



RABBI SHALOM

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MAGGID SHIUR, DAF YOMI, OU.ORG
ROSH BAIS MEDRASH ENGLISH SPEAKING PROGRAM JCT MACHON LEV

Leadership: Power or Influence?

Toward the end of *Parashat Beha'alotcha*, the Torah describes a remarkable moment in the development of spiritual leadership within the Jewish people. Moshe Rabbeinu gathers seventy elders and the Divine spirit rests upon them. Included in this group are Eldad and Meidad who begin to prophesize in the camp. A young man runs to inform Moshe, and Yehoshua, Moshe's devoted disciple, reacts with alarm. Fearing a challenge to Moshe's unique authority, he urges: "*My master Moshe, restrain them!*"¹

Moshe's response, however, is astonishing. Rather than perceiving their prophecy as a threat, he answers with generous vision:

*"Are you jealous for my sake? Would that all of Hashem's people were prophets, that Hashem would place His spirit upon them!"*²

Moshe dreams not of exclusivity but of expansion. In his ideal world, prophecy would not be the privilege of a few but the spiritual potential of all. Yet only a few *parashiyot* later, in *Parashat Korach*, a seemingly similar claim provokes the opposite reaction. Korach confronts Moshe and Aaron with the declaration: "*The entire congregation,*

all of them, are holy."³ Here, Moshe does not welcome the sentiment. Instead, he recognizes it as rebellion. The confrontation escalates dramatically, culminating in divine judgment when the earth opens and swallows the rebels.

The contrast is striking. When Eldad and Meidad prophesize, Moshe celebrates it. When Korach claims equality, Moshe opposes it forcefully. Why the difference?

POWER AND INFLUENCE

A profound explanation is offered by Rabbi Jonathan Sacks,⁴ who draws a distinction between **power** and **influence**.

At first glance, the two appear similar. The person with the most power often seems to have the most influence, while those with little authority appear to wield little impact. Yet Rabbi Sacks explains that the two operate according to entirely different principles.

POWER DIVIDES

Power is finite. If a leader holds the authority to make every decision and then shares that authority with someone else, his own power diminishes. The more power is distributed, the less remains concentrated in any one individual. Power therefore functions as a zero-sum game: one person's gain is another's loss.

Korach sought precisely this type of authority. His challenge was not about spiritual inspiration; it was about who held the reins of leadership. By claiming that "the entire congregation is holy" he was effectively claiming

1. Bamidbar 11:28

2. Bamidbar 11:29

3. Bamidbar 16:3

4. Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, *Lessons in Leadership* p. 193-197

equality and demanding a share in Moshe's governing authority. Moshe understood that such a demand threatened the structure necessary for communal stability. Leadership based on power cannot be endlessly divided without collapsing into chaos.

INFLUENCE MULTIPLIES

Influence works in the opposite manner. When a teacher inspires students, and those students go on to inspire others, the teacher's influence does not diminish, it expands. The more influence is shared, the greater its reach becomes. Influence therefore operates as a multiplication, not a division.

This is why Moshe rejoiced when Eldad and Meidad prophesized. Their prophecy did not compete with his leadership but extended it. The Divine spirit that rested upon Moshe was now radiating outward through others. What Yehoshua saw as a threat, Moshe saw as a triumph.

TWO MODELS OF LEADERSHIP

The Torah presents two fundamentally different models of leadership.

Korach represents leadership as power.

Leadership becomes a struggle over status, authority, and control. When power is the goal, leadership becomes competitive and confrontational.

Moshe represents leadership as influence.

Leadership becomes the ability to inspire others to grow, to think, to teach, and to elevate those around them.

Judaism consistently expresses deep ambivalence about leadership defined primarily by power. Kingship itself is surrounded by caution in the Torah. By contrast, the tradition places extraordinary emphasis on prophets, teachers, and sages. These figures' authority rests not on coercion but on inspiration.

Indeed, throughout Jewish history the most

enduring leaders have rarely been those with the greatest formal authority. Rather, they were those whose words, ideas, and spirit transformed others. Their leadership was measured not by the power they possessed, but by the influence they generated.

The Torah's vision of leadership challenges us to reconsider what it means to make an impact in the world. Many people believe influence requires position, title, or authority. The Torah teaches the opposite. The most powerful force in Jewish life has never been political power but spiritual influence. True leadership is exemplified by the ability to illuminate minds, inspire hearts, and awaken greatness in others.

Every parent who shapes a child's character, every teacher who ignites curiosity, every friend who strengthens another's faith participates in the same sacred chain of influence that began with Moshe Rabbeinu. This type of influence, unlike power, has no limits. When we share wisdom, encouragement, and faith, we multiply rather than diminish. One inspired person inspires another, and the light continues to spread.

Moshe's dream was not that a few should lead while others follow. His dream was that an entire nation should become a source of prophecy, inspiration, and moral vision. *"Would that all of Hashem's people were prophets."*⁵

That dream remains the calling of the Jewish people. May we seek to build a community not of competing power, but of expanding influence, where every individual becomes a source of light for others, and where the spirit of Torah flows outward, illuminating the world. ■

5. Bamidbar 11:29