

The Menahel and the Manhig: Two Models of Leadership

Celebrating the Chag HaSemikhah of the Rabbi Isaac Elchanan Theological Seminary gives us an opportunity to consider the extraordinary contribution that the musmachim of RIETS have made in leading the Jewish people. Our Yeshiva prides itself on ensuring that every graduate is fundamentally an accomplished talmid chacham. In addition, each student has received exceptional training, mentorship, and guidance in the practical dimensions of rabbinic leadership. RIETS continues to engage our musmachim through their personal relationships with RIETS roshei yeshiva, which endure long beyond the years spent in the beis midrash, and through the continued rabbinic education that is offered to our alumni throughout their careers. It is often the musmachim of RIETS who find themselves at the forefront of confronting major communal issues that impact not only the larger YU community, but the Jewish people as a whole. As a rav, one is often called upon to provide perspective and guidance, and occasionally take unpopular public positions in the pursuit of propelling our community forward in its development as *ovdei Hashem*.

As the Torah relates the unfolding narrative of the Jewish people, we are presented with many models of leadership, and are often exposed to the struggles and achievements that are



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invariably associated with providing a principled path for communal development. Perhaps one of the most challenging moments of leadership that we encounter throughout the Torah, and the episode with the most far-reaching consequences, is the mission of the *meraglim*. The Torah describes the stature of the individuals selected to represent the Jewish people in exploring the landscape of our intended destination — Eretz Yisrael:

וַיִּשְׁלַח אֹתָם מֹשֶׁה מִמִּדְבַּר פָּאֲרָן עַל פִּי ה' כָּלָם
אֲנָשִׁים רָאשֵׁי בְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל הֵמָּה.

And Moshe sent them from the desert of Paran based on the commandment of G-d, they were all [distinguished] men, heads of the Jewish people.

Bamidbar 13:3

The Torah describes the reaction of the people upon hearing the report of the *meraglim*:

וַתִּשָּׂא כָּל הָעֵדָה וַיִּתְּנוּ אֵת קוֹלָם וַיִּכְבּוּ הָעָם
בְּלִילָהּ הַהוּא. וַיִּלְנוּ עַל מֹשֶׁה וְעַל אַהֲרֹן כָּל בְּנֵי
יִשְׂרָאֵל וַיֹּאמְרוּ אֲלֵהֶם כָּל הָעֵדָה לוֹ מִתְּנוּ בְּאָרְץ
מִצְרַיִם אוֹ בַּמִּדְבָּר הַזֶּה לוֹ מִתְּנוּ. וְלָמָּה ה'
מְבִיֵּא אֶתְנוּ אֶל הָאָרֶץ הַזֹּאת לְנַפֵּל בְּחָרֶב נַשְׁנוּ
וְנִסְפְּנוּ וַיְהִי לְבַז הַלֹּאֵא טוֹב לָנוּ שׁוּב מִצְרָיִם.
וַיֹּאמְרוּ אִישׁ אֶל אָחִיו נַתְּנָה רֹאשׁ וְנִשׁוּבָה
מִצְרָיִם.

And the whole congregation lifted up their voice, and the nation cried that night. And they complained against Moshe and against Aharon; and the whole congregation said to them: "If we only had died in the land of Egypt! Or if we only had died in this wilderness! And why is G-d bringing us to this land to die by sword, our wives and children will be taken captive, isn't it better for us to return to Egypt?" And each one said to his brother, "Let us appoint a leader and return to Egypt."

Bamidbar 14:1-4

The Jewish people react with a national panic that reflects an underlying lack of faith in Hakadosh Baruch Hu; they are ultimately sentenced to remain in the desert, while the next generation will enter the Land of Israel. The commentators struggle with many aspects of this story. A generation that had been emancipated from Egypt, crossed the Yam Suf, survived the theological crisis of the *cheit ha'egel*, seems to be undone by the report of the *meraglim*. What caused this breakdown in leadership?

R. Yechiel Yaakov Weinberg, in his *Liferakim* (pp. 122-125), poses a

simple question: The attribute that we treasure most in our leaders is integrity. Why would G-d hold the *meraglim* accountable for reporting precisely what they saw? They were insightful and sophisticated people. In their judgment, the enemies of the land were indeed formidable, and posed an existential threat to the Jewish people. What exactly was expected of the *meraglim* in this scenario?

R. Weinberg suggests that there are two types of leaders. The first is what R. Weinberg describes as a “*menahel*.” A *menahel* is a modality of leadership that relates to the practical and concrete dynamics of governance. It consists of the cycle of “cause and effect” that needs to be taken into account when assessing a situation for formulating a responsible approach. The *menahel* excels at the managerial and administrative elements of leadership, the tasks necessary to maintain the steady, consistent, and reliable

character of the entity that he leads. However, there is a second category as well, and that is the “*manhig*.” The *manhig* views the landscape of reality and recognizes the compelling need to transcend it. The *manhig* is a risk taker, suggesting ideas that are often impractical. The *manhig* is a visionary who can see beyond the constraints of practicality. The *manhig* recognizes that not all situations in life should be met with a reasonable and deliberate response — sometimes a bold and ambitious approach is necessary to propel the people forward.

The *meraglim* were at fault for deploying the *menahel* mode of leadership when the moment called for a *manhig*. The Jewish people, standing at the precipice of entering the Land of Israel, required leadership that saw beyond the “here and now.” It required a bold declaration — “*aloh naaleh*,” let us go up, the declaration stated by Kalev (Bamidbar 13:30). The *meraglim* were supposed to

express a commitment to transcend whatever challenges were before us and lead the people into their homeland.

There are moments that require the leadership of the *menahel*. They require a measured and steady approach to guiding our communities in their growth in commitment to Torah and mitzvos. Yet there are other moments that call for the *manhig* — the bold vision that at first seems nearly impossible, but with exceptional inspiration and leadership can emerge as a reality. Those who live entirely in the realm of the *menahel* restrain our community’s capacity to aspire for greatness. Those who reside exclusively in the domain of the *manhig* ignore the day-to-day challenges that frame our constant struggle to achieve meaning and purpose in our lives.

In Megillas Esther we encounter this very dynamic in the metamorphosis of Esther’s leadership. As Mordechai

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becomes more aware of the threatening decrees against the Jewish people and the precarious nature of their standing in the Persian kingdom, he relays to Esther that the time has come to beseech the king for the salvation of her people:

ואת-פתשגו כתב-הדת אשר-נתן בשושן להשמידם, נתן לו — להראות את-אסתר ולהגיד לה; ולצוות עליה, לבוא אל-המלך להתחנן-לו ולבקש מלפניו — על-עמה. ויבוא, התה; ויגד לאסתר, את דברי מרדכי.

He also gave him the written text of the law that had been proclaimed in Shushan for their destruction. [He bade him] show it to Esther and inform her, and charge her to go to the king and to appeal to him and to plead with him for her people. Hathach came and delivered Mordechai's message to Esther

Esther 4:8-9

Esther relays back to Mordechai that such a request is impractical. There are protocols and procedures in the kingdom in order to engage the king. Essentially, Esther makes the rational case for incremental and cautious engagement, outlining the risk of angering the king, which would result in her own demise.

ותאמר אסתר להתה, ותצוהו אל-מרדכי. כל-עבדי המלך ועם-מדינות המלך ידעים, אשר כל-איש ואשה אשר יבוא-אל-המלך אל-החצר הפנימית אשר לא-יקרא אחת דתו להמית, לבד מאשר יושיט-לו המלך את-שרביט הזהב, ויהי; ואני, לא נקראתי לבוא אל-המלך — זה, שלוש יום. ויגידו למרדכי, את דברי אסתר.

Esther told Hathach to take back to Mordechai the following reply: "All the king's courtiers and the people of the king's provinces know that if any person, man or woman, enters the king's presence in the inner court without having been summoned, there is but one law for him—that he be put to death. Only if the king extends the golden scepter to

him may he live. Now I have not been summoned to visit the king for the last thirty days." Mordechai was told what Esther had said.

Esther 4:10-12

Mordechai's reaction to Esther's apprehension is to convey the magnitude of responsibility that rests on her shoulders. Mordechai doesn't address her specific concerns, and instead begins to speak to Esther's personal disposition as a leader. Mordechai explains that Esther must recognize that there are moments that call for incremental and thoughtful consideration, and others that demand action:

יג ויאמר מרדכי, להשיב אל-אסתר: אל-תדמי בנפשך, להמלט בית-המלך מכל-היהודים. יד כי אם-החוש תחרישי, בעת הזאת--רוח והצללה יעמוד ליהודים ממקום אחר, ואת ובית-אביך תאבדו; ומי יודע — אם-לעת קזאת, הגעת למלכות. טו ותאמר אסתר, להשיב אל-מרדכי. טז לך פגוס את-כל-היהודים הנמצאים בשושן, וצומו עלי ואל-תאכלו ואל-תשתו שלשת ימים לילה ויום — גם-אני ונערתי, אצום כן; ובכן אבוא אל-המלך, אשר לא-כדת, וכאשר אבדת, אבדתי. יז ויעבר, מרדכי; ויעש, ככל אשר-צוהו עליו אסתר.

Mordechai had this message delivered to Esther: "Do not imagine that you, of all the Jews, will escape with your life by being in the king's palace. On the contrary, if you keep silent in this crisis, relief and deliverance will come to the Jews from another quarter, while you and your father's house will perish. And who knows, perhaps you have attained to royal position for just such a crisis." Then Esther sent back this answer to Mordechai: "Go, assemble all the Jews who live in Shushan, and fast in my behalf; do not eat or drink for three days, night or day. I and my maidens will observe the same fast. Then I shall go to the king, though it is contrary to the law;

and if I am to perish, I shall perish!" So Mordechai went about [the city] and did just as Esther had commanded him.

Esther 4:13-17

Esther's initial reaction was one of *hanhalah*. It is Mordechai's inspiration that transitions her outlook and disposition to one of *hanhaga*. Esther begins to recognize that if she is waiting for the ideal opening to address her concerns, it may be too late. Esther summons the courage to move forward in a most illogical and nearly irresponsible manner — ultimately asserting herself as a *manhiga* — and saving the Jewish people.

The musmachim of RIETS are entrusted with the sacred role of providing leadership for the Jewish community. Fundamentally, that is an obligation to approach the institutions and organizations of our community within a grounded and realistic framework of a *menahel*. From officiating lifecycle events to teaching Torah, these rabbis search for every opportunity imaginable to provide the support and love for our constituents, and elevate the spiritual vitality of our community. However, there are issues that face our community, which when assessed from an analytical perspective, seem insurmountable. These are moments that demand a *manhig*, someone who stands up and says "aloh naaleh." Someone who provides creative, ambitious, and relentless leadership in addressing the challenges of our generation. Our musmachim have a responsibility to avoid the pessimism that often percolates about the future of our community. They must be a source of optimism and hope in projecting a path forward to secure the future of our people.