

Parashah and Politics: How Torah Changed the World

Parashat Tzav, Leviticus, Chapters 6-8

By Rabbi Meir Soloveichik

If you enjoy this commentary on the weekly Torah portion and want to continue learning with Rabbi Soloveichik, please visit MeirSoloveichik.com and subscribe today!

Gratitude and the Lessons of Leadership

It is an indubitable fact of history that great men and women matter; their words and deeds have tremendous effects on the course of events. For example, the story of 20th-century Britain would have been profoundly different were it not for two individuals: Winston Churchill and Margaret Thatcher. At the same time, understanding how important decision-making is for leaders allows us to appreciate how decisions made by so many others impact leaders themselves, and the course of events. The brilliant historian Andrew Roberts once put it this way:

The great men and women view of history is a very important one because it reminds us that individuals do matter. It has a moral imperative behind it, which reminds us that what we do in our lives and the decisions we take and the virtue we try to follow . . . is what history is all about, because all history is really is the decisions taken by billions of people every day.

Leaders change the world; but they themselves are formed by decisions made by others. We bear this mind as we ponder the leaders described in the Torah. After Genesis, a book marked by family conflict, we are introduced in Exodus to a family in which each member achieves spiritual greatness because of the decisions made by his or her relations. Moses, the redeemer, is born because his parents courageously brought him into this world (despite Pharaoh's decree to drown Israelite boys) and then hid him as well as they could. When all grew desperate, Moses' sister watched over him in the bulrushes.

When the chosen redeemer of Israel stood before the burning bush and insisted that he was insufficient for the task, he was informed that his elder brother Aaron, in an astonishing act of unstinting generosity and joy, would eagerly consent to serve as his spokesman, exhibiting not the slightest scintilla of envy at the greatness for which his younger sibling had been chosen. Moses prayed for his sister when she was in dire straits, reflecting the devotion she once showed to him.

The king of Egypt, worshipped as a god, was ultimately overthrown not only by Moses, but by the decisions of a father and mother, brother and sister, all of whom recognized that it was God, first and foremost, Who brought this about. As my father once pointed out to me, this was a family that shaped each of its members into the person each became.



Parashah and Politics

Tzav

None of us can become our best selves without others; none of us are entirely self-formed. I could quote to you John Donne's famous phrase "no man is an island," but instead I will cite something more basic from my childhood. From 1980 until 2001, the recruiting commercial for the United States Army was: "be all you can be." Then it was suddenly announced that the army was changing its slogan to "an army of one." In other words, each soldier becomes his or her own individual army. It didn't last; within five years the army switched to another slogan: "army strong." But by 2018, one representative of the army said the institution was looking for a phrase to match the success of the original, as "be all you can be" was "one of the most successful advertising campaigns ever." It was successful, I think, because it captured a profound truth: no one is "an army of one;" it is through others, through being part of something larger than ourselves, that we can "be all we can be."

Rightly understood, this is the larger lesson of the *parashah* known as *Tzav*: it communicates to us that true leaders recognize the role of Providence, and of other human beings, in shaping their own lives. Moreover, and perhaps just as importantly, the Torah teaches us that truly great leaders not only understand the influence of others upon themselves, but also the necessity of allowing others to do what they themselves cannot.

While the reading begins with a few additional points about the offerings discussed last week, such as the *olah* (burnt offering) and those brought in cases of sin, it can, to a great extent, be seen as addressing two main topics. The first is the *todah*, the offering of thanksgiving, brought by an individual who experiences salvation from serious danger. Ostensibly a variation of the *sh'lamim*, or offering of wellbeing, the *todah* is distinguished by the bread that is offered and eaten alongside it: three forms of unleavened matzah—ten of each—and ten loaves of *hametz*, leavened bread. In a fascinating essay, Rabbi Yoel Bin-Nun explains that this is a carefully chosen menu, one that tells a story. The unleavened bread "represents a station in mid-process, before the end-result is achieved. It represents a deficiency that is waiting for completion." *Hametz*—bread that has risen and achieved an end state—represents the conclusion of a process, and an acknowledgment that the moment in which one finds oneself is due only to the grace of God:

An offering of thanksgiving is brought by a person who faced some danger or predicament and was delivered from it. Therefore, when he is saved, it is indeed proper that his offering include both *chametz* loaves and *matzot*. The *matzot* symbolize the trouble that he was in, the bitter cry that he uttered, and the process of redemption from that predicament to an open space of relief. The *chametz* represents the completion of his deliverance and his current state of tranquility; it is an expression of reaching the end of this particular road.

As Rabbi Bin-Nun further notes, this is the reason that Passover, the Jewish festival of freedom, is known as the holiday "of unleavened bread," while, 49 days later, Shavuot—the commemoration of the revelation at Sinai—is celebrated in the Temple with a ritual involving two leavened loaves. The arrival at Sinai was the end goal of the Exodus; God liberated Israel and protected it in its perilous journey. Thus does a nation mark its founding by remembering the salvation from Pharaoh, as well as the trek through the treacherous wilderness, reminding itself at all times how much it owes to a power beyond itself.

This biblical understanding of the world has, of course, always been one that American leaders at their best have embraced. Toward the conclusion of the Revolutionary War, the Thanksgiving declaration issued by the Con-



Parashah and Politics

Tzav

tinental Congress specifically set out events during the war that it deemed providential, if not miraculous. The declaration makes mention of Washington's indispensable role, while also turning in gratitude to God:

We beg recommend in a particular manner that they may observe and acknowledge to their observation, the goodness of God in the year now drawing to a conclusion: in which A mutiny in the American Army was not only happily appeased but became in its issue a pleasing and undeniable proof of the unalterable attachment of the people in general to the cause of liberty since great and real grievances only made them tumultuously seek redress while the abhorred the thoughts of going over to the enemy, in which the Confederation of the United States has been completed by the accession of all without exception in which there have been so many instances of prowess and success in our armies; . . . in which we have been so powerfully and effectually assisted by our allies, while in all the conjunct operations the most perfect union and harmony has subsisted in the allied army: in which there has been so plentiful a harvest, and so great abundance of the fruits of the earth of every kind, as not only enables us easily to supply the wants of the army, but gives comfort and happiness to the whole people: **and in which, after the success of our allies by sea, a General of the first Rank, with his whole army, has been captured by the allied forces under the direction of our illustrious Commander in Chief.** [Bolding my own.]

This is a reference to the victory at Yorktown; American leaders recognized Washington's role but gave gratitude to God, without Whom Washington could have done nothing. Then, in 1789, Washington himself issued the first Thanksgiving declaration by the new government of the United States, expressing American gratitude to God for:

the signal and manifold mercies, and the favorable interpositions of his Providence which we experienced in the course and conclusion of the late war—for the great degree of tranquility, union, and plenty, which we have since enjoyed . . .

“American leaders, from the very beginning, created a culture that recognized human greatness, but also what was owed to God.”

Thus does the first part of our reading remind us how American leaders, from the very beginning, created a culture that recognized human greatness, but also what was owed to God.

The second part of the *parashah* is emotionally resonant, and striking: Moses prepares his brother Aaron, and his children, for the priesthood. For seven days, in the Tabernacle, Moses oversees the consecration of his elder sibling, the one who stood by him in his moment of trial.

The Lord said to Moses, Take Aaron and his sons with him, and the garments, and the anointing oil, and the bull of the sin offering, and the two rams, and the basket of unleavened bread; and assemble all the congregation at the door of the tent of meeting. And Moses did as the Lord commanded him; and the congregation was assembled at the door of the tent of meeting.



Parashah and Politics

Tzav

And Moses said to the congregation, This is the thing which the Lord has commanded to be done. And Moses brought Aaron and his sons, and washed them with water. And he put on him the coat, and girded him with the girdle, and clothed him with the robe, and put the ephod upon him, and girded him with the skillfully woven band of the ephod, binding it to him therewith. And he placed the breastpiece on him, and in the breastpiece he put the Urim and the Thummim. And he set the turban upon his head, and on the turban, in front, he set the golden plate, the holy crown, as the Lord commanded Moses. (Leviticus 8:1–8)

As the rabbis understand it, during these days of consecration it was Moses who served as high priest, before, at the end, forever consigning the sacred role to his brother. In so doing, Moses reminded us of the role his own brother played in his moment of trial before Pharaoh. It is noteworthy, therefore, that Moses' anointing of Aaron is alluded to in the Psalms:

Behold, how good and how pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity! It is like the precious ointment upon the head, that ran down upon the beard, even Aaron's beard . . . (Psalms 133:1–2)

Aaron, we are informed in Exodus, felt "joy in his heart" when his long-lost brother returned to redeem Israel, and unstintingly stood by him. Moses, surely, felt joy as he dressed Aaron; but is that all he felt? In traditional Torah cantillation, a rare and strikingly elongated series of notes, known as the *shalshelet*, emphasizes the description of Moses' consecration of Aaron. The *shalshelet* has traditionally been understood to connote hesitation. Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, in a profound piece, reflects on the significance of the moment, and its lessons:

[N]ow the work is complete and all that remains is for Moses to induct his brother Aaron and Aaron's sons into office. He robes Aaron with the special garments of the High Priest, anoints him with oil, and performs the various sacrifices appropriate to the occasion. Over the word *vayishchat*, "and he slaughtered [the sacrificial ram]" (Leviticus 8:23) there is a *shalshelet*. . . .

[A] moment's thought makes it clear what Moses' inner turmoil was about. Until now he had led the Jewish people. Aaron had assisted him, accompanying him on his missions to Pharaoh, acting as his spokesman, aide and second-in-command. Now, however, Aaron was about to undertake a new leadership role in his own right. No longer would he be one step behind Moses. He would do what Moses himself could not. He would preside over the daily offerings in the Tabernacle. He would mediate the *avodah*, the Israelites' sacred service to God. Once a year on Yom Kippur he would perform the service that would secure atonement for the people from its sins. . . .

That is Moses' inner struggle, conveyed by the *shalshelet*. He is about to induct his brother into an office he himself will never hold. Things might have been otherwise—but life is not lived in the world of "might have been." He surely feels joy for his brother, but he cannot altogether avoid a sense of loss. Perhaps he already senses what he will later discover, that though he was the Prophet and liberator, Aaron will have a privilege Moses will be denied, namely, seeing his children and their descendants inherit his role. The son of a Priest is a Priest. The son of a Prophet is rarely a Prophet.



Parashah and Politics

Tzav

This, Rabbi Sacks adds, reveals a profound lesson about leadership.

Moses is a Prophet, not a Priest. To say ‘Yes’ to who we are, we have to have the courage to say ‘No’ to who we are not. Pain and struggle is always involved in this type of conflict. . . . But we emerge less conflicted than we were before.

This applies especially to leaders, which is why the case of Moses in our parsha is so important. There were things Moses was not destined to do. He would never become a priest. That task fell to Aaron. He would never lead the people across the Jordan. That was Joshua’s role. . . .

A leader should never try to be all things to all people. Leaders must be content to be who they are. They must have the strength to know what they cannot be if they are to have the courage truly to be their best selves.

The greatest of leaders have recognized the divine source of their own strength, as well as their need for the talents of others. The drama of Lincoln’s life lies in his evolving recognition of God’s role in the American story, and his understanding of the role that others’ talents would play in his own success. “I can’t spare this man,”

Lincoln famously said about General Ulysses Grant; “he fights.” Perhaps even more strikingly, Lincoln’s understanding of the Constitution, and of American liberty, lived on after his assassination in part because he had the vision to appoint Salmon

A leader should never try to be all things to all people.

Chase—the man who had attempted to challenge him for the presidency not only in 1860 but also in 1864—as chief justice of the Supreme Court. Lincoln, as a truly great leader, understood what he had to contribute to America’s future—but also what others must do.

On the face of it, our reading describes cultic rites: a thanksgiving offering and the consecration in the Tabernacle of a high priest. These rites are indeed religiously vital. Seen through the lens of history, however, they also reveal more general lessons that leaders, at their best, have imbibed, teaching that the origin of political greatness often lies in the recognition of what one owes to others.



Parashah and Politics

Tzav

Parashah and Politics: How Torah Changed the World is generously sponsored by Ivan Kaufman.

Rabbi Soloveichik's podcasts and essays on the Book of Leviticus are generously sponsored by Dr. Michael Schmerin and family in honor of Rabbi Soloveichik, in thanks for his scholarly teaching on Jewish thought, Israel, and Zionism.

This week's D'var Torah is generously sponsored by Sheldon Buckler.

May the merit of our study together bring a swift victory to the Jewish people.

Additional Resources

The Continental Congress's Thanksgiving Proclamation of 1781, October 26, 1781. [Click here to read.](#)

George Washington Proclaims a National Day of Thanksgiving, Thanksgiving Proclamation, October 3, 1789. [Click here to read.](#)

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks on Leadership and Identity, "The Courage of Identity Crises," March 2014. [Click here to read.](#)

