

On Choosing Leaders and the Meaning of Integrity

Parashat Va'era 5783

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With all the scandals and shenanigans politicians pull around the country, it's rare that the dubious character in the hotseat is your own guy. And yet here we are, in the 3rd Congressional District of New York, and it's our very own representative—the now infamous George Santos—who's the butt of every joke.

And then, of course, there are the classified documents in the garage in Delaware and the golf resort in Florida, and the special prosecutors, and the perennial investigations and document requests. Plus, you may not have realized this, but this month marks the 25th anniversary of Bill and Monica, which somehow makes us nostalgic for the good old days when it was “just about sex.”

And all this is just what I saw on the news today while I was eating lunch!

If we're interested in thinking about the challenges of choosing good leaders, modern America gives us an abundance of good material.

And, not surprisingly, so does Judaism.

This week is a good time to talk about it—not only because of today's news, but also because in our parashah this week Moses steps into his role as God's designated leader and goes to Pharaoh to demand that he let the Israelites go.

Now, Moses is a complex character. On the one hand, he is courageous, humble, and highly evolved spiritually. On the other hand, he's somewhat irritable; he thinks he can do everything himself; and he struggles with anger management.

But all that comes later.

At this point in our story, the more pressing—and scandalous—question is about Moses's father, Amram.

See, buried deep in one of those genealogies we usually skip over, the Torah says, “Amram took his father's sister Yocheved as his wife, and she bore him Aaron and Moses.” (Gen. 6:20)

Let me repeat that in case you missed it: “Amram took his father's sister Yocheved as his wife. ...”

That's right, friends: Amram married his aunt and had kids with her! Meaning that Moses's mother was also his great-aunt. Gross!

Now, you might be inclined to say: Well, that's just how they did it in ancient days.

But, actually, the Torah itself, in *Leviticus* Chapter 18, says specifically, “Do not uncover the nakedness of your father's sister.” So, sorry Amram—having children with your aunt is a big Torah no-no.

And this was the father of Moses!

Just like the pundits on TV today, the classical talking heads—like Rashi and others—were all abuzz about this. Some denied that she was really his aunt; some made excuses for Amram; and some condemned him for acting so inappropriately.

In the end, the behavior of biblical figures like Amram and King David—who also did some pretty shady stuff in his day—and the understandable desire for community leaders to be upstanding human beings give rise to a conversation in Jewish literature about what kind of people we should choose to lead us.

Two contrasting approaches emerge.

One is found in the halakhic discussion about who is fit to be chosen as a prayer leader. The Hebrew term for that role is *shaliach tzibbur*, which means “representative of the community.”

The 13th-century Spanish halakhic scholar Rabbi Jacob ben Asher contends that the only people who are fit to serve as *shaliach tzibbur* are people who are “empty of sin” and who have an unblemished reputation (Tur, OH 53 and Beit Yosef ad loc.).

Clearly, the intent is that only people who are unquestionably honest and upright can be entrusted with the responsibility of representing the community. But it’s obviously an impossible standard in practice.

The other approach is articulated by the medieval French Rabbi Hezekiah ben Manoach—known by his nickname Chizkuni—in his commentary on Amram’s marriage to his own aunt.

Chizkuni is genuinely puzzled by how such people—a nephew and his aunt who married each other—could become the parents of Judaism’s greatest leader.

The only explanation, he says, is that there is a rule—a *rule*—that “we do not appoint a person to [a position of high leadership] unless the people were aware of at least *something* inappropriate that such a person had been *guilty* of actively or passively before his appointment.”

This is the complete opposite of the first view.

Chizkuni’s implication is that we shouldn’t entrust someone with the responsibility of leadership *unless* they are *known* to be guilty of some wrongdoing first!

Why? One explanation is that this “will diminish the chances of such high-ranking people allowing their high office to [cause them to] develop feelings of superiority to those around [them].”¹

In short, it seems that the view that only those who have done no wrong should be chosen is based on the belief that trustworthiness is rooted in *purity*, while the view that only those who are known to have sinned should be selected is based in the idea that trustworthiness is rooted in *shame*.

Both approaches, though, seem inherently flawed.

On the one hand, there is no such thing as a person who has never done anything wrong in their life or had a negative word spoken about them.

On the other hand, while recognition of one's own past transgressions can surely cultivate humility and empathy, we also know that there are some people who are, quite simply, shameless.

Clearly, there's another element that neither of these two models accounts for.

That element, I think, is *integrity*—and it transcends the issue of whether a person has an unblemished record or is known to have committed wrongs in the past.

No one is perfect, of course; everyone makes mistakes, sometimes even really bad ones.

Integrity is about how we handle ourselves and our relationships with others when we've done wrong.

Lolly Daskal, a contemporary leadership coach and author who is also Jewish, argues that there are six key measures of integrity (and here I'll quote and paraphrase her at length from her book *The Leadership Gap*):

One: "Honoring commitments. [Are you willing to] be accountable and responsible for what you say and do[?]"

Two: "Speaking with honesty. ... [Are you willing to speak] the whole truth, even when it may have a negative effect on the relationship[?]"

Three: "Maintaining a consistent moral code. Doing what is right is not always easy, but those who have integrity do not compromise their moral code, even if it means there will be consequences."

Four is "Embracing unwavering convictions." Are you able to "[acknowledge] your convictions" and are you committed to "act accordingly"?

Five: "Treating everyone with respect. [Do you] treat everyone with the same respect you'd expect" from them?

And six: "Establishing trust." Do your words match your actions? Do your actions match your promises?²

With this list, Daskal makes a meaningful contribution to Jewish thought on choosing leaders.

She teaches us that the traditional question of whether a person has transgressed in their life or not is too simplistic and an inadequate criterion for choosing leaders.

The better question when deciding whether a person should be entrusted with leadership is: Is this a person of integrity?

Is this someone who is transparent, and admits when they've made a mistake, and acknowledges that their judgment isn't perfect, and is guided by a moral code, and is willing to hold them self accountable to that code, even if doing so costs them dearly?

Maybe Moses's father, Amram, *was* that kind of person, even if he *did* marry his own aunt.

(But, still, just to be clear: You should definitely not marry your aunt.)

1 Sefaria editor's gloss to Chizkuni's comment to Ex.

6:20, https://www.sefaria.org/Chizkuni%2C_Exodus.6.20.1?lang=bi

2 The above six measures of integrity are quoted and paraphrased from Lolly Daskal, *The Leadership Gap*, 128-131