

Korach 5785 Shabbat Morning

June 28, 2025

Bnei Mitzvah of Eli Mandel and Joshua Stefanisin

Eli and Joshua, I'm so impressed with the Torah you taught us this morning. You've made me so excited to be back to hear this caliber of thoughtful Torah from our teens. As I said to both of you earlier this week, our Torah is our most precious inheritance, but it's not only an inheritance. It doesn't belong to the past. It belongs to the present and the future as well, and the way we make that true is by teaching it anew every week, in every generation, by making it speak to us and to our times. You have done that today.

Eli, you gave us an excellent prescription for leadership based off of the negative and positive examples of Korach and Moses, respectively. You taught us that a leader should be humble and not driven by personal gain. They should derive their power from the respect of their people and not from fear. They should always strive to do what is right even when it is hard. They should know that they don't know everything. They should feel responsible for their people. You said, "They should put themselves in their people's shoes and really care for their needs," and you clarified that you meant all of the people and not just their supporters.

Joshua, you asked when it is legitimate to challenge authority — whether it's teachers, parents, or the president of the United States. You taught us that unlike Korach, we should only challenge authority when our motivation is not personal gain but instead the pursuit of truth, truth that will make the world a better place for all people. The examples you gave of the kinds of truth we might pursue are: to uphold the Constitution and the laws of the United States, to stop corrupt practices by people in authority, or to correct bias or discrimination.

Your messages complement one another perfectly. Eli, you were speaking about formal leadership. Joshua, you were speaking about informal leadership. Let me explain more what I mean by informal leadership. Informal leadership is when you don't have an official position but you lead anyway. You both were imagining that there are some people with authority, people who are leaders, and others without authority, who are not leaders. To some extent that's true. Some people

run large institutions, have big platforms, and wield a lot of power, and others do not. But this divide is not as big as it seems. Everyone has some power to influence the people around them, and everyone can build informal authority by earning the respect of others.

I've been away for six months, and this is my first Shabbat back at CBE. I've missed this place and this community a great deal. I am and will forever be grateful for the immense gift I was given of these six months to renew myself. I'll be saying more about what I did and reflecting more on the experience on the Shabbat of July 11, but for now I'll say this:

For four of the last six months I was traveling in South America. Though my primary goal was to be in beautiful wilderness, and that's most of what I did, I was also aware that every country I traveled in had lived through some kind of authoritarian regime. While I was there, I learned about these histories. I read books, I went to museums, and I talked to people. The most surprising thing I learned was that it was all kinds of ordinary people, in all walks of life, of all ages, who found ways of leading by challenging unjust use of authority and by creating alternative ways for people to come together and get their needs met. And when enough people decided to lead, decided to pursue truth and a different path for their country — culturally, socially, religiously, economically; subtly, overtly; directly, indirectly; secretly, openly — things began to change and it led to the end of the regime.

I used to think that distributed leadership was only really possible in a democracy, but that's not true at all. Regardless of the nature of our government over time, we all share responsibility for the society we create. Because we are a communal species who evolved from herds and then tribes, we look to one another for cues and clues about how to behave. Which means that every one of us, regardless of age or station, role or platform, has the ability and the responsibility to lead the people around us. There is no reason to wait until you arrive at a certain age, or a certain life stage, or some position or moment when it suddenly gets real. There is no such moment. It's real now. And if you think that people aren't watching, looking around for models of what to think, what to say, what to do, how to be, you aren't paying attention. None of us has it all figured out. We're all watching each other.

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks observes that Korach has a fundamental misunderstanding of what leadership is, and I think we do too. Korach says to Moses and Aaron, “Why... do you place yourselves above Adonai’s assembly?” He imagined that Moses and Aaron, as leaders, were above the community. We too tend to think of leaders as above the people, in vertical hierarchy. But that is not actually how Torah thinks of leadership, or how Moses or Aaron did. As you mentioned Eli, with only a few exceptions, Moses only does or says what God tells him to do or say. Not only does Torah tell us explicitly of Moses’s humility, it tells us that the priests were meant to be merely conduits for the flow of God’s blessing. Sacks says, “Neither priest nor prophet has personal power or authority. They were transmitters of a word not their own... that is why humility was not an accident of their personalities but the essence of their role.” Even kings were not supposed to put themselves above other people. Holding oneself higher than the people you lead was seen as a moral failing.

Moses is called “eved Adonai, the servant of God” eighteen times in Tanach, the Hebrew Bible. This became the definition of leadership for the Jewish people. To lead is to serve. A thousand years later when Rabban Gamliel appointed two Sages to office, he said, “Do you imagine I am offering you rulership? I am offering you avdut, the chance to serve.” (Horayot 10a-b)

And that brings us back to the idea that all of us have the potential and responsibility to be leaders, no matter where we stand or what we do. As God says of the Jewish people (in Leviticus 25:55) “To Me the Israelites are servants; they are My servants whom I brought out of Egypt.” That is the highest calling any of us can fulfill. to dedicate our lives to serve the Oneness that is within us and among us and beyond us, the life force that connects all things and all beings, the force that moves us from what is to what can be.

In fact, the most crystallized clarity of my sabbatical, the message I came home with most strongly is exactly this: my deepest yearning for the remaining years of my life is only to serve that Oneness with all of my heart and all of my soul and all of my being. I believe that that is why I am here, why I live. And I believe it is why you are here. That service is what leadership looks like. That service is what every one of us can do.

Shabbat Shalom.

