

In Defense Of Followers

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‘Leadership’ is the mantra of our times. Countless books, articles and lectures have been devoted to the theme of developing leaders in the world of business, politics, communal life and virtually every other endeavor. And surely the dramatic election of Barack Obama has only spiked interest in the notion of leadership as the key to success, a message that resonates particularly in a Jewish community buffeted by reports in recent years that it is shrinking, in numbers and commitment, as well as growing older and rudderless.

It seems like every Jewish organization has created a Young Leadership division — all you have to do to qualify is be under a certain age, join up and you’re a leader. And have you ever heard of a Followers Mission to Israel?

We are so eager for leadership that we’ve undermined the concept of working one’s way up the ladder and qualifying by displaying traits that inspire and command respect. Besides, it seems to me that our community — any community — needs far more devoted foot soldiers than generals. Not everyone can or should be a leader, so why focus so much energy on a small percentage of our population? Even the most dedicated, brilliant and charismatic leader will fail if he or she does not have significant numbers of people to translate a vision into action. Those are the people we should be concentrating on, preparing young men and women to recognize their responsibilities and carry out the work necessary to sustain vibrant, meaningful communities.

For centuries, rabbis and scholars were seen as the leaders of the Jewish community, and it is only in the last century that, increasingly, men of wealth were given titles of respect as heads of various communal organizations.

As the late Rabbi Arthur Hertzberg once reflected, in the early part of the 20th century prominent businessmen lined up each week to consult the rabbi. Today, the rabbis line up to ask favors of the businessmen.

We are very good at bemoaning the fact that we are bereft of Jewish leaders today while looking back fondly at those “giants” who led us in the past. But how many of them were appreciated at the time? Theodor Herzl, the father of Modern Zionism, was considered a kook for any number of his wild ideas, including mass conversion to avoid anti-Semitism and resettling the world’s Jews in Uganda, as well as for calling for and predicting a Jewish State in Israel in the 20th century, a concept that most Jews opposed.

When he died in 1904, Herzl was little appreciated for the historic effort he set into motion.

In this country, Stephen Wise, a Reform rabbi and president of both the American Jewish Congress and World Jewish Congress, was seen as one of the great Jewish leaders of his time. But he has been criticized by scholars for bowing to his friend President Roosevelt, who resisted

rescuing European Jews during the Holocaust. Rabbi Wise not only remained silent but castigated as irresponsible extremists those who spoke out to save their brethren.

Abraham Joshua Heschel is viewed today as a modern-day prophet, revered by many for his lyrical and wise writings on Jewish philosophy and for his involvement in the civil rights movement of the 1960s. But students at the Jewish Theological Seminary at the time recall that he was not given the respect then that he is given now.

Up close and in real time, we rarely appreciate those we may come to admire in hindsight. The greatest Jew who ever lived was Moses, who had a personal relationship with God. But were he alive today, he would never be elected to the Knesset, much less prime minister of Israel. Could you imagine a viable candidate with a serious stutter whose most notable characteristic is humility?

Moses' greatest frustration was that he led a people described by God as "stiff-necked and stubborn," a generation of men and women who, soon after witnessing miracles, were clamoring to build an idol or return to the "good old days" of slavery in Egypt.

We are commanded in the Torah to be a holy people by following, not leading. "What is required of us?" asks the Prophet Micah (chapter 6, verse 8): "Only to do justly, to love mercy and walk humbly with thy God."

And how is God described as leading? "Not by power nor by might, but by My spirit, saith the Lord of Hosts." (Prophet Zechariah, chapter 4, verse 6)

Leaders are important and valued, but each of us can play a vital part in the struggle for Jewish continuity by following in the footsteps of the prophets, doing right by observing the mitzvot and maintaining the values of our tradition, with humility. And beyond the religious sphere, we also serve by doing service – by being good citizens, by thinking and acting communally rather than selfishly, and by doing our part to make the world a little better for our having been here.