Covenant & Conversation

Jonathan Sacks
THE RABBI SACKS LEGACY

NITZAVIM-VAYELECH • נצבים-וילך

FROM THE TEACHINGS AND WRITINGS OF **RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS** זצ"ל

With thanks to the Schimmel Family for their generous sponsorship of Covenant & Conversation, dedicated in loving memory of Harry (Chaim) Schimmel.
"I have loved the Torah of R' Chaim Schimmel ever since I first encountered it. It strives to be not just about truth on the surface but also its connection to a deeper truth beneath. Together with Anna, his remarkable wife of 60 years, they built a life dedicated to love of family, community, and Torah. An extraordinary couple who have moved me beyond measure by the example of their lives." — Rabbi Sacks

This year's series of essays and videos were originally written and recorded by Rabbi Sacks zt"l in 5771 (2010–2011).
These timeless messages are accompanied by a new Family Edition (2023-2024), created to inspire intergenerational learning on the *parsha*.

Leadership: Consensus or Command?

The great transition is about to take place. Moses' career as a leader is coming to an end, and Joshua's leadership is about to begin. Moses blesses his successor. Then God does. Listen carefully to what they say, and to the subtle difference between. This is what Moses says:

> "Be strong and courageous, for you must *go with* this people into the land that the Lord swore to their ancestors to give them, and you must divide it among them as their inheritance."
>
> Deut. 31:7

And this is what God says:

> "Be strong and courageous, for you will *bring* the Israelites into the land I promised them on oath, and I Myself will be with you."
>
> Deut. 31:23

The difference in Hebrew is even slighter than it is in English. Moses uses the verb *tavo*, "go with." God uses the verb *tavi*, "bring." It is the slightest of nuances, but Rashi tells us the words are worlds apart in their significance. They refer to two utterly different styles of leadership. Here is Rashi's comment:

> Moses said to Joshua, "Make sure that the elders of the generation are with you. Always act according to their opinion and advice." However, the Holy One blessed be He said to Joshua, "For you will *bring* the Israelites into the land I promised them" – meaning, "Bring them even against their will. It all depends on you. If necessary, take a stick and beat them over the head. There is only one leader for a generation, not two."
>
> Rashi on Deuteronomy 31:7

Moses advises his successor to lead by consultation and consensus. God tells Joshua to lead firmly and with authority. Even if people do not agree with you, He counsels him, you must lead from the front. Be clear. Be decisive. Be forceful. Be strong.

Now this is a strange comment from Rashi, considering what we learned elsewhere about the leadership styles, respectively, of God and Moses. Listen first to the comment of Rashi on

the words of God immediately prior to the creation of humanity: "Let Us make man in our image after our likeness" (Gen. 1:26). Who are the "Us"? To whom is God speaking and why?

Rashi says:

> From here we learn the humility of God. Since man was [created] in the image of the angels they might become jealous of him. He, therefore, consulted them. Similarly, when He judges Kings, He consults His heavenly court . . . Though they [the angels] did not help in his creation and [the wording of the verse] may give the heretics an opportunity to rebel, [nevertheless,] Scripture does not refrain from teaching courtesy and the attribute of humility, that the greater should consult and ask permission of the smaller (Genesis Rabbah 8:9).
>
> Rashi on Gen. 1:26

This is a remarkable statement. Rashi is saying that, before creating man, God consulted with the angels. He did so not because He needed their help: clearly He did not. Nor was it because He needed their advice: He had already resolved to create humankind. It was to show them respect, to pre-empt their jealousy of man, to avoid their resentment at not being consulted on so fateful a decision, and to show us – the readers – the fundamental truth that greatness goes hand in hand with humility. So it was God who acted according to the advice Moses gave Joshua: "Make sure that others are with you. Consult. Take their advice."

On the other hand, Moses acted the way God advised Joshua to do. "If necessary, take a stick and beat them over the head." Is that not figuratively what Moses did at Kadesh, when he hit the people with his words and the rock with his staff (Num. 20:1-12), for which he was condemned by God not to enter the Promised Land?

So we seem to have God saying words we associate with Moses' type of leadership – firm, strong, decisive – and Moses advocating the kind of leadership – consensual, consultative – that Rashi associates with God. Surely it should have been the other way around.

However, perhaps Rashi is telling us something profound. At the end of his life, Moses recognised one great failure of his leadership. He had taken the Israelites out of Egypt, but he had not taken Egypt out of the Israelites. He had changed his people's fate, but he hadn't changed their character.[1]

He now realised that for this to happen there would have to be a different kind of leadership, one that handed back responsibility to the people as a whole, and to the elders in particular.

So long as there is a Moses performing miracles, the people do not have to accept responsibility for themselves. In order for them to grow, Joshua would have to engage in participative leadership, encouraging diverse views and listening to them, even if that meant going more slowly.

That is transformative leadership and it requires the leader to engage in what the kabbalists called *tsimtsum*, self-effacement.

Or as Rashi puts it: "Make sure that the elders of the generation are with you. Always act

[1] For a deeper discussion on Moses' actions at Kadesh and how the people's need for a leader was evolving, see Covenant & Conversation essay on Chukat, 'Why was Moses not destined to enter the land?' https://rabbisacks.org/covenant-conversation/chukat/why-was-moses-not-destined-to-enter-the-land/.

according to their opinion and advice" (Rashi to Deuteronomy 31:7)

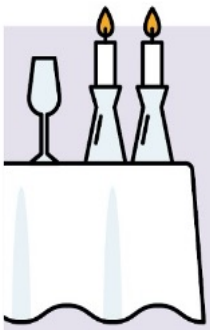
As for God, He was not changing His mind. He was not suggesting that Joshua should become, in general, an authoritarian leader. He was suggesting that Joshua needed to do this just once. Listen carefully to the verse: "For you will bring the Israelites into the land" (Deut. 31:23) Recall that there was one occasion that condemned an entire generation to die in the wilderness – the episode of the spies, in which the people lacked the faith and courage to enter and take possession of the land.

It was then that two men – Joshua and Caleb – stood firm, insisting against the other 10 spies, that they could conquer the land and defeat their enemies. God was saying to Joshua that there will be one future trial in which you must stand firm, even against the majority, and that will come when you are about to cross the Jordan. That is when the people are in danger of giving way to fear.

That is when your leadership will consist, not in consultation and consensus, but in allowing no dissent. That is when "it will all depend on you . . . There is only one leader for a generation, not two." Sometimes even the most consensual leaders must lead from the front and bring the people with them.

There is a time to discuss and a time to act, a time to seek agreement and a time to move ahead without waiting for agreement. That is what both God and Moses were telling Joshua in their different ways.

A leader must have the courage to lead, the patience to consult, and the wisdom to know when the time is right for each.



Around the Shabbat Table

1. What do you think are the main differences between the leadership styles of Moshe and Yehoshua?
2. Why do you think the incident of the spies was so formative for Yehoshua's leadership?
3. What are some unique traits that you embody that would contribute to strong leadership?

- These questions come from this week's **Family Edition** to Rabbi Sacks' Covenant & Conversation. For an interactive, multi-generational study, check out the full edition at **www.RabbiSacks.org/covenant-conversation-family-edition/nitzavim/leadership-consensus-or-command/**