

Yasher Koach, Josephine and Leo. It is so meaningful to *learn* from you, not only to watch you go through the rite of passage of chanting Torah and Hebrew blessings. But also, truly, to hear what you have to say. You are, today, our leaders, and I'll try to explain more about what that might mean for *you*. And for all of us as we think about leadership writ large.

Josephine, you taught about the importance of *wholeheartedly* pursuing our goals, specifically as they relate to repairing our world. Focusing on the high priest in Parashat Tetzaveh, and unpacking the minutiae of each garment and what they symbolize, you gave us the literary insight that every item he placed on his body was supposed to guide him toward performing his function fully. I'm going to come back to this idea of *wholehearted* leadership as you expanded it beyond the priesthood to be a lesson for all of us.

And you, Leo, asked a different leadership question about the priesthood. If Moses was God's anointed leader of Israel as we know he was, why not make him high priest, too? As you point out, the commentaries mostly focus on how this must have felt for Moses. As if to understand Moses' disappointment that he led the people out of Egypt and all he got was a lousy walking stick. The midrashim describe God reassuring Moses that even if he didn't get chosen for high priest, he's still the more important leader or the more favored brother. But also, as you argue, Leo, there's a lesson here in how we organize our systems of leadership. Namely, shared power in different branches of government. Beyond that connection to our democracy, the lesson here might be to select leaders like Moses, who accept the limitations of their role, and who treat their power with humility.

Each of you did a fabulous job of parsing this parsha, and teaching us something real.

There's a curious thing that happens in the phrasing of this parsha. Normally, throughout the Torah we read the words "Vayomer Adonai el Moshe," or some such. Meaning God spoke to Moses...and the phrase is usually followed by God offering a commandment. But in Tetzaveh, anytime

we get a commandment, it's phrased in the context of "Aaron shall do this," and "Aaron shall do that," and as the text addresses Moses, the parsha prefers language like, "lead Aaron to do x, y, or z," presenting *Aaron* as the main subject of the portion. Not Moses.

In fact, Moses' name does not appear anywhere in parshat Tetzaveh. The whole text is a list of commandments that God is offering to Moses, which we know, from the context of "Aaron, your brother," and so forth. Here we are inaugurating the priesthood, establishing the religion of Israel, but despite the importance of this whole drama, the name "Moshe," or "Moses" is nowhere to be found. It is in fact the only parsha NOT to include Moses' name, if we exclude Genesis before he was born. And many rabbinic commentaries understand this absence as a sign of Moses' *tzimtzum*, his ability to contract himself, or to restrain himself, as the spiritual leadership of Israel is established.

One of those commentaries known as *Midreshei HaTorah* explains that Moses knew that his role was to be a conduit of God's truth and NOT to be a charismatic leader, being all things to all people. Specifically, the commentator writes, "[Moses] carried out this delegation of authority not as one commanded to do so, out of necessity, but rather, *wholeheartedly*, as a true friend who puts himself at the disposal of his Maker, even when his name is not mentioned."

Mic drop. As I read that text this week, Josephine, I knew that it fit too perfectly with your drash *not* to share it here. Seeing wholeheartedness in Moses just confirms the argument that, as exemplified also by Aaron, wholeheartedness may be an essential virtue of leadership.

Wholeheartedness. I'm fixated on this idea because it is so the opposite of what we've come to expect in leadership, or more specifically in political life. We are living in a time of endless cynicism...the opposite of wholeheartedness or open-heartedness or earnestness.

Looking around at the myriad issues besetting our people, our country, and our world...we might wonder: where is our Moses or Aaron to lead us out of this painful time. If that feels like too religious a question, we might ask instead: with so much cynicism in global leadership, where might we find wholeheartedness? Where, today, is that all-in commitment to the common good that we find in Aaron and the priesthood? Or that humility or tzimtzum that we find in Moses?

It is, unfortunately, a rhetorical question. Because looking out the world, we mostly see examples of where leadership fails.

Focusing first on Israel, the past four months of trauma and war have shed light on the gross failure of the Netanyahu administration to protect Israelis, or for that matter, Palestinians. You spoke, Leo, about Bibi's proposed judicial reforms as contrary to a healthy democracy. And it may be that the split between Moses and Aaron *is* a useful model for separation of powers, which remains critical both here and in Israel. Bibi's attempt to blur those powers, benefiting himself, is just one sign of Netanyahu's inability to lead with wholeheartedness, or an earnest commitment to his people. He has long been motivated only by remaining in power and staying out of prison, and in many ways, October 7th demonstrated his inability to govern. All the more so now, as his government has failed in its war aims, and failed to negotiate a hostage release, and also failed to protect Israeli and Palestinian lives in Gaza.

Precisely because Bibi has been consumed by cynicism.

Turning to a different part of the globe, we ended last week with the news that Alexei Navalny had died in an arctic Russian prison. In the days since, we've been forced to confront in yet another way the brutality of Vladimir Putin's authoritarian government. Today marks exactly two years since Putin declared what he called a "special military operation" in Ukraine against eternal foes of Russia. Putin's war was always founded on spurious, dishonest claims about Ukrainians. And over these two years we

have watched in horror as over 70,000 Ukrainians have died, as have nearly as many Russian soldiers. This war should never have been!

But here, too, we find a leader fueled by a cynical view of power. And how to retain it.

Closer to home, as our own American elected leaders have addressed how to support Ukraine in this war, the US Congress has reached a standstill... Last fall, Senate Republicans insisted that the only way they'd agree to more funding for Ukraine was if the Congress addressed the crisis at our southern border. And a few weeks ago, a bipartisan group of Senators agreed on the specific language for a bill that addressed both immigration reform and funding for Ukraine, making painful choices against their own side in the spirit of compromise. This, we might say, was in the spirit of wholehearted, earnest patriotism.

But when Donald Trump objected to the bill moving forward, Republicans in both the House and the Senate pulled away. In this scenario, Congress was moving closer to doing what it was always meant to do: work together to compromise, working across the aisle to solve America's problems. Until the presumptive Republican presidential nominee stepped in...and effectively killed it, because it's contrary to his agenda as he seeks the White House again. The Senate voted last week to advance a bill supporting aid to Ukraine and Israel, but it's expected to fail in the House for the same reason.

We could go on and on, examining so many examples from American government and from leaders across the world motivated above all by maintaining their own power. And you can read better analysis of all of it in any newspaper than you will ever hear from any bimah. But what seems *unlikely* is that you will read in any newspaper or see on TV that all these issues stem from a *spiritual* affliction. That is, a lack of *wholeheartedness* from our leaders.

We can debate policies and politics, and surely we will. But we must agree that it should be better than this. That leaders can be motivated by intentions that are purer than anything we find today. The role of *religion* in times like these is to remind us to believe that it can, in fact, be better. By *believing* that leaders can behave better...that they can act with good intentions, and with the goodwill of the people in mind, like Moses and Aaron in this week's parsha, we can start *demanding* that they do.

We can't face *their* cynicism with further cynicism of our own. About power inevitably corrupting. We have to believe that it is possible for leaders to take the advice you shared today, Josephine and Leo. To be wholehearted. To recognize their limitations in governance. We have to believe that leaders can make room for others, again, like Moses and Aaron.

And as we grow to believe it, we can pray that it will be so.

Shabbat Shalom.