce in order to go to the people?" We must interpret as follows. When Moses descended from the mountain he was still clinging to the upper worlds and in them was accomplishing his sublime work of suffusing the divine attribute of rigor with that of mercy. Those were the affairs Moses had to attend to. Yet he paused in his great work, disengaged himself from the upper worlds and turned to the people. He listened to all their petty troubles, stored the heaviness of heart of all Israel within himself and then bore it upward in prayer."*

*When Rebbe Hayyim heard this, his anger melted away. He asked someone to call back the man he had shouted at and gave ear to his request. Almost all that night he listened to the troubles and wishes of the Hasidim gathered around him.<sup>41</sup>*

## **IV. Contemporary Challenges**

### **The Israeli Rabbinate**

Through much of Jewish exilic history, rabbinic leadership mixed religious,

social and political functions, and this is still true of most congregational rabbis of the Diaspora. The Diaspora Rabbi, as a result of these multi-dimensional roles, tends to develop a deep and complex sense of responsibility for his or her willing and supportive community, answering to the needs of a congregation that desires and even demands his services, and his sense of responsibility often extends to others outside his community.

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*The modern State of Israel has put the Israeli Rabbinate in the awkward position of having to shape its roles in a not always congenial social and political setting*

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The modern State of Israel, by ironic contrast, by its very Jewish national identity, has put the Israeli Rabbinate in the awkward position of having to find its place and shape its roles in a historically novel and not always congenial social and political setting. Some Rabbis have opted to join the State government, either as politicians or as part of a rabbinic bureaucracy.

The politicization of the rabbinate in Israel has generated dangerous antagonism within the Israeli body politic. Some Rabbis have taken to running for office for religious political parties to represent the narrow special interests of their particular religious communities on issues such as education subsidies and government religious policies. These Rabbis have abandoned the impartiality and sense of general care and

responsibility for all Jews and the goal of fostering communal unity that had been a hallmark of the traditional rabbinate. Instead, they position themselves as harsh antagonists against non-religious Jews and their representatives and interests. This has generated deep rifts of suspicion and alienation between religious and non-religious Israeli Jews.

Other Rabbis have joined a State bureaucracy that has developed to take charge of narrowly-defined issues of religious identity and ritual function. They are responsible, not for a willing congregation by choice, but for a national citizenry that is diverse, largely non-religious, and often indifferent or resistant to rabbinic involvement, perceived as interference. Rabbinic authority in this context is imposed and unaccountable, not freely chosen. The Israeli synagogue is often not a community center for social interaction, but merely a building to pray in and leave. This has led to alienation and resentment on the part of significant segments of the Israeli populace, and has left many of the traditional rabbinic functions unattended, such as social support and community building. Lately there has been some interest in developing an American style Rabbinate in Israel among the more Zionist religious communities and even among non-religious Israelis who are looking for a warmer sense of community.

Other Israeli rabbinic leaders, mostly of the Hasidic and Haredi communities, prompted by religious ideologies, have rejected becoming agents of the State, and have retained their traditional roles through cultivating and serving their own voluntarily-

constituted communities. The self-isolation of these communities, however, has sparked considerable social tension with non-religious Israelis. The Haredi leadership, far from addressing this problem or working to ameliorate it, or even seeing such amelioration as a value, tends to reinforce the ethos of isolation and separatism. Nor is this isolation limited to rejection of secular society, but rather entails a dismissal or disparagement of other religious Jews as well, leading to a movement that lacks adequate external feedback or checks and balances.

### **Autonomy versus Paternalism**

The role of Rabbi as teacher also contains a paradox. In Orthodoxy, the knowledge base required to function as an informed Jew is large, technical and highly complex, and requires years of dedicated education. The most effective teacher is one who trains and strengthens his or her student to become skilled enough to become self-reliant. This is a goal of all denominations. This ideal is expressed in the Torah itself, when Moses endorses the independent prophecy of Eldad and Medad, which appeared to threaten his authority. Joshua had complained and urged Moses to “shut them up.” Moses responds, with complete generosity of spirit and no defensiveness: “are you jealous on my account? Would that all God’s people were prophets, that God would bestow His spirit upon them (Num 11:29).”

The Hasidic and Haredi leadership ideologies, by contrast, demanding great reverence for the Rabbi and submission by

his followers, entails a different approach with different results. Lawrence Kaplan sums up the significance of this position: “Above all, the ideology of da’at Torah, with its extreme reading of emunat hakhamim, is perhaps the central element in the ethic of submission that characterizes the antimodern, haredi worldview.”<sup>42</sup> The notion of da’at Torah, Torah mind, posits that expert scholars of Torah, who have deeply internalized the thought process of Torah to the exclusion of all other modes of knowledge, can render authoritative opinions that express the principles of Torah, not just on matters narrowly defined as halakhic, but on all aspects of life.<sup>43</sup> The view of rabbinic leaders of the Yeshivah world as nearly infallible, as separated by an unbridgeable gulf of intellectual superiority from their followers, as endowed with divine authority, has helped cultivate an intense social cohesion, social pressure and conformity within Haredi groups, and is effective in maintaining group discipline and promoting dedicated Torah text learning and precision in halakhic practice. This anti-modern ideology also results, however, in a stark and intentional isolation from other Jewish groups and isolation from society in general, in Israel and the West, and has conditioned a process of infantilization among many followers when it comes to taking responsibility for one’s choices. R. Dessler states that the goal of one’s development in Torah life is to attain self reliance, to “become fit to judge ourselves in truth,” but the ethos of this ideology tends to keep its adherents in a state of dependence and submission.

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While submission may be a general spiritual virtue, in this intensified form it is liable to slip into pathology and maladaptive behaviors, such as hysterical group-think, narrow anti-intellectualism and mass violence. This tendency is exacerbated by the intentional social and intellectual isolation of the Haredi Yeshivah-centered culture from other groups, with some leading figures inciting passions of tribalism and xenophobia rather than transcendence, openness and hospitality. When the rabbinic leader is a head of an isolated organization, supported by reverent students and conferring only with like-minded colleagues, it is possible for such a leader to lose contact with social, political, moral and spiritual reality, with dangerous results for his community and himself.

### **Training for the Rabbinate**

A major portion of an American congregational Rabbi's vocation involves counseling and emotional support of congregants. Young Orthodox Rabbis fresh out of Yeshivah find that the detailed training in Halakhah they received, while central to communal practice, does not prepare them for the more personal psychological assistance they are called upon to give their congregants on a daily basis. This in an area in which Reform and Conservative

Seminaries have excelled, in offering or directing their candidates to courses in therapy and counseling, and a few Orthodox Yeshivot are beginning to learn from this example.

### **Spirituality**

Across all denominations, there is a long-standing reticence with regard to explicit and sophisticated discussion of Jewish theology, spirituality and mysticism, a pattern rooted to some extent in halakhic mandate and cautionary historical experience. Most rabbinic sermons and classes deal with moral or legal issues, or text exegesis, only rarely with theology or mysticism. During the 1960s and 1970s, the drift of some young Jews away from Judaism towards more overtly spiritual or mystical religions was partly attributable to a perceived lack of spiritual resources in Jewish tradition. In truth, the theological and mystical depth and sophistication of Jewish Tradition is profound, but modern Jewish leaders have had to work at becoming more familiar with these traditions themselves in order to convey them authentically to their communities. In this effort, which is ongoing, assistance from specialists in Jewish philosophy, Kabbalah and Hasidism from the Jewish academic community has been valuable, and Hasidic leaders have been especially effective.

### **Gender and Leadership**

In the Orthodox community, leadership is largely a male prerogative, based on legal tradition and cultural predilection. The problem is that a male-dominated

hierarchy is often not sensitive or informed regarding issues vital to the religious lives of women. There have been some attempts in the more liberal wing of Orthodoxy to find leadership roles for women, as halakhic counselors for woman's issues and as teachers in Day Schools and congregations. Modern Orthodox Rabbis are witnessing an upsurge in women's attendance in religious classes of all kinds. The Reform and Conservative movements have ordained women as full-fledged Rabbis and have women prayer leaders, and generally promote a full integration and equality of women and men in religious communal life, but are also considering the import of recent studies that have tracked a decrease in male involvement in synagogue life when women serve as Rabbinic leaders.

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*The challenge when it comes to women's leadership is to move beyond a conception of equality as mere imitation or caricature of male leadership styles to authentic women's leadership*

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The challenge when it comes to women's leadership is to move beyond a conception of equality as mere imitation or caricature of male leadership styles, with women donning male uniforms and adopting male titles and roles, to authentic woman's leadership.

There is significant precedent for genuine women's leadership in Jewish tradition. Not only Judaism, but all religious

traditions today could benefit from authentic women's leadership that brings women's sensibilities and skills to address the serious problems of contemporary religion and society, especially the swelling tide of intolerance, hatred and violence fueled by religious passions.

Question:

Would cultivating women's leadership in all faith traditions contribute to reducing intolerance and violence?

### **Interfaith Relations**

Finally, when it comes to involvement in interfaith contacts, Reform and Conservative Rabbis have taken the lead, on local, national and international levels, while Orthodox Rabbis, with some notable exceptions, tend to be more absorbed in internal group issues. This is an area of future growth for the Orthodox Rabbinate, which may be able to relate effectively to leaders of traditional religious movements in other societies, especially to those emphasizing a legal approach to religious practice, such as the Islamic traditions. Today, when the entire planet is roiling with religiously-fueled violence, particularly in the Middle East, where conflict between Jews and Muslims is especially intense, it is vital that religious leaders across all faiths come to understand each other and respect each other, and help guide their constituencies towards the true principles of the world's great religions: compassion and loving responsibility for all God's creatures, and especially for all human

beings, all of whom are created in the image of God (Genesis 1:26,27).

## **V. Leadership for the Future**

Maimonides' conception of the role of leader as to "complete every shortcoming, remove every excess,"<sup>44</sup> can be applied just as well to a prescription for future Jewish leadership in general. Each of the major groups of the Jewish community has certain strengths and weaknesses, and ideally, each group and its leaders can learn from each other. The Reform and Conservative communities have developed leadership approaches that are highly professional on the social and political levels, yet can benefit, and have benefitted from strategies of the Orthodox communities for increasing lay participation and promoting in-depth Torah education. The Haredi communities have developed intensely cohesive groups and a focused educational system that inculcates a high degree of traditional halakhic expertise and text skill among its rank and file, but at the expense of spiritual maturity and intellectual honesty. Modern Orthodox communities strive for a healthy balance between traditional practice and intellectual sophistication, but do not always succeed in promoting serious halakhic awareness and meticulous practice.

My vision for the future of rabbinic leadership would combine all the strengths of these approaches. I would envision a robust

rabbinic leadership that is well-trained in the full range of Torah Tradition and well-trained in interpersonal skills and counseling, with a full command of and commitment to the legal, ethical and spiritual dimensions of Judaism. Such leadership would not be afraid of scientific and academic knowledge because it trusts the infinite divine wisdom of Torah and really understands Torah as the structure of reality that can be fully explored using the full range of human knowledge. I envision a leadership that has a passion and enthusiasm for conveying this vital approach to Torah to all Jews, with the conviction that our calling is not only to serve all Jews, but to serve all humanity.

Only a Jewish religious leadership that is robust, enlightened and inspired can effectively address the most pressing issues of our time. Only such rabbinic leadership will have the depth of spiritual authority to offer moral guidance in the Israeli and international political sphere, to understand and to teach the lessons of the moral use of power learned over the course of two hard millennia. Only such rabbinic leadership can join effectively with all authentic religious leaders in the world-wide struggle against violence, especially the violence that grows, tragically, out of the religious sphere itself. Only such rabbinic leadership can help all humanity to realize the vision of a peaceful, compassionate, enlightened human civilization that is the cherished hope of every true religious community on our planet.

Let me close with the traditional prayer for Jewish leaders at all levels of leadership:

May salvation arise from Heaven, with grace, love and compassion, long life, abundant sustenance and heavenly help, health of the body and light from Above, with vital and robust offspring, children who will neither interrupt nor cease from words of Torah, for our masters and leaders, the holy fellowships that are in the Land of Israel and the Diaspora, for the leaders of the Torah assemblies, the leaders of the exile communities, the leaders of the academies, the judges at the gates and all their students, and to everyone who engages in Torah study. May the King of the World bless them, enhance their lives, increase their days and grant them length of years. May He save them and rescue them from every distress and all ailments. May the Master in Heaven come to their assistance at every season and time, and let us say Amen.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Midrash Yalkut Shimoni, sec. 776. Sifrei Bemidbar, Pinhas, sec. 13. Ibid., Ve-zot ha-berakhah, 344. Pesikta Zutrata, Va-ethanan.
- <sup>2</sup> Larry C. Spears, "Tracing the Growing Impact of Servant-Leadership," in *Insights on Leadership: Service, Stewardship, Spirit and Servant-Leadership*, ed. Larry C. Spears (New York, 1998) 2-3; Robert K. Greenleaf, *The Servant as Leader* (Indianapolis, 1970).
- <sup>3</sup> Yerush. Pesahim 5:5; Midrash Shochar Tov, Tehillim, secs. 18, 113.
- <sup>4</sup> Rabbi Israel Salanter: "the material needs of my neighbor are my spiritual needs." See E. Levinas, "Judaism and Revolution," in *Nine Talmudic Readings*, 99.
- <sup>5</sup> Num. 12:7, Jos. 1:2, 24:29, 2 Sam. 3:18, Is. 37:35, Mal 3:22.
- <sup>6</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, trans. A. Lingis (Pittsburgh, 1969) 48-52. Idem, "Transcendence and Intelligibility," in *Emmanuel Levinas: Basic Philosophical Writings*, ed. A.T. Peperzak, S. Critchley and B. Bernasconi, (Bloomington and Indianapolis, 1996) 150-59.
- <sup>7</sup> R. Kalonymus Kalman Epstein, *Ma'or va-Shemesh*, vol. 2 (Jerusalem, 1986) 173 (Shoftim, Som tasim alekha Melekh...).
- <sup>8</sup> Moses Maimonides, *Guide of the Perplexed*, trans. S. Pines, 2:38 (Chicago, 1969) 377-78. Steve Denning, "Narrative, a Core Competence for Leaders," in *High Performance Teams*, (August 9, 2005). [stevedenning.typepad.com](http://stevedenning.typepad.com)
- <sup>9</sup> *Likkutei Imrei Pinchas*, ed. E.E. Frankel, vol. 2 (Bnei Brak, 2003) 183-84.
- <sup>10</sup> E.g. Ps. 24.
- <sup>11</sup> Max Weber, *The Theory of Social and Economic Organizations*, trans. A. M. Henderson and Talcott Parsons. New York: The Free Press, 1947, pp. 358-392.
- <sup>12</sup> R. Hayyim of Volozhin, *Nefesh ha-Hayyim*, 4:10 (Bnei Brak, 1989) 221-225.
- <sup>13</sup> M. Buber, *Tales of the Hasidim*, vol. 1, 164.
- <sup>14</sup> Anthony J. Mayo, Nitin Nohria, and Laura G. Singleton, *Paths to Power: how Insiders and Outsiders Shaped American Business Leadership*, (Cambridge, 2007).
- <sup>15</sup> Hullin 7a: "My forefathers left me a place to distinguish myself," says Rabbi Yehudah Ha-Nasi when challenged to defend an innovative ruling he issued. See, too, Exodus Rabbah 28:4: "Rabbi Yitzhak said: everything the prophets throughout the generations were to prophecy they received at Mount Sinai... And it was not only that the prophets received their prophecy at Sinai, the sages, too, who were to arise in every generation all received their teachings there." Moses Maimonides, *Guide of the Perplexed*, trans. S. Pines, 2:40 (Chicago, 1969) 382.
- <sup>16</sup> Num. 27:15-23.
- <sup>17</sup> Midrash Shemot Rabbah, 2:2.
- <sup>18</sup> M. Buber, *Tales of the Hasidim*, 2:243.
- <sup>19</sup> David Biale, *Power and Powerlessness in Jewish History* (New York, 1986) 43-45.
- <sup>20</sup> Robert Brody, *The Geonim of Babylonia and the Shaping of Medieval Jewish Culture*, (New Haven, 1997) 35-53.
- <sup>21</sup> L. Finkelstein, *Jewish Self-Government in the Middle Ages* (New York, 1924) 7-19.
- <sup>22</sup> Avot 1:12.
- <sup>23</sup> Avot de-Rabbi Natan, version B, ch. 25.
- <sup>24</sup> E.g. Tosefta Sotah 13:3: When the last of the prophets died, Haggai, Zekhariah and Malakhi, the Holy Spirit ceased in Israel. Even so, they would inform them by a heavenly echo. Once, the sages assembled in the attic of Guria in Jericho and a heavenly echo called out to them "there is one among you worthy of the Holy Spirit, but his generation does not merit it." They
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gazed at Hillel the Elder. After he died they said “Humble one, pious one, student of Ezra.”  
 26 Bava Mezi’a 59b.  
 27 Bava Batra 12a.  
 28 Nahmanides, *Hiddushei ha-Ramban*, vol. 2, Bava Batra (New York, 1975) 5b (on Bava Batra  
 12a).  
 29 R. Abraham Isaac Kook, *Orot* (Jerusalem, 1963) 121.  
 30 Mo’ed Katan, 16b.  
 31 R. Elimelekh of Lizhensk, *Noam Elimelekh*, Va-etchanan, s.v. “ha-yom.”  
 32 R. Israel Dov Baer of Velednik, *She’erit Yisrael*, (Brooklyn, 1985) 1a.  
 33 M. Walzer, M. Lorberbaum, N.J. Zohar, eds., *The Jewish Political Tradition*, vol. 1 (New Haven,  
 2000) 299-300.  
 34 Spiritual self-reliance and direct person connection to God without the mediation of others is  
 also a stated value in the Torah itself: Num. 11:29.  
 35 R. Eliyahu Eliezer Dessler, *Mikhtav Mei-Eliyahu*, vol. 1 (Bnei Brak, 1977) 59:  
 It has been explained above... that there is a long way before us until... we become fit to  
 judge ourselves in truth. But what should we do in the meantime? Who shall show us the way?  
 What shall a blind man do when he needs to walk on an unfamiliar road? He takes someone of  
 sharp vision to guide him, or at least asks those of sharp vision at every corner he turns. So too  
 has God in His abundant love prepared for us guides, our Sages, the Sages of Torah. Any one  
 who contemplates their words sees how clear their vision was regarding their own abilities of  
 soul and those of all people, and regarding the paths a person should follow for their own  
 welfare... From this comes the definition of “faith in the Sages.” Whoever wants to believe in  
 them can utilize their clear vision, and they shall be his eyes. From their words we can receive  
 straightening in our world views and practical conduct... Therefore the great ones of our  
 generation, whose life work is to continue, as faithful students, in the paths of thought of the  
 Sages, merit uprightness in powerful measure, such that their opinions, even in matters that do  
 not have an explicit (textual) source, and even general advice in worldly matters, is clear and  
 true “like one who seeks the divine word (2 Sam. 16:23),” as we have seen with our own eyes,  
 thank God, also in this generation.  
 36 Ibid, 75-77.  
 37 Taanit 4a.  
 38 E. Levinas, *Difficult Freedom*, trans. Sean Hand, (Baltimore, 1990) 6,7.  
 39 This is actually mandated in the Talmud itself: Berakhot 55a: A leader must not be appointed  
 over the public unless the public has been consulted. L. Finkelstein, *Jewish Self-Government in the  
 Middle Ages* (New York, 1924) 1-35.  
 40 E.g. Berakhot 32a, Jerusalem Talmud Peah 8:6, Yoma 22b, Hagigah 5b.  
 41 Martin Buber, *Tales of the Hasidim*, vol. 2 (New York) 209-10.  
 42 M. Walzer, M. Lorberbaum, N.J. Zohar, eds., *The Jewish Political Tradition*, vol. 1 (New Haven,  
 2000) 305.  
 43 Y. Feitman, "Daas Torah: Tapping the Source of Eternal Wisdom", in *Torah Lives*, ed. Nisson  
 Wolpin. (Brooklyn, 1995) ix-xxviii.  
 44 Moses Maimondes, *Guide of the Perplexed*, 2:40 (Chicago, 1969) 382.