

The Chutzpah Factor

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From the outset, let me offer my most sincere appreciation to Ann Kimball for the magnificent way that she has shepherded, and guided, and facilitated our new leadership class. Ann is always enthusiastic and, she completely understands the necessity of regenerating this Congregation's leadership and taking us toward an ever-prouder future of service to God, to the household of Israel, and to the human family. Thank you Ann, for a superlative job well done.

Let me also congratulate each of the graduates of our new leadership class. You have persevered and creatively participated in all aspects of your introduction to Jewish administrative chaos and in the challenges that every synagogue faces. Your fundraising efforts with that delightful comedian were very successful, and we appreciate your generosity, your hard work, and your vision.

For thoughtful Jews, I suppose there are some obvious answers to the question, "What do you think is the number one challenge facing the American Jewish community in this first decade of the 21st century?"

I. Intermarriage

The first thing you might think of is the problem and challenge of intermarriage, which now exceeds 50% in many regions of our country. To compare: the rate of intermarriage was only 6% only 25 or 30 years ago.

II. Rate of Unaffiliated

Problem number two might be the rate of unaffiliated within the American community. There are too many that fail to support any synagogue whatsoever, and who, by reason of their charitable contributions, or membership in Jewish social organizations, country clubs, or auxiliaries, or the quantity of white fish and bagels consumed on Sunday morning feel that they have done all they need to do to assure and maintain a viable Jewish future. They're very wrong. It's sadly common for major urban centers of the United States to have 60-80% rates of unaffiliated within their Jewish community.

III. Religious School Enrollment

A third answer as to our greatest problem might well be the plummeting religious school enrollment and an alarming dropout rate in the post-B'nai Mitzvah year. After they have memorized their Torah verses and Haftarah and received the overwhelming accolades of the synagogue auxiliaries, officers, and board (not to mention the Rabbi and the Cantor); after they've been expertly coifed, elegantly garbed, and their certificates have been filled with calligraphy; and after the reception has been videotaped and lavishly catered, so many Jewish adolescents feel that they know everything about their Judaism. So, they just drop out of religious school! Thankfully that does not happen often at Temple Sinai or in New Orleans, but it's common in major Jewish centers.

In my opinion, none of these is the number one problem and challenge facing the future of American Judaism. I think that that sad and troubling distinction goes to our dearth of leadership. I mean, the lack of doers and willing spirits who will step forward

and assume responsibility and even risk their very reputations to do the job. Have you ever thought to:

- Bring off a fundraising event?
- Or rebuild a PTA?
- Or chair a committee, maybe?
- Perhaps establish an agenda for the social justice committee?
- Or maybe just think of a new pattern for our worship?
- Have you ever asked who is going to assure that people have rides to the Temple on Friday evenings?
- Or who will bake the chicken for the Shabbat dinner?
- Who's going to take the reservations for the Seder?
- Anybody want to write a PR article for a newspaper?
- Who will inform the Rabbi when someone is in the hospital?
- Who will be there to help him decorate the succah?
- And, who'll bring back a person whose feelings have been hurt, so that they'll worship with us again at here at Temple Sinai?
- Are you planning to attend the Bible study class?
- What about attending a conference or represent the group?
- Who wants to step forward to be the new board member?
- Or maybe you'd like to help in the Capital Campaign, to make sure that everyone is invited to participate?

Any one of these things needs to be done within any given year.
Yeah, we have a leadership crisis within the Jewish community.

I understand that economic necessity forces many people who once were available for volunteer duty to go back to work. It isn't unheard of to pay \$15,000 a year for a preschool, of all things. And yes, I understand that many new careers have been launched because of single-parent homes and the increased rate of divorce.

But, I don't want us to beat our breasts and gnash our teeth. We can save the sackcloth and ashes for another time, so don't feel too terribly guilty about all of this. I really believe we can view this dearth of leadership from a larger perspective, for it is merely a symptom of our times. Ever since the early 1960s, synagogue life has suffered a famine of genuine, certifiable, and honest leadership.

The truth is that we live in hard times for would-be leaders. Leadership has lost much of its prestige. I don't know whether it was the assassinations of the '60s or the disillusionment after the race riots and antiwar movements, not to mention two presidents back-to-back – Johnson and Nixon – who left us deeply cynical and suspicious that our government would no longer be honest. Regardless, these are hard times for would-be leaders.

Many would say that Ronald Reagan was a fine leader. I understand why, but my political bias refuses to admit the possibility! Personally, I thought Bill Clinton was an excellent leader; but, most of you would probably disagree. We won't even begin to discuss the current occupant of the White House. But, the point is made: leadership has lost much of its prestige and automatic respect.

I. Learning

So, I think that there are five essential steps to restoring Jewish leadership. The first one is learning. Our Congregation's new leadership understands well that a leader must be intellectually prepared and Jewishly literate. I don't mean to say that one needs to be an ordained Rabbi to be the president of a congregation or the chair of a committee. But, I cannot understate the importance of intellectual preparedness.

There's a story about a poor half-wit who is befriended by a millionaire who happens to have his own private orchestra. So, one day this half-wit comes to his benefactor and asks for a position in the orchestra.

Astonished, the rich man said, "You know, I had no idea that you could even play an instrument."

He answered, "I can't, but I see you have a fellow that does nothing but wave a stick around while the others play. I know I could handle his job."

The first thing you need to realize is that leadership is much more than going through the motions. It is much more than acting and waving a stick over others' heads. Those who aspire to leadership must be well-informed in their Judaica. They need some very important insight into human nature and into the subtleties of working with people.

H. Gordon Selfridge built one of the world's largest department stores in the city of London, England. Selfridge succeeded by being a leader, not a boss. There's an important distinction between the two. Here is Selfridge's own comparison of the two types of leaders:

The boss drives his employees; the leader coaches them. The boss depends upon authority; the leader, on good will. The boss inspires fear; the leader inspires enthusiasm. The boss says 'I'; the leader says 'we.' The boss fixes the blame for the breakdown; the leader fixes the breakdown. The boss says 'Go!'; the leader says 'Let's go!'

II. Imagination

The second thing to know is that a Jewish leader – or any leader for that matter – must possess imagination. That person must be able to bring a vast creative ability to bear upon the obvious facts. A true leader imagines wholeheartedly and thinks and

dream of a brighter future – and then, that leader works out the practicalities of those dreams and ambitions. A leader must be a person with vision!

III. Think Soundly

Thirdly, a Jewish leader must think soundly. A genuine leader of people is the one who balances imagination with sound thought. The dreamer sees castles in the sky, but the leader combines imagination and reason. That leader sees the castle and delves into the earth and plans a foundation able to bear the weight of its completed structure. Emerson said it best: “The hardest job in the world is to think.” And I think that often, it’s also the loneliest job.

IV. Initiative

And fourth, a great leader initiates. How many would-be thinkers are there who know how to organize and perform their visions, but do nothing about it? There are people with intelligence running out of their ears, but they lack the impulse, the ambition, the initiative, and the discipline to enact their ideas.

V. Tenacity

Fifth and finally, a great Jewish leader diligently applies him-or-herself to every task and does so with unmitigated tenacity. Leadership is not luxurious. You don’t just bask in the light of notoriety and honor. Rather, leadership involves unceasing effort and unflinching dedication. And often, when the team fails, you have to shoulder the blame. And when it succeeds, a smart leader credits everyone else. It makes me think of the Talmudic statement: “Leadership shortens life.” Leading is not easy and in leading our fellow Jews is rarely a simple task (bless their hearts!). In the Midrash, Exodus Rabba, it is written that God once advised Moses and Aaron:

My children are obstinate, ill-tempered, and troublesome. In assuming leadership over them, expect to be cursed and even stoned by them.

Well now, I’ve never met anyone who has been stoned, but I’ve certainly met more than a few who have been emotionally beat up. Dr. Robert McCreech, the former president of the American Association of Volunteer Bureaus, offers this advice that surely applies to the graduates of our leadership development program and to any one of us who would step forward to lead

Dr. McCreech advises, that anyone working with volunteers...

...needs to have the patience of Job, the wisdom of Solomon, and the hide of a rhinoceros. A few years ago [writes Dr. McCreech], (a man) sought to describe his wife’s role as director of volunteers in a Los Angeles-area hospital. She was expected to scintillate like a social matron; plan broad programs like an executive; compose

detailed procedures like a method analyst; interview like a well-trained psychologist; keep time like a clerk; write sparkling, yet homey, yet business-like correspondence; speak with authority, yet social temerity; investigate irregularities like a James Bond; coordinate like a joint chief of staff in the Pentagon; and finally, sit on a fence and take a stand.

Leadership is American Jewry's greatest need. We need people with too much faith to say no – I mean people who dare to serve and who strive to lead. There are jobs to do, and there are problems that desperately need willing hearts and worthy minds. Thus, I say to you: dare to lead our people! Wherever you are, whatever your role in this Temple or in any organization, dare to raise your hand to lead! Take a chance that someone will criticize you, because by God, they will! Only the person that never does anything is safe from criticism. And often, those criticizing you will secretly wish they had your bravery. Remember the old adage: it's always better to try and fail than do nothing and succeed.

We Jews live in history's kitchen. Philosophers, theologians, and historians have asked why it is that we always seem to be at the vortex in every age's swirling events.

We read in our Torah how our ancestors came to stand at the foot of Mt. Sinai and accepted a Brit – a sacred covenant, and a contract made between themselves and God. They made a deal with the Creator that not only bound them, but binds us as well. They agreed to individually and collectively enter history's kitchen as God's co-partners and to labor for a society of greater justice, righteousness, peace, and freedom.

But remember, we Jews aren't the only ones in covenant with God. Anyone who will take the heat can walk into history's kitchen. This covenant is not exclusive. But as a Jew, you cannot escape taking your turn in kitchen duty. Others may be free to leave, but we are not. We are called to labor as God's servants to repair this broken world.

And so it is: those who dare to lead – the ones who have the Chutzpah and the nerve to hang in there – they will lift a worthy vision before those who are young and older. They will suffer fools, while guiding them and providing a worthy example. And they will, above all else, make a healthful, constructive difference in the future of Judaism.

Congratulations to each one of our graduates, for you are all infected with the Chutzpah factor! We pray that you will dare to serve and dare to lead, and that God will bless you in your endeavors with rich success.

Amen