

What Qualities Define a Leader?

A Tale of Two Executives

King Shaul and King David were the first two executives of the Jewish People. Both men were chosen by Hashem due to their righteousness, their character and their outstanding leadership skills. Neither of them were perfect, however, and the Navi has a no-holds-barred approach to detailing their flaws and iniquities.

Shaul disregarded an explicit command to destroy Amalek in its entirety. Out of compassion, he allowed Agag, king of the Amalekites, to live, and he kept the choicest animals alive to be able to offer *korbanot*. David spent the night with Batsheva, and tried to cover up her resulting pregnancy by bringing her husband Uriah home from battle. When he refused to go to her, David ordered Uriah be sent to the front lines of combat where he knew he would not survive, thus clearing the way for his marriage to Batsheva and concealing the tryst.

If we were to compare the sins of these two great leaders, it would appear that the sins of David were more severe than the sins of Shaul. David acted out of passion and desire, and while he was technically not guilty of adultery (Batsheva had a *get* and was divorced as were all soldiers' wives to prevent *aguna* situations — *Shabbat* 56a) or murder (by refusing the direct order



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of the King, and by referring to Yoav as his master, Uriah was a *moreid b'malchut* and deserving of the death penalty — *ibid*), he was guilty of a gross impropriety and an underhanded plan to conceal what he had done. This was certainly not behavior befitting a king of Israel. Shaul, on the other hand, came so close to completing his mission. The majority of Amalek had been decimated under his command. He failed to destroy everything, but he had noble reasons for his noncompliance; compassion and the opportunity to offer *korbanot*. Why is it then, that Shaul, who seems to have committed the lesser of two evils, was stripped of his kingdom, but David, whose guilt was so blatant and whose offense so egregious, retained an enduring dynasty?

The Gemara in *Yoma* 22b, offers an interesting insight why Shaul's kingdom was eradicated. It states:

אין מעמידין פרנס על הציבור אלא אם כן קופה של שרצים תלויה לו מאחוריו.

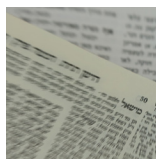
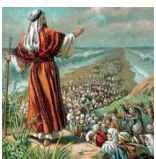
We do not appoint a leader over a community unless he has a box of creeping creatures hanging behind him.

Shaul was the product of a charmed life. He came from a good, solid family, he had the best education, he was tall and handsome; essentially he had no skeletons in his closet or *kupa shel shratzim* as the Gemara describes. He was so accustomed to being admired and respected by others that popularity and approval became very important to him and his perceived success as a leader. On two occasions where Shaul ignored the command given to him, he attributed it to the desire of the people.

וַיֹּאמֶר שְׂמוּאֵל מָה עָשִׂיתָ וַיֹּאמֶר שְׂאוּל כִּי רָאִיתִי כִּי נִפְצָן הָעָם מֵעָלַי וְאַתָּה לֹא בָאתָ לְמוֹעֵד הַיָּמִים וּפְלִשְׁתִּים נֹאֲסָפִים מִקָּמָשׁ.

Shmuel said, "What did you do?" Shaul responded, "For I saw that the people had scattered from me, and you didn't come by the arranged time and the Plishtim had gathered at Michmash."
Shmuel I 13:11

This is Shaul's defense for not waiting for Shmuel to offer the *korbanot* prior to the battle against the Pelishtim as instructed. The **people** were getting ants. He had to do what the **people** wanted. Similarly, when confronted



LEADERSHIP IN TRANSITION

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by Shmuel after his failure to kill all the animals of the Amalekites, he said:

וַיֹּאמֶר שְׂאוּל מֵעִמְלֵקֵי הַבְּיָאוֹם אֲשֶׁר חָמַל הָעָם
עַל מִיטֵב הַצֹּאן וְהַבָּקָר לְמַעַן זְבַח לַיהוָה אֱלֹהֵיךָ
וְאֵת הַיּוֹתֵר הִחְרַמְנוּ.

Shaul said, "They were brought from the Amalekites for the people had pity on the best of the sheep, and the oxen, in order to sacrifice to the Lord your God, and the rest we destroyed."

Samuel 1 15:15

The **people** wanted to do this. He was ceding to the will of the **people**. Shaul was humble to a fault, and too much humility is intertwined with the need for the support and endorsement of others.

David, on the other hand, was the black sheep in his family, hailing from a long line of what was widely perceived to be inappropriate relationships. His Moavite great-grandmother Ruth was a thorn in his side his whole life. The gossip mongers scoffed that Boaz, his great grandfather, married a much younger former princess from a nation that had been banned from joining with ours. He was an old man, they jeered, trying to justify a relationship with a pretty young woman. Many scorned David and did not recognize his legitimacy as a Jew, let alone a king. David was followed by a payload of skeletons in his closet, and because of this, he never expected or sought the approval of anyone. His decisions as a leader, as opposed to those of Shaul, were motivated solely by the will of God and what he thought was best for the nation. Shaul was too consumed with the bloggers and what the people were saying about him in the back row of the shul and the kiddush club. Anyone who tries to please all of the people all of the time is doomed to fail. David, who knew he had nothing to lose if he made unpopular choices, was

able to lead the people with a clear and unfettered vision of what is ultimately in the best interest of the nation.

Both men made grave mistakes, and perhaps David's was worse, but David had the sense of self that is so crucial to successful leadership. Shaul didn't lose the kingdom because he failed his mission. He lost his kingdom because of the personality flaw that caused him to fail his mission, his need to be loved by the people. David's monarchy endures not because David was perfect, but because his imperfections immunized him from the need to please the masses and enabled him to fulfill the mandate of the Almighty.

A second answer to "why David and not Shaul" lies in the response of each man when confronted with his sin. As we mentioned above, Shaul's knee-jerk response was to blame the people, make excuses, get defensive. Shmuel had to really lecture Shaul before Shaul even understood that he had done something wrong. David, when confronted by Natan after the Batsheva debacle, utters two very heart-rending words (Samuel II 12:13), *chatati la'Hashem*. No argument that it wasn't adultery, no defense that Uriah deserved to be killed, simply taking responsibility that "I have sinned against Hashem." Perek 51 of Tehillim is a more elaborate version of David's admission of guilt and soulful desire to repent and make it right.

כִּי אָדָם אֵין צַדִּיק בְּאֶרֶץ אֲשֶׁר יַעֲשֶׂה טוֹב וְלֹא יִחַטָּא.

There is no righteous person in the land who does [only] good and does not sin.

Kohelet 7:20

What defines a person's character is not that they sin, but how they respond to that sin. Do they

rationalize, get defensive, make excuses, pass the blame? Or do they take responsibility, admit their mistake, and work to change, to improve and to learn and grow? Shaul did the former, and lost his claim to the throne. David did the latter and his monarchy is eternal.

The *melucha* (the executor of the halachic community) and the modern-day presidency are very different institutions. Judaism was never a democracy, but a meritocracy. Only the best and the brightest and the most perfected are the individuals who are governing. The *melech* was chosen by God via the prophet and Sanhedrin, and his most important task was to enforce and implement the decisions of the legislative body, the Sanhedrin. In a democracy anyone can get elected, even if they are sorely unqualified, as long as the people decide that that person can fulfill their needs at that moment, even if completely ignoring what is best in the long run. Like the philosopher king in Plato's *Republic*, the most qualified person should be the one at the helm. Hashem decided that King David was the most qualified leader. Because he was invulnerable to public opinion, because he was a man who took responsibility for his mistakes and worked tirelessly to right them, because he only wanted what was best for the nation long term, he earned the title *David HaMelech*.

We hope and pray for the day when leadership is not a popularity contest in which presidential candidates pander to the short-term wants of the electorate, but that leadership is chosen as a function of the person's merits to fulfill the will of the Creator in Heaven and take care of the long-term needs of the nation.