

Daniel Sperber

I find lists of the great or the famous such a silly waste of time. I never take them as anything more than journalists' fluff. Whatever the criteria, they are bound to be subjective and superficial. By most standards of fame, singers, soccer players, and starlets are the best known and most popular. So what? Qualities of leadership are bandied all over the place, and we tend to hear about politicians most of the time. We seem to take the media as the basis of judgment. So whom do I rate?

I am not considering those who achieve something through money. I do not deny the good that money can do, but I just do not see money-making as a criterion for human nobility or spirituality. Nor does heredity confer any inherent positive values, though neither does it necessarily preclude talent or greatness. Power tends to corrupt, and the paths to power almost invariably involve dubious activities. If people with power almost automatically exclude themselves from my list, even more so do those otherwise significant and talented people who have the power to change or to stand up for certain values in Judaism but refuse to. And, given a life spent in education, I really value those who dedicate their lives to teaching.

Most of the time I am suspicious of charisma. I have seen it misused too often. I admire the modest men and women who do good works unheralded or unrecognized. But they are rarely leaders. The "tzaddik nistar" (hidden saint), who does not pursue fame or recognition, is the person who tops my list of genuine spiritual leaders. But by very definition such people are hardly known.

I admire the ancient prophets, precisely because they eschewed power, position, and popularity, and the message was their overwhelming animation. I have enormous admiration for scholars, but I know some scholars, as the Talmud says, can be vicious biting snakes. Similarly rabbis, and if they get involved in politics, we part company. I have to say that the best and most talented, by far, are based in Israel. It is almost a replay of the Talmudic era, when the Israeli rabbis used to mock the Babylonian ones for relying on outward finery to bolster their status.

Most of my readers may not have heard of Rabbi Daniel Sperber. He gets a far bigger audience outside Israel, in the USA. He is hardly appreciated in his birthplace, Britain. I first met him when I went to Kol Torah yeshiva in Jerusalem when I was 16. He took me under his wing. I was amazed at his many talents. He played the guitar well. He was a talented artist. He had a phenomenal memory. He had studied what to me felt like vast amounts with his brilliant, scholarly father in London, and he was quite definite about wanting to combine his Gemara with his familiarity with Latin and Greek. He delighted in showing me examples of Greek influence on the Talmud both in language and culture. Danny was the first genuine budding scholar I had met.

I returned to England to continue my schooling. Two years later, back in Jerusalem, once again Danny and his circle became the focal point of both my

unofficial education and my social life. In between bouts of the most intense study, his idea of a break was to go to Turkey and hitchhike east to India and beyond.

By the time I returned to England, he was well on his way to a brilliant career that led him to the professorship of Talmud at Bar Ilan University and a vast number of academic and popular publications, most notably on the origins of Jewish customs^x. He has won the Israel Prize (like a Nobel Prize of Jewish culture). He married an equally talented woman, Chana Magnus^x, and combined his academic work with being the rabbi of a small community in Jerusalem and raising a large and, unsurprisingly, creative and diverse family.

Unlike so many in both the rabbinate and academe, Danny has broader horizons. He has involved himself in interfaith dialogue. He heads a foundation dedicated to training a new generation of learned yet open-minded and tolerant Israeli rabbis. He stands up controversially and fearlessly for women's rights and an expanded role within halacha. He, unlike so many others, has been ready to put his head above the parapet and write and speak about the inconsistencies and regressive attitudes that so many rabbis in the Orthodox world today refuse to examine or stand up to. Given the fact that I tend to criticize religious leadership more often than not, it is a delight to be able to be positive about one of them for a change.

Rabbi Sperber surely cannot be as perfect as he sounds. No man could be. We have not, until recently, gone in for saints. But there you have it, a man of genuine spirituality, scholarship, broad vision and guts, not scared of controversy. Now, tell me how many people you know that you can say that of.