

Mosheh Rabbenu's leadership

Written by

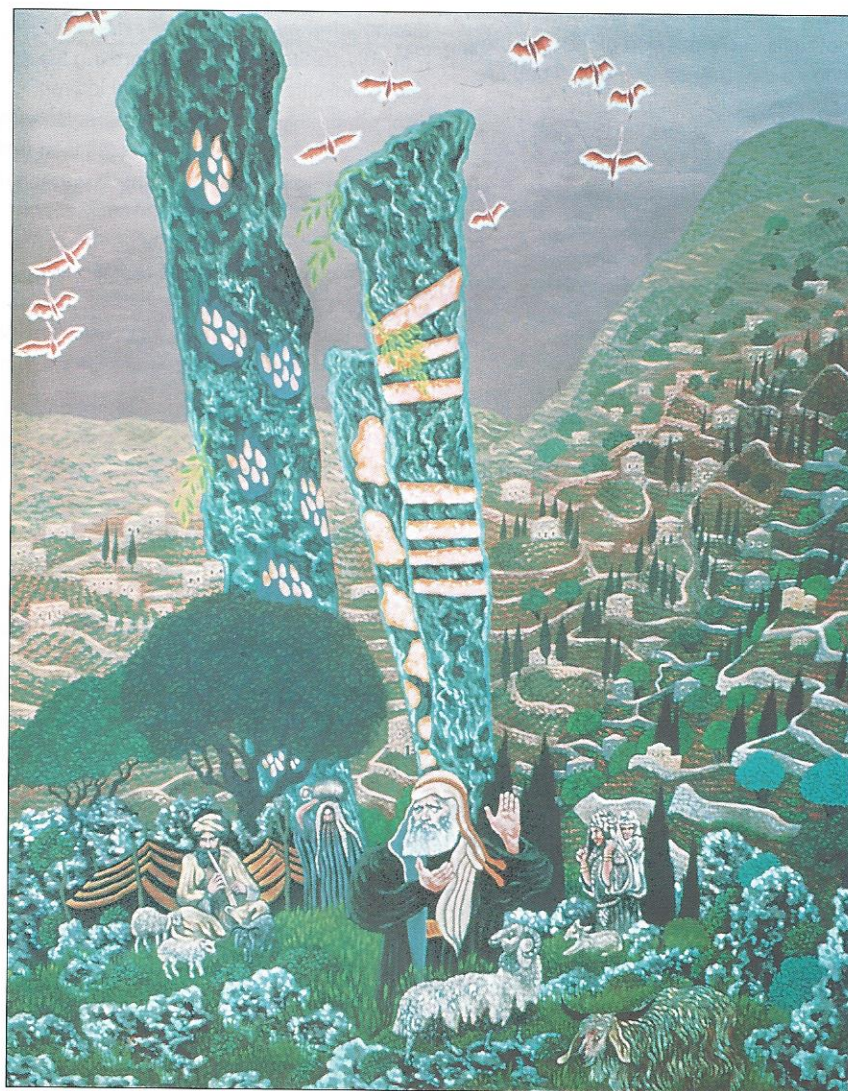
GEORGE NATHAN SCHLESINGER

Rabbi Meir said (Pirke Avoth IV;27) "Do not look at the jug but at what is in it." The Zohar (Exodus, 95a) echoes this sentiment saying "Sometimes in vessels, seemingly empty, grains of gold can be discovered." These statements are so obviously true that it would not require any further comment were it not for the fact that there exists a very powerful human urge to focus on the container, neglecting to investigate its contents; to be enticed by the packaging without examining what is in it, and to prefer what is open to direct inspection, regardless the emptiness that may lie behind it.

The strong bias in favor of what glitters rather than what is gold, seems to be a constant of human nature. Knowing this, many manufacturers take less meticulous care in the preparation of their merchandise than in planning spellbinding packaging; spend less mental energy and ingenuity on improving their products than on inventing magic words describing them, like chewy, crunchy, tangy, zippy, or mind boggling phrases like "EATINGEST food, welling with MILKINESS."

Most contemporary leaders are also more in the image making, rather than substance offering business. They concentrate on creating the impression of acting wisely rather than on the endeavor of really acting so. Most politicians are anxious to find out what their electorate wants and adjust their policies accordingly. Such politicians have been parodied by none other British Prime Minister Disraeli saying, "I have to follow them: I am their leader!"

Professional pollsters advise daily our leadership concerning their ratings. Consequently they must exercise acrobatic skills in the attempt to sit on the fence and



© Boruch Nachshon, Israel.

at the same time keep both ears to the ground, knowing also that most of the public won't scrutinize very deeply their pronouncements. "They have the ability" said Winston Churchill "to foretell what is going to happen tomorrow, next month and next year. And to have the ability afterwards to explain why it did not happen." In sum, looking good matters more than being any good.

The famous chemist, Marie Curie, worked together with her husband for four years to isolate one gram of radium salt from eight tons of the ore. Her heroic efforts brought her one third of the Nobel Prize for Physics in 1903 (two thirds of which were awarded to her husband and another physicist). For her discovery of radium and polonium she was awarded in 1911 the Nobel for Chemistry, by which

time she was a celebrity. An enterprising American newspaperman succeeded in tracking down her remote cottage where she happened to be vacationing. The reporter found a shabbily dressed woman sitting in the garden. "Are you the housekeeper?" he asked, not realizing that he was addressing the celebrity he was after. "Yes" she said. After some further small-talk the man asked, "Can you tell me something confidential about your mistress?" To which her memorable reply was, "Madame Curie has only one message she likes to give to reporters, namely, be less curious about people and more curious about ideas."

When journalists interview a famous scientist they wish to hear about their likes and dislikes, as well as work habits, hobbies and eccentricities. All this is of course absurdly trivial compared to the ways in which they manage to create new concepts and to the precise meaning and ramifications of their work. Madame Curie seems to have been inspired by Rabbi Meir's dictum and counseled not to waste time on gathering information about the "jug," i.e. her external habits and foibles, but focus on "what is in it," i.e. the ideas, the reasoning, the planning of the experiments which led to her great discoveries.

Moshe Rabbenu, when still a young child, manifested signs of a future, genuine leader. In Midrash Shemoth Rabbah, it says that Pharaoh used to kiss and hug the infant Moshe who used to take his crown and put it on his own head. The Royal Astrologers, who took this to be an omen of how the mature Moshe will grow and take Pharaoh's crown for himself, counseled Pharaoh to kill the boy. Yitro, who was present, said, "The infant has no sense. Test him by placing some gold and some burning coal before him. If he stretches forth his hand for the gold, then he has sense, and you should slay him, but not otherwise. They accepted Yitro's advice and Moshe perceiving what is genuinely valuable, was about to reach for the gold. (To save him, the angel Gabriel pushed his hand into the hot embers, some of which the child put in his mouth, thus becoming slow of speech and of tongue.)

Moshe grew up to be a great leader of his people. One of the essential characteristics of a genuine leader is the ability to distinguish between appearances

and reality. Moshe was a model of what a true leader is to be, one with a penetrating vision wholly unconcerned with image and concerned only with substance. To cite one example, R. Chaim the Maggid of Szutstin offered an ingenious interpretation of the story about Yitro, who advised his son-in-law Moshe not to wear himself out by counseling and judging the entire people of Israel without any assistance. He advised him to appoint others as well:

"And let them judge the people at all times; every great matter they shall bring to you, but any small matter they shall decide themselves...And Moshe chose able men out of all Israel...And they judged the people at all times; hard cases they brought to Moshe."

The Maggid drew attention to the subtle difference between the wording of Yitro's advice and the report of what Moshe actually did. According to Yitro, Moshe was to judge every "great matter" while in fact Moshe chose to judge all the "hard cases." The leader of the people should naturally attend to the most important cases, i.e. great matters such as disputes concerning a great amount of money, should be referred to him, according to Yitro. He, of course, meant well, however, Moshe in his profound discernment realized that glamorous is not to be evaluated by financial calculation. The Servant of G-d delved below the surface of the issue at hand, realizing that his position demands that he should decide highly complicated issues. Thus, important cases are not necessarily cases involving a great

monetary value, but rather cases requiring *hard, rigorous* reasoning.

It is beyond the scope of this essay to dwell on the many other aspects of Moshe Rabbenu's leadership. Is it conceivable that nowadays people should admire and fully trust (with a few incidents of resentment in the course of his very long term of office) a leader who had a speech impediment? Can one name a modern head of state who, when approaching the age of 100, personally conducted a battle against his compatriots' enemies with the help of his older brother? Do we know about modern men in power who not merely neglected all efforts to grab the leadership, but when it was offered to them by the Highest Authority begged to be excused? And how many politically correct individuals, who gallantly fight for the women's liberation, would, as a total stranger (as was Moshe in Midian) be prepared to risk life and limb to stand up to a bunch of muscle-bound shepherds in order to defend the right of Yitro's daughters to water their flock?

The Torah ends with saying "There has not arisen [an individual] like Moshe," and then enumerates some of his characteristics, including his prophecy and his relation to the Almighty. It is also clear that he served as a unique example of a leader excelling in discernment, wisdom, and in his complete selflessness.

Professor George Nathan Schlesinger is a professor of Science and Logic at the University of North Carolina, where he has taught for the last 26 years.

FREE

JOIN WIZARD CLUB

And Get:

10% Reduction

Fast & Exclusive service Selected Upgrades
T.L.D.W Mandatory - From \$5 per day

AVIS

ISRAEL

From **18**

\$ **per day**

NEW JERSEY: 201-816 8157 CANADA H.R.C: 1-800-526-5343 U.S.A: 1-800-638 4016