

# Modern Leadership

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

In the Jewish world leadership is discredited. And Chanukah is good time to discuss it. Recent exchanges on my blog have questioned my definition of "leadership". So let me clarify what I mean. All significant creative and innovative movements in religious Judaism, after Moses, have come from outside the established leadership. The prophets of Israel, the Maccabee uprising, Talmudic Judaism, medieval Kabbalah, Chasidism, and Musar have all challenged, been challenged, changed, and then themselves become stratified establishments.

Over time, most human organizations and movements atrophy, grow stale, and need either injections of new vitality or replacement. Very rarely does the person at the top have the capacity to bring about change or adaptability on his own. Sometimes challenge modifies the established order, but more often it does not. And often external circumstances do what internal leadership cannot. It is "the hour that maketh the man" rather than the reverse.

But how does one define leadership? If you live in the USA, where they love to produce lists of "the most influential", you will know that they bear little or no relevance to reality. Leadership seems synonymous with publicity and self-promotion, not with the actual numbers of people who follow, listen to, or obey. America's Rabbi, like America's Best or America's Sweetheart, are just publicity slogans.

Leadership of organizations or political parties is rarely a reflection on the power and influence of the individuals who occupy the senior positions, even when the organization itself might be numerically very significant. Sometimes the self-selected appear to wield influence. But in reality it is only their money that does.

The exception to the rule was post-destruction rabbinic Judaism, first under Ezra and then two thousand years ago, when it responded to the cataclysm with a whole raft of innovative ideas and laws. This is precisely why I tend to refer back to Talmudic authority with such devotion and admiration. Some might want to point to later attempts to reform Judaism, but I only see those as trying to adapt Judaism to other cultures.

True leadership is when someone with a vision and guts goes for it regardless, like Mattityahu and Yehudah. The Lubavitcher rebbe might be an example although his greatness lay in the creation of a dynamic missionary movement, not in a radical paradigm shift in Jewish religious thinking or halachic innovation. As for those scholars who left Eastern Europe under duress and at the last moment and helped establish new centers of learning and Torah in the USA and Israel, they were forced by circumstances rather than innovative intent. Indeed, none of the topflight Eastern European rabbinic leaders had the wisdom, foresight, or vision to encourage migration either to Israel or the West when it was still possible.

The reluctance of intense Orthodox leadership to be innovative stems from the defining characteristics of post-Enlightenment Orthodoxy as defined by the Chatam Sofer, who insisted that one retreat behind the safe walls of established tradition and reject innovation (that in itself is the exception to my rule and an example of a visionary volte-face). Or perhaps it is a visceral response both to the Holocaust and excessive modern self-indulgence.

Leadership could be defined as commanding large numbers of followers. Although Stalin's rhetorical question "How many divisions has the Pope" shows how he defined leadership. Like the Pope, the major heads of the Lithuanian and Chasidic movements, the great Sephardi rabbis command inestimably more loyalty following and commitment than any "western rabbis" or community leaders. That gives them power. But are they using that power and authority to lead or to conserve? At least the Pope is ready to think again about condoms! Besides for all these leaders' apparent power, most followers ignore their rulings when it suits them, in private at least. Religious leaders become superstitious salves for guilty consciences. And our version of Peter's Pence is a charitable donation to a man who, too often, looks the part but we would not want to emulate.

My blog commenter suggested Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz as an example of a great leader. But, as great as his contribution is through his commentaries on the Talmud, he has not been a leader; that is, I am not aware that he has championed causes or entered the lists (other than a brief, and ill-advised sortie into an attempt to recreate the Sanhedrin).

I can, with hindsight, see the impact of the Hippy Revolution in the USA, which led to the Chavura movement, Shlomo Carlebach, and various New Age rabbis. But all of them functioned independently of established organizations, and the actual lifestyle example they set has been left behind. I think of the rise of Jewish education, which (outside of the ultra-Orthodox world) is overwhelmingly due to the failure of state educational systems. And the largest single factor in the rise of Charedi Judaism has been the social welfare system that, more than anything else, has enabled so many thousands of families to live a life of study and subsist without other means of support.

Philanthropic funds have done a great deal, but these too are sui generis creations and vehicles of individuals, not vehicles of leadership. Whether one thinks of Zionist organizations, federations, unions of synagogues, lay representative bodies—they all, by nature and record, tend to preserve the status quo and discourage innovation and creativity.

The exciting contributions I can think of, whether in the realms of adult education or the evangelical movements from within Orthodoxy—such as Ohr Somayach, Aish Hatorah, the new alternative minyanim and egalitarian communities in the USA and Israel—they were started by individual initiative, rather than organizational fiat and they are independent. Even so, they are on the periphery of Judaism. The established rabbinates of all colors have done nothing I can think of that is creative or innovative to grapple with the challenges of our times.

Thinking, creative Orthodoxy exists today in two areas—academia and grassroots. If I am scornful of “leadership”, I am full of admiration for what I see as the survival and growth of thinking Orthodoxy, even if it lacks powerful leaders. I do not for one moment deny the value and need for organizations, for structures and agencies and representation. But their role is largely preservative. It is the spirit of individual Jews that I find so impressive and which gives me cause for tremendous optimism. We refer to Moses not as “Moses our Leader” but rather “Moses our Teacher”. And therein lays the secret of survival.

Happy Chanuka.