

Leadership

How does a leader lead best? We have three examples of leadership in our patriarchs. Abraham embodies *Hesed*, or lovingkindness. He defends to people of Sodom and Gomorrah when God wants to destroy them, asking “Will you sweep away the innocent along with the guilty?”¹ Abraham also embodies ‘radical hospitality,’ rushing to greet three men who visit his tent despite the pain he was feeling from his circumcision. Yet there is concurrently something lacking in Abraham. He rushes to Sarah and has her drop everything she is doing in order to feed the men. He hurries to Mount Moriah with his son Isaac as a sacrifice, prepared to kill him until an angel intercedes. Abraham is ‘anxious to please,’ pleasing other while neglecting the needs of his family.

In contrast to Abraham, Isaac embodies *gevurah*, which I choose to translate as resilience. Despite the trauma of almost being sacrificed by his father, Isaac marries Rebecca and fathers two children, Jacob and Esau. He chooses to put aside the anguish, the hurt that a beloved father would kill him to please God, and begins a new generation. Yet some of Isaac’s trauma remains; he is permanently scarred. Isaac becomes a passive character, manipulated by Rebecca and Jacob. In Parshat VaYetze, Jacob says “the fear of Isaac.”² *Pahad Yitzhak* is a way I understand our patriarch, though not in the traditional sense. He was too afraid to act and thus became the object of other people’s actions.

Jacob’s approach is the one I think leaders should emulate. Yes, Jacob the *kniver*, who took Esau’s birthright for a bowl of stew. According to tradition, Jacob embodies *tiferet*, the glory of God, and also *emet*, truth. He is a visionary who begins with the end in mind, and then seizes the opportunity to obtain his goals of receiving the birthright and blessing. Even with God Jacob has a plan. When he is a refugee from his home, running in fear of his brother Esau, using a stone as a pillow, Jacob vows that he will believe in god only “if God remains with me, if God protects me on this journey and gives me bread to eat and

clothing to wear.”³ A leader needs to be able to speak his/her truth with conviction while also being receptive to the truths of others. Being in active dialogue about what we need and doing things not because they are popular but because they are right (in other words, having the courage of our convictions) is the hallmark of effective leadership.

In her article “Why the Most Successful Leaders Don’t Care About Being Liked,”⁴ my former life coach Deborah Grayson-Riegel wrote “When does being liked become a problem? **When it comes at the expense of being respected.**” She continues, “According to scientist Cameron Anderson of the Haas School of Business at the University of California, Berkeley, overall happiness in life is related to **how much you are respected by those around you.** Nevertheless, when we sacrifice what it takes to be respected for the quicker, and often easier, win of feeling liked, we lose out on the benefits that respect yields.” Grayson-Riegel concludes “For professionals who want to grow in their roles and careers, being liked is good, but **being respected is a requirement.** As Margaret Thatcher once remarked, ‘If you just set out to be liked, you would be prepared to compromise on anything at any time, and you would achieve nothing.’”

We recognize this week in Parshat VaYera the dangers of Abraham doing God’s will in blind faith. We will see in Parshat Toledot the dangers of Isaac being so restrained he loses all sense of agency. While Jacob is far from perfect and certainly did not have an easy life—especially at the end—his sense of how to achieve what one needs is what we should emulate.