



*“Words from the Heart
Enter the Heart”*

BAMIDBAR > Korach

By Rabbi Simon Jacobson

July 9, 2016

Korach

**The Rebbe, Elie Wiesel and
a Lesson in Leadership**



Meaningful Sermons *“Words from the Heart Enter the Heart”*

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ABSTRACT

Korach attacked the epitome of Jewish leadership, Moses and Aaron.

Korach’s grandson reached the epitome of Jewish leadership and was compared to Moses and Aaron.

In this sermon you will discover who Korach’s grandson was and what made him such a great leader – perhaps even greater than Moses in one way.

You will also discover – via a lesson from the Talmud – that you have the very same leadership instinct and ability embedded into your DNA.

Gimmel Tammuz concealed the leader of our generation, compelling us all to be his shluchim – his arms and legs in carrying out his mission, as leaders of our respective communities, each in our own inimitable way.

A poignant letter from the Rebbe to Elie Wiesel (who sadly passed away last Shabbat), teaches us the secret to leadership and how to fight the “night,” the evils and darkness of our enemies: 1) be fruitful, spread, and multiply – in other words, lead; 2) pass on our family traditions – Vizhnitz, Lubavitch, a righteous Jew – to our children, grandchildren, and all future generations.

A LESSON IN LEADERSHIP THE REBBE AND ELIE WIESEL

1. Consulting (Humor)

A shepherd was crossing a road with his flock when a Mercedes Benz stopped. A man in a business suit came out of the car and asked: "If I tell you how many sheep are in your flock without looking at them, would you wager one of your sheep?"

The unbelieving shepherd readily agreed.

The man took out a laptop and satellite dish. He began to pound the keys and after a few minutes told the shepherd: "You have exactly 143 sheep."

The shepherd was astonished and with pain in his heart he muttered: "Choose one sheep."

The man in the suit put a sheep in the trunk and was just about to leave when the shepherd stopped him: "If I guess what you do for a living would you return my sheep?"

"That's a deal, but you do not have any chance," smiled the confident businessman.

"You are a consultant," said the shepherd.

"How did you know?" the shocked man asked.

"It was obvious! First: you came without being invited; second: you told me something I already knew perfectly well; and third - you took my dog instead of a sheep!"

2. Lack of Leadership

Once upon a time, there was a shepherd leading the flock – there was a Moses, an Aaron, a King David. But, today, it seems as if such faithful shepherds have been replaced by leadership consultants who show up without being asked or invited, who preach to us things we already know or don't care about, and who can't tell the difference between a sheep and a dog.

Where are the Jewish leaders of old – the Taanaim, Rishonim, Achronim, Goanim and Rabbanim? And how can we survive without them?

Every entity needs a leader. Try running a company without a CEO – every book it will read would start at Chapter 11. It isn't possible. Try listening to a philharmonic symphony without a conductor – it will sound like a subway station during rush hour (maybe not quite that bad). Try sailing aboard a ship without a captain – best get on line for the lifeboats.

And yet, here we are: Jews in 2016 and who is our CEO? Who is our leader?

How are we to progress and achieve without a maestro conducting our symphony? How are we to learn and discover without a master teacher?

The answers to our questions and the keys to the mystery of leadership are found in this week's Haftarah and Torah reading as we shall see.

3. Parshat Korach

Our Torah portion is named *Parshat Korach* after a dissident who attempted to undermine the leadership of Moses and Aaron by fragmenting the newly formed Jewish nation.¹

¹ Numbers 16.

The consequences were harsh – the earth swallowed Korach and his posse, and a plague descended upon Israel.² Moses, the true leader, beseeched G-d to heal the people of their plague and G-d answered his prayers.³

What it means to be a true leader of Israel – a Moses or an Aaron – is further illuminated in our Haftorah – an excerpt from the First Book of Samuel⁴ – which we read at the conclusion of the Torah reading.

At first flush, there seems to be little, if any, connection between the Torah reading and the Haftorah. Sure, both Moses and Samuel use similar language, but what is the core connection between the two? What layers of light does the Haftorah cast upon the written words of the Torah?

A fascinating Talmud⁵ explaining this Hafotrah will help us understand the connection between the Parsha and the Haftorah, illuminating for us the true meaning of leadership, with three timeless lessons on leadership that are relevant today more than ever.

4. Who Is a Leader?

Who is a true leader? Ostensibly, most of us would probably say that only a Moses is a true leader. Or perhaps Moses and Aaron. As evidenced in the harsh rebuke to Korach for challenging the leadership of Moses and Aaron, with the argument that “the entire congregation are all holy, and the Lord is in their midst. So why do you raise yourselves above the Lord's assembly?”⁶

But that would leave us with a big question and void: If only Moses and Aaron are true leaders, who are the leaders of following generations, until this very day?! Are we to say that after Moses and Aaron we have, G-d forbid, no leaders.

² Numbers 16:30-35.

⁴ Numbers 17.

⁵ I Samuel 11:14-12:22.

⁶ Numbers 16:3.

Comes the Talmud and explains how the Prophet Samuel answers this question in this week's Haftorah:

The Haftorah describes how the nation of Israel gathered at Gilgal for a second coronation of King Saul, as the first was underwhelming in consensus. There, the Prophet Samuel delivered a sermon referring to six previous leaders of Israel:

And the Lord sent Moses and Aaron, and they brought your forefathers out of Egypt, and they made them dwell in this place...⁷ And the Lord sent Jerubaal, and Bedan, and Jephthah, and Samuel, and He saved you from the hand of your enemies round about, and you dwelt in safety.⁸

Samuel reminded the people how, throughout history, G-d sent leaders to guide and shepherd the Jewish people out of darkness. The six leaders that he mentioned were: 1) Moses, 2) Aaron, 3) himself, Samuel, 4) Jerubaal, 5) Bedan, and 6) Jephthah.

Says the Talmud that by comparing the three minor leaders Jerubaal, Bedan, and Jephthah, to the three major leaders Moses, Aaron, and Samuel, the prophet is teaching us that leaders in every generation have something in common.

And therein lie three vital lessons.

5. The Talmud on Leadership (Part One)

The Talmud begins its lesson by quoting the *Ethics of our Fathers*:

Moses received the Torah from Sinai and gave it over to Joshua. Joshua gave it over to the Elders, the Elders to the Prophets, and the Prophets gave it over to the Men of the Great Assembly.

⁷ I Samuel 12:8.

⁸ I Samuel 12:11.

The Talmud then asks a simple question: Why were the names of these elders not mentioned? Throughout the Torah, the names of the tribes and their family trees are listed by name, so why not list the names of the seventy elders that helped Moses lead?⁹

Answers the Talmud:

The names of the elders are not listed so that a man in a later generation should not say, “Is So-and-so like Moses and Aaron? Is So-and-so like Nadav and Avihu? Is So-and-so like Eldad and Medad?”

By refraining to name the seventy elders, the Torah removes the possibility of comparing a present-day leader to leaders of the previous generations. As Rashi explains:

If a person questions a Jewish court (*Beit Din*) in his own time, asking whether the court is comparable to Moses and Aaron, we can answer him that even if the court is not comparable to Moses and Aaron, it may very well be comparable to the seventy elders who are not named.¹⁰ Because the seventy elders remain anonymous, they allow comparison to every Jewish court forever to come.

6. The Talmud on Leadership (Part Two)

The Talmud continues its lesson in leadership by quoting our Haftorah:

And the Lord sent Moses and Aaron, and they brought your forefathers out of Egypt, and they made them dwell in this place... And the Lord sent Jerubbaal, and Bedan, and Jephtah, and Samuel, and He saved you from the hand of your enemies round about, and you dwelt in safety.

The Talmud then juxtaposes this quotation with a famous verse from the Book of Psalms – Moses and Aaron were among His priests, and Samuel among those who called upon His name¹¹ –

⁹ See Maharsha ad loc.

¹⁰ See also Kli Yakar ad loc for a lengthy explanation.

which implies that Samuel was on the same level as Moses and Aaron and should be counted as one of the three mightiest leaders that Israel ever had.¹²

But how are we to understand these three heavy-duty leaders being lumped by the Haftorah with three “lightweight” leaders such as Jerubaal, Bedan, and Jephthah?

In answer, the Talmud says something incredible: By placing three of the lightest characters on the same level as three of the mightiest characters, the Torah is teaching us that Jerubaal in his generation is like Moses in his generation, Bedan in his generation is like Aaron in his generation, Jephthah in his generation is like Samuel in his generation. This teaches us that even the lightest leader, once he has been appointed a leader of the community, is to be viewed like a heavyweight.

7. The Talmud on Leadership (Part Three)

But there is more.

In continuing its treatise on leadership, the Talmud next quotes a verse from the Book of Deuteronomy: *[If you are in need of judgment] ... you shall come to the priests from the tribe of Levi and to the judge who will be in those days.*¹³

This teaches us, says the Talmud, that we must be content to go to the judge who is in our days, and not bemoan the fact that he is not like a leader from a different era.

And the Talmud cements this idea with a concluding verse from the Book of Ecclesiastes: *Do not say, “How was it that the former days were better than these?” For not out of wisdom have you asked concerning this.*¹⁴

¹¹ Psalms 99:6.

¹² See Berachot 31b; Taanit 5b; Leviticus Rabba 16:4 elaborated on below.

¹³ Deuteronomy 17:9.

¹⁴ Ecclesiastes 7:10.

To sum up the Talmud's three directives with regard to leadership:

1. Do not question your present day leaders, asking whether they are like Moses and Aaron, for perhaps they are like the seventy elders. The seventy elders remain unnamed; how do you then know that your present day leaders aren't comparable to them?
2. Once a leader of Israel is appointed a leader, the leader becomes as mighty as Moses and Aaron, even if he was not on that level initially. If he is a leader, then he wears the mantle of leadership and is equal to the leaders who came before. (If he isn't a leader than there is nothing to talk about.)
3. Do not reminisce about former times and bemoan latter-day leadership. Be content with the leadership of today, for that is what has been given to you.

8. The Prophet Samuel

Before I relate this Talmudic teaching to our present day situation, I would like to say a few words about the Prophet Samuel, the author of our Haftorah.

As I mentioned, the Book of Psalms equates Samuel with Moses and Aaron, and it is this particular verse that we recite every single Friday night during *Kabbalat Shabbat*:

*Moses and Aaron were among His priests, and Samuel among those who called upon His name, who called out to the Lord, and He answered them.*¹⁵

The Midrash¹⁶ expounds on this, saying that when G-d wanted to communicate with Moses, He commanded Moses to come to Him, but when G-d communicated with Samuel, He went to where Samuel was.

¹⁵ Psalms 99:6.

¹⁶ Leviticus Rabbah 16:4. For a mystical discussion on the soul origins of Moses, Aaron, and Samuel see Mamorei Admur Hazaken 5565, p. 420; 5568, p. 365; Sefer Hamamorim 5685, p. 190.

Why?

The Midrash explains G-d's reasoning: Moses sat in one place and educated and judged the people from that place, with everyone having to come to him. Samuel however traveled all over the land, going himself to the people to teach and judge them, not waiting for them to come to him. So, the Midrash says that G-d declared: "Because Samuel traveled from city to city to judge the people, I will go to him."

Later commentaries¹⁷ go so far as to say that Samuel's willingness to travel to reach every Jew is what earned him – from among so many great prophets of Israel – the distinction of being ranked on par with Moses and Aaron as far as leadership was concerned.

And what may surprise all of you is that Samuel was the grandson of the rebel Korach!¹⁸

How strange things often turn out: Out of the progeny of Korach, who challenged Moses' leadership, sprung Samuel who upheld and perpetuated Moses' leadership!

Moses, the leader of the Jewish people, stood up for what was true and right, abolishing the threat that was Korach. A few generations later, in the Land of Israel, the Moses of that generation, Samuel, a grandson of Korach, traveled the land to uphold Moses' Torah and truth.

In the wilderness, in Moses' era, leadership consisted of remaining in one place and educating the people. In Samuel's era, leadership demanded traveling the land and bringing the message to the people.

Every generation has the leadership it needs. Which brings us to our generation.

¹⁷ See Ohr Hatorah, Neviim Uchtuvim, vol. 2, p. 753; Torat Shmuel 5633, vol. 1, p. 17; vol. 2, p. 586; Sefer Hamamrim 5689, p. 310; Sichat Kodosh 5730, vol. 1, p. 23.

¹⁸ I Chronicles 6:3-13.

9. Leadership Today

Every generation has its leaders: Our teachers, our Rabbis, our mentors, the people we respect who have helped shape our lives and whom we trust and turn to for guidance.

And we don't make comparisons between generations. A leader in our times is like a leader in previous times. Even when we know that we cannot compare to the great leaders of Israel, we are also told that every leader in his time is given the strengths from the leaders that preceded him.

10. How to Lead (Personal Lesson)

Let's take this a step further:

Beyond the leaders in each generation, every one of us is also expected to be a leader in microcosm in our own right.

Blessed with a divine soul, and with unique skills, each one of us, without exception, can and must lead and show the way in our particular sphere of influence.

To lead, simply start and start simply. Think of one thing that you lead in.

When you drink your morning cup of Joe, does someone tell you how to drink it, black or with cream and sugar? Does someone tell you how to get dressed in the morning? As a human being created in the divine image, you have an ingrained leadership instinct. Follow it. This leadership instinct is the voice of your soul, beseeching you to take life by the horns – and, when necessary, by the thorns – and lead it to the green pastures of the Promised Land.

You lead in your own life. You don't have to be a leader of the Jewish people to lead a Jewish person. Lead yourself. Don't look for followers. Do not turn around to see if others are following you. It is irrelevant.

Every generation is provided with the leadership it requires to get the job done. If you believe in G-d, then you certainly believe that G-d provides what you – and all of us – need to be successful in our mission, including whatever leadership is necessary. The fact that we stand here today with no revealed Moses, Aaron or Samuel means one simple thing: we, ourselves, have the skills, tools, abilities, and responsibilities to get the job done.

And toward that end, here are a few tips:

- Stay in place and you will go to G-d; travel to the people, and G-d will come to you.
- Don't blame your followers, look to yourself. If there is a fault it is your job to fix it.
- Build bridges; don't create divisions. Building a bridge will enhance your generation and, perhaps consequently, all future generations.

11. Bridge Builder (Optional Poem)

Apropos bridge building, I would like to read you a poem that I think captures a Jew's leadership role in a readily relatable way. The title of the poem is, *The Bridge Builder*:

An old man going a lone highway,
Came at the evening, cold and gray,
To a chasm, vast, and deep and wide,
Through which was flowing a sullen tide.

The old man crossed in the twilight dim;
The sullen stream had no fear for him;
But he turned, when safe on the other side,
And built a bridge to span the tide.

“Old man,” said a fellow pilgrim, near,
“You are wasting strength with building here;
Your journey will end with the ending day;
You never again will pass this way;
You’ve crossed the chasm, deep and wide,
Why build you this bridge at the evening tide?”

The builder lifted his old gray head:
“Good friend, in the path I have come,” he said,
“There followeth after me today,
A youth, whose feet must pass this way.

This chasm, that has been naught to me,
To that fair-haired youth may a pitfall be.
He, too, must cross in the twilight dim;
Good friend, I am building this bridge for him.”¹⁹

This is what a leader does.

And we are all leaders. We are bridge builders. The opposite is a divider and that is not what a Jew is.

12. The Lubavitcher Rebbe and Elie Wiesel

This Shabbat is *Gimmel Tammuz*, the day when the Rebbe – the leader, the Moses of our generation – ascended on high 22 years ago.

Last Shabbat, Elie Wiesel, the Nobel Prize winning Holocaust writer, passed away, and I thought it very appropriate to share how the Rebbe changed Elie Wiesel’s life – in a series of letters and private audiences (*yechidus*), which goes right to the heart of the leadership issue.

¹⁹ The Bridge Builder by Will Allen Dromgoole, see: <http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems-and-poets/poems/detail/52702>.

In a powerful letter written in 1965 to Mr. Wiesel,²⁰ the Rebbe sets forth very practical advice on how he can fight the “night,” the evils and darkness of our enemies. The letter is worth reading in its entirety; I will mention two items:

First: Be Fruitful and Multiply

It is not enough, writes the Rebbe, to simply not forget the atrocities and to shout “never again!” One must proactively confront and overpower the evils of the Final Solution. How? By demonstrating how alive and full of life we Jewish people are. This is done by being fruitful and multiplying, literally and figuratively. Jews building vibrant families, full of Jewish light and pride, is our greatest revenge and the best answer we can give. Be a leader by building life. This means, of course, being fruitful and multiplying in good deeds, learning, and everything righteous and holy.

Wiesel, as many of you may know, gave up on life, after witnessing and experiencing the utter cruelty perpetrated by the Nazis. As he writes the devastating words in his book, *Night*:

“Never shall I forget that night, the first night in camp, that turned my life into one long night seven times sealed.

Never shall I forget that smoke.

Never shall I forget the small faces of the children whose bodies I saw transformed into smoke under a silent sky.

Never shall I forget those flames that consumed my faith forever.

Never shall I forget the nocturnal silence that deprived me for all eternity of the desire to live.

Never shall I forget those moments that murdered my God and my soul and turned my dreams to ashes.

Never shall I forget those things, even were I condemned to live as long as God Himself.

Never.”

²⁰ Igrot Kodesh, Letter #8969 (Vol. 23, p. 369ff).

And here comes the Rebbe, just a few years later, and finally convinces a man who considered himself dead, to rebuild his life. To emerge from the blackness of night and see a new dawn. To marry and to build a family. Which he did: He married his wife Marion in 1969, and in 1972 they gave birth to a son, and named him Shlomo Elisha, after Wiesels' father who perished in Buchenwald.

Second: Be Uniquely Proud of Your Tradition

Elie Wiesel was a Vizhnitzer Chassid. The Rebbe refers to this fact when he writes that by living life and building a family he can ensure that Hitler did not diminish him: "On the contrary, you will nurture and educate children and grandchildren who are Vizhnitzer Chassidim until the end of all generations." The Rebbe adds that though he would be happy to see more Chassidim in the world, he would be just as happy to see any Jews in the world who observe Torah and mitzvoth.

This letter teaches us several things:

- 1) A leader pierces the darkest places and illuminates it with light.
- 2) The best way to be a leader is by spreading far and wide, being fruitful and multiplying – this is how we increase light in the world.
- 3) A leader values and respects the diversity of people. We all come from different backgrounds – perhaps Vizhnitz or Lubavitch, perhaps Ashkenazic or Sephardic. Thus we all have unique traditions to uphold and perpetuate forward.

For whatever reason, G-d chose that today we have to be the Rebbe's arms and legs and mouthpiece, and bring his teachings to the world.

We cannot be resigned and bemoan the fact that we do not see the Moses, Aaron or Samuel of our generation. We need to act. We need to move forward. And we need to follow the Rebbe's leadership and teaching: be fruitful and multiply literally and figuratively, building healthy families, educating and inspiring all those we come in contact with, spreading all over the world; and being true to our traditions, passing that truth on to our children and grandchildren until the culmination of all generations.

13. Leadership Conference (Conclusion)

This year – the year which follows *Shmittah*, the sabbatical year – is called the year of *Hakhel*, a year of assembly, of conferring and conferencing, of gatherings of the Jews.

Since every Jew is a leader, thus, every year of *Hakhel* is, effectively, a leadership conference. At a leadership conference one is inspired to lead, while networking with other leaders.

When Jews, leaders, gather, every Jew learns new leadership techniques and discovers – really, is reminded of – his or her own innate leadership qualities.

Let me say it once again: We are all leaders. Let us live up to our calling and lead the world toward the Final Redemption. May it happen speedily in our days. Amen!

Shabbat Shalom!

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