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On Reluctant Leadership

What Moses, Jeremiah, and Esther can teach us about accepting responsibility



MY FAMILY was one of the many called to rise reluctantly in the aftermath of the October 7 massacre. Our global, and tragically failed, quest to save our wounded son Hersh from captivity in Gaza exposed our family to the halls of power worldwide. And throughout the 330 days of our personal ordeal, we discovered that the interests (that word, *interests*, would come up often) of the leaders who occupy those halls often conflicted with ours: to save as many hostages as possible as quickly as possible. Though many people have done their best to convince us that our devastating outcome was not a failure on our part, I realize that we did fail to identify and mitigate three specific flaws prevalent among global leaders: lack of empathy, inactivity in the face of urgency, and failure to foster unity.

The biblical figures Moses, Jeremiah, and Esther—called to rise against their wishes and above their personal interests—are among our greatest teachers of leadership. When God appears to

Moses at the burning bush and calls him to free the Jewish people from slavery in Egypt, Moses famously responds, “Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and free the Israelites from Egypt? ... Please, O my Sovereign, make someone else Your agent” (Exodus 3:11–4:13). The prophet Jeremiah, upon having prophecy revealed to him, resists: “I don’t know how to speak, for I am still a boy” (Jeremiah 1:6). And in perhaps the most quoted line of the book of Esther, Esther’s cousin Mordechai responds to her self-doubt by insisting that she can indeed use her position of leadership to save her people: “And who knows if for just such a moment you have reached royalty?” (Esther 4:14).

What can contemporary people in positions of power and civil society learn from Moses, Jeremiah, and Esther?

We hostage families tried to foster empathy by presenting each of our loved ones as the vibrant individual that each is. Through the collective efforts of the hostage families, the world learned that Carmel loved yoga, that Chaim was an advocate for peace, and that Hersh was a radical listener and a vegetarian who didn’t eat vegetables. But it seemed that too many people in power saw only chess pieces. We repeatedly met leaders who failed to truly empathize with the suffering of their people. Conversations frequently revealed the geopolitical matrix at play (“We’ll do this, then they’ll do that, then we’ll do this...”), all absent one key component: that the pieces in this strategic game were real live human beings. The pawns were our beloved parents and siblings and children.

In contrast to many contemporary decision-makers who lack empathy, each of our reluctant biblical leaders mastered this capacity. Shortly before Moses is called to rise and lead the Jewish people, the text tells us *va-yar b’sivlotam*, literally that “he saw *into* their suffering.” He didn’t just observe that his people were suffering; he empathized with them in a manner that moved him to his core, that

brought him inside the suffering. Every year at the Passover seder, we are asked to emulate this empathy, to see ourselves as though we have been personally saved. Jeremiah, generally credited as the author of the most heartrending book in the Jewish canon, the book of Lamentations (Eicha), felt the pain of his people so deeply that he is known as the “weeping prophet.” He weeps as he says, “Oh, that my head were water, my eyes a fount of tears! Then would I weep day and night for the slain of my poor people” (Jeremiah 8:23). Esther is so in sync with the plight of her people that she joins them in the very action that she requests in their moment of peril: “Go, assemble all the Jews who live in Shushan, and fast on my behalf. . . . I and my maidens will observe the same fast” (Esther 4:16).

We hostage families regularly warned the people holding the reins, “Our loved ones are held by a terror organization in a war zone. At any moment, the captors are likely to line up our loved ones and shoot them execution-style. Why are you not acting with appropriate urgency to save innocent lives?” We were repeatedly told in response, “That won’t happen. We’ll get the hostages out. We just need a little more time.” While military action was consistent, the negotiations that were clearly required to free hostages happened only intermittently and often with an unclear mandate for action. On day 330, Hersh, Ori, Almog, Alex, Carmel, and Eden (the Beautiful Six) came back in body bags. Hersh had six bullet holes in his body. Forty-six of the hostages who were taken alive into captivity returned home in bags. Many of the hostages who did come home alive now ask why it took 400, 500, 600 days. Where was the required action in the face of urgency?

A bias toward action is a trait that distinguishes great leaders. Though reluctant to lead, Moses exemplified that bias. Sometimes those instincts were questionable—was killing the Egyptian who had been berating a Jew the appropriate response?—but Moses’s bias to do something led an oppressed people from slavery to freedom,

and thousands of years later his methods are studied far outside the realms of Bible classes. Esther's need to do something came at great personal risk. She understood the risk when she implemented her plan to convince the king to reverse the evil decree: "If I am to perish, I shall perish" (Esther 4:16). To state what seems obvious: Leaders must not sit idly by, especially when the situation is clearly a matter of life and death.

Finally, we hostage families, who included all stripes on the political, socioeconomic, and religious spectrums, deliberately met with communities outside our own, in Israel and around the world, to build a shared sense of support, purpose, and unity. Hostages, we pleaded, are a human issue. It largely worked. In Israel, the Haredim prayed along with the National Religious, civil society marched, and soldiers came off the battlefield and reported to the hostage families that the mission to bring our beloveds home was what motivated them to keep going. On the global stage, one memorable demonstration of solidarity occurred at the Democratic National Convention a mere eight days before the Beautiful Six were to be executed. Bracing for the possibility of a mixed, or even hostile, reaction, my wife Rachel and I were moved to tears when we walked out to address the United Center crowd in Chicago, to the roar of tens of thousands of people, a few clad in keffiyehs, chanting "Bring them home." To so many, even in the fog of war, the hostages remained a unifying force.

Lamentably, despite commendable unity among the people, some leaders, at best, failed to use their influential voices to strengthen the unity. At worst, they used their influence to drive wedges between hostage families and soldier families, military-action-only families and negotiation-families, and more. This destructive discord hurt our cause and harmed Israel and the Jewish people, a harm that persists to this day.



Plato had the same insight as the Bible when he wrote, roughly 2,400 years ago, that “he who does not desire power is most fit to hold it.” If that is so, our age is not one rich in fit leadership. Today’s political reality is that many of our leaders are the people who most crave power, and not always because they have been called to rise by life’s circumstances. Yet, within this reality, we citizens have a critical role to play. By and large, all the hostage families, each in their own way, employed the lessons of Moses, Jeremiah, and Esther. We tried to foster empathy, we pleaded for appropriate action, and we mostly modeled the unity that is possible among diverse populations. Empathy, a bias for appropriate action, and unity are not partisan issues. These are human virtues that we all must consistently demand of ourselves and our leaders, despite our healthy political differences.

Perhaps IDF Brigadier General Dan Goldfus is well-versed in the Bible. Called to rise after October 7, Goldfus spoke these commanding words from the Gaza border in March 2024:

I ask at this opportunity to address our leaders, from both sides....You need to be worthy of us. You need to be worthy of the soldiers who lost their lives. You need to be worthy of the reservists who don’t care what [political] side they are on, and fought and fight alongside each other...that all the effort and sacrifice won’t be in vain....I ask of you to be together, united, push away the extreme, and adopt togetherness. Find what unites....Make it worth [it].

The test of leadership is not how badly one wants power but whether, once given power, one can still see the suffering of the people, hold them together, and act with necessary urgency on their behalf. The test of society is to identify and cultivate the leaders who exemplify

these qualities. And, just as Moses and Jeremiah each maintained these qualities for roughly 40 years in leadership, our responsibility is to hold our leaders ceaselessly accountable to these high ideals. In the words of Emily Dickinson:

We never know how high we are
Till we are called to rise;
And then, if we are true to plan,
Our statures touch the skies —



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