



Autumn 2008

On Charisma and Jewish Leadership

by Rabbi Jill Jacobs

What makes a great Jewish leader? Two very different examples may give us some clues.

In the 3rd Century CE, Rabbi Yochanan bar Nafcha was said to be so beautiful that he literally shone. In one Talmudic story, Rabbi Yochanan boasted to his fellow rabbis about his effect on women:

Rabbi Yochanan would go and sit at the gates of the women's bathhouse. He said, "when the daughters of Jerusalem come out from their immersion, it is a mitzvah for them to encounter me, so that they will have sons as beautiful as me, and as learned in Torah as me." The rabbis said to him, "Are you not afraid of the evil eye?" He responded, "I am from the seed of Joseph, and the evil eye has no power over me." (Bava Metziah 84a)

Rabbi Yochanan exemplified the charismatic leader who capitalized on his seductive appeal to propagate his own teachings. In this case, Rabbi Yochanan used his possibly supernatural powers to produce a generation of beautiful and brilliant children to follow in his footsteps. He judged himself a successful leader because he raised the next generation to be just like him.

In the 2nd Century CE, an earlier Talmudic leader, Rabbi Elazar ben Azariah, took a different approach. When Rabbi Elazar ben Azariah replaced Rabban Gamliel as head of the *beit midrash* (study house), he suspended Rabban Gamliel's rules restricting access to the *beit midrash* to only the most elite students. As his first act of leadership, Rabbi Elazar ben Azariah removed the doorkeeper who would keep out students who did not meet Rabban Gamliel's scholarly standards. Between 400 and 700 benches were added to the *beit midrash* to accommodate the waves of new students who seized the opportunity to study. Rabbi Elazar ben Azariah's unexpected decision paid off: On the day that the *beit midrash* was opened to the masses, the Talmud says, the most difficult legal problems were solved.

The Talmud suggests that had he chosen to do so, Rabbi Elazar ben Azariah could have led by his charisma alone. He is described as a prodigy who, at eighteen, was already sufficiently wise and wealthy to step into a position of leadership. God is said to have performed miracles for him, including turning his hair grey on the occasion of his appointment to leadership.

The difference between Rabbi Yochanan and Rabbi Elazar ben Azariah is that Rabbi Yochanan used his power to garner more attention to himself and to create leaders who were just like him, whereas Rabbi Elazar ben Azariah used his power to open leadership to the masses. The Rabbi Yochanan story leaves us thinking about the radiance of a gifted leader; the other story leaves us thinking about the power of the entire community.

For most of Jewish history, the model of the charismatic leader prevailed. Despite Rabbi Elazar's efforts, the Talmudic rabbis generally opened leadership only to a select few, considering the masses untrustworthy in many matters of religious practice. Much later, the mystical tradition produced charismatic leaders such as the 16th Century's Isaac Luria, who created a tight, elite circle around him. Not surprisingly, members of this circle competed for proximity to their leader. Hasidic communities, which form around a *Tzaddik*, or Rebbe, directly follow in the path of these mystical circles. The most charismatic leaders are often believed to have magical powers, and stories abound about their abilities to heal, to communicate with animals and to have special access to God.

To be sure, charismatic leaders have transformed Jewish life and the Jewish community. Luria and the early Hasidim taught us new ways of envisioning God and of living passionate Jewish lives. Early leaders of the Zionist and labor movements used fiery speeches and the force of personality to change the course of Jewish history.

At times, though, reliance on charismatic leaders has led to tragedy or heartbreak. Most infamously, in the 17th Century, Shabbatai Zvi persuaded entire communities of Jews that he was the Messiah. More recently, a few heavily publicized cases of rabbinic sexual scandals have reminded us that even the most trusted leaders are fallible.

As many Jews have become disillusioned with charismatic leadership, more egalitarian models have emerged. Feminism has challenged the "man on the *bima*" style of rabbinic leadership, and many women rabbis have worked to create a new model of rabbinic authority. Both male and female rabbis are currently experimenting with more facilitative modes of leadership. Some rabbis replace sermons with Torah discussions, train lay leaders to lead worship, or facilitate conversations among congregants about issues ranging from social justice to prayer practices. The Reconstructionist Movement has made community participation its hallmark. The emergence of independent *minyanim* (prayer communities) has also opened religious leadership to many without formal backgrounds. The rise of congregation-based community organizing, a means of social justice work that begins with conversations among a broad swath of congregational membership, has broadened the pool of community leaders. And across the board, the

interest of young people in do-it-yourself Judaism has reduced reliance on religious leaders.

In general, these new models follow Rabbi Elazar ben Azariah's example: the role of leadership is to cultivate the leadership abilities of other members of the community. Jewish organizations as well as rabbis have heard this call. Jewish Funds for Justice offers classes at most of the major rabbinical seminaries in which students learn a style of leadership that prioritizes listening to community members, developing leadership from within the ranks, and mobilizing this new leadership to take actions in areas of communal concern. Jewish Funds for Justice's Selah Leadership Program helps those working both within the Jewish community and in the general social justice community to cultivate a leadership style based on emotional intelligence rather than charisma. The Wexner Heritage program is designed to help lay people learn more about Judaism and to expand their leadership skills. Mechon Hadar helps independent prayer communities to take charge of their own religious experiences. These new models are already producing leaders who see the cultivation of other leaders as a major part of their communal responsibilities.

Charisma can be an invaluable leadership tool. A charismatic leader can persuade a community to take risks, to explore new ideas or to try out new modes of practice. But the very qualities that instill such a leader with power can easily be used for negative effect. Those leaders blessed with charisma have the responsibility to maintain appropriate boundaries. The community, in turn, has a responsibility to foster a culture that does not revolve only around the personality of its leader, but that can collectively cultivate the next generation to become leaders when the time is right.

When we as Jews choose our leaders, we might challenge ourselves to seek out individuals like Rabbi Elazar ben Azariah. Such people may or may not exhibit charisma, but they inspire and guide members of the community to become leaders in their own right.

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