

Parshat Tetzaveh 5775
Brad Sugar

R' Elazar ben Azariah, "I am 70 years old." Though he had obtained authority, he nevertheless lived long. Thus, you can learn that authority generally shortens life. –

Talmud Yerushalmi

While I cannot attest to the long term health effects that the Presidency of Kol Sasson has had on my lifespan, I can certainly attest that it has shortened my hairline.

Most of the material I'll be speaking about today comes in the form of paraphrasing of a former teacher of mine, and current Spertus President Dr. Hal Lewis. Dr. Lewis' book "From Sanctuary to Boardroom" was a perfect resource to help me aggregate my thoughts on this topic, and he is a thought-leader in the realm of analyzing and contextualizing modern Jewish leadership. If you haven't had an opportunity to learn from Hal, you should find one.

Skokie resident and head of SVARA Bet Midrash, Rabbi Benay Lappe, was featured recently in an excellent ELI talk about radical innovation in Jewish life. Her thesis suggests that when the core pillars of your life's framework or your major assumptions are shattered, you really have three options:

- 1) Blissful ignorance and continuation of life as it was
- 2) Complete dismissal and outright rejection of previous the framework
- 3) Re-assess what worked about the old framework and begin creating a new one.

Rabbi Lappe continues that the first major period where Jews had to make this choice was with the desecration of the Temples, and had to configure life anew for the Judaism as they knew it.

I hate hyperbole, but have no other way of saying this: it's clear that our temples are yet again beginning to fall. I'm not referring to physical structures that represent Jewish life today (although I also believe that to be true), rather I refer to the communal ones that house our leaders and enable them with unprecedented power and authority. While it is true that tales of abuse of power are as old as the Torah itself and the stories within it, our spiritual, religious and communal authorities are failing us at such a rapid and significant rate that we must contemplate re-thinking these enabling structures. While it is possible that access to information through the internet and social media has exacerbated or overexposed the problem, I believe that examining a new framework for Jewish life and decision-making within it is necessary now more than ever.

I know that many of us in this room, by virtue of simply being here – when faced with a cracked framework - would choose Rabbi Lappe's third option. I certainly count myself in this group. I don't presume to know everything, but I know enough

not to 'not judge Judaism by its' Jews,' and to not throw out the baby with the bathwater. There is significant value in our tradition, even if our systems are flawed and various leaders within it have failed us. However, as someone who works with youth, I know that far too many have or will cast their lot in the first two groups: fundamentalism or complete antipathy, and I do not believe either of those are solutions to the long-term survival of the Jewish enterprise.

The question is, therefore – how do we, as a community that clearly has held on to central components of religious Jewish life - but still know that certain things must be changed – relate to Jewish law and its interpretation/applicability in modern times? Who do we rely upon, trust, and authorize – to set the agenda in this new communal framework and lead us forward when we have been burned and tattered time and time again?

The Torah accepts three general paradigms of biblical authority: Priest, King, and Prophet. In each case, G-d authorizes these roles directly but as Dr. Lewis points out, this sanction is not enough. The general community must also approve these figures in order for their authority to mean anything. The sources and examples about this in the Torah are plentiful – rather than me quoting them, I suggest you read Dr. Lewis' book. In Tzav – the mirroring Parsha to Tetzaveh which also discusses the inauguration of Aaron and other Kohanim, it says: "Take Aaron and his sons with him...and gather the entire assembly to the entrance of the Tent of Meeting." – Leviticus 8:1

So – this is helpful in determining who HAD sanctioned authority in the biblical and subsequent periods, but how does this help us now? God isn't showing up anytime soon to authorize or strike down the Agudah's latest missive or sanction J-Street or AIPAC's latest Israel campaign. Taking a cue from Pirkei Avot, we know that there are three crowns/ketarim of leadership in Jewish life: Keter Torah, Keter Kehunah, and Keter Malchut. Each of these crowns represents a significant facet of Jewish power and authority – but cannot not work properly without the other. They are the Jewish equivalent of American government branches, and suggest that an approach of **shared** power between these systems creates a necessary balance.

In biblical times, leaders serving in different ketaric roles **were initially all sanctioned by God** directly, with subsequent authorization from the community as we've noted.

Keter Malchut has the function of Jewish civ/political governance and Kings filled these roles. The falling of dynasties and Jewish kingdoms gave rise to exilarchs, and the erasure of exilarchs created the parnas. Exliarchs and parnassim would assess/collect taxes, set community policy, oversee infrastructure. As a matter of fact, parnassim even had the authority to put someone in herem, expropriate land, and often make decisions that would be brought to beit dins today. Today's Keter Kehuna equivalent would be that of a lay leader of power or influence, a trustee, or a head of a communal organization.

Keter Kehunah has the role of bringing people towards god. As illustrated by Tetzaveh, we see that Priests/Kohanim filled this role with their temple service on behalf of the people of Israel. Lineage is somewhat of a factor here, and while we still

have retained portions of this *visa vis* tefillah and duchening, there are many Jewish leaders that fill this role today. We are in fact instructed to be a *mamlechet Kohanim*, a nation of priests – suggesting that the ability to perform these functions resides in all of us should we attempt to harness it. In today's terms, congregational rabbis, *chazzanim*, those who practice mindfulness and spirituality might carry the torch of *keter kehunah*.

Lastly – and perhaps most complicated – is *Keter Torah*, which is defined by bringing God closer to the people, or rather - delivering messages from God. This role was played, many times reluctantly – by Prophets. As prophecy was lost and the temples eventually fell, the Jewish world focused predominantly on scholarship and text in order to make sense of the world. While the chasm between the original bearers of *Keter Kehunah* and *Keter Malkhut* and their modern counterparts might be considered vast it is not as apparent here in *Keter Torah*. Despite these roles being similarly authorized, it's simply a bigger leap to equate a King with a lay leader than it is to equate a Prophet to sage or Rabbi.

They say that winners write history, and for those scholars that assumed leadership after the fall of the 2nd temple, this certainly was the case. A relentless and impressive campaign to paint Torah scholars as no different – or in many cases – greater than Moshe (Moshe “Rabbenu”) or prophets has blurred the lines of inheritance of *Keter Torah*, even today. The infamous oven of Akhnai story illustrates this well. The bearers of this crown today are predominantly scholars and Rabbis.

I will posit that our temple walls are cracking and crumbling because a heavy imbalance in the *Ketaric* system, with *Keter Torah* and the rabbinate having a disproportionate amount of power and authority today. We have already established that all three crowns have been sanctioned by God and the community – all voices are relevant and necessary. And yet for some reason today only one holds the mantle of “authenticity.” Collaboration between these systems and the people within them in a greater way is necessary to advance Jewish life and restore balance to the system.

Where do we go from here? How do we restore this balance? We would first be wise to recognize the distinction between leadership and authority. They are certainly not the same thing – it is actually often the case that those in positions of authority **fail** to lead on many levels because of the constraints placed upon them in their positions. It is in many ways easier to lead, or to have an impact – without authority. Perhaps the most notable example in Jewish literature is of course Nachshon.

Bamidbar Rabbah suggests: *“When Israel stood by the Reed Sea, the tribes stood contending with each other, one saying ‘I will go first,’ and the other saying ‘I will go in first.’ Thereupon Nachshon leapt into the waves on the sea and waded in. Said the Holy One, Blessed be He, to Moses: “My beloved is drowning in the sea and you stand praying! Speak unto the Children of Israel, that they go forward.”*

Iterations of the word *מנהיגות*, or leadership - accurately describes the definition:

NHG – driver

MiNHaG – practice

The point is actions are key. Authority is less relevant when a true change is desired.

Jonathan Sarna suggests that over the past 350 years, the inspiration, motivation and direction of major innovations and initiatives in American Jewish life have come from men and women who exercised leadership precisely WITHOUT authority. Pioneers in Jewish education, publishing, social services, American Zionism, Soviet Jewry, feminism, Jewish renewal are in this mold. We are in this mold.

To restore balance to the system, and re-adjust our framework – we must demonstrate that all voices – including but not limited to Rabbinic – are sanctioned, and heed the call to be a mamlechet kohanim – and lead by example, whether we have the authority to do so or not.