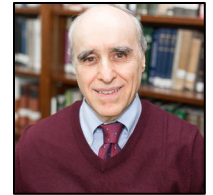


Six Takes on a Leader's Attributes

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In chapter eight of Leviticus, Moses is essentially serving as temporary *kohen gadol*, high priest, during the dedication of the Mishkan, the Tabernacle. On the eighth day, according to Rashi, Aaron and his sons are officially inaugurated into the priesthood. Moses transfers the position to his brother Aaron, who along with his descendants will officially serve as priests and high priest. The transition occurs in [Lev. 9:7](#):

And Moses said unto Aaron: **“Draw near unto the altar, and perform the service of your sin-offering** and your burnt-offering, and make atonement for yourself, and for the people; and present the offering of the people, and make atonement for them; as the LORD commanded.”

Identifying the textual problem: commentators have noticed that the phrase “draw near unto the altar” seems superfluous. If Aaron is being commanded to “perform the service of the sin offering,” is it not obvious that he will need to approach the altar? This textual issue will serve as the basis for our consideration of the attributes of a leader based on our examination of the comments of the traditional Jewish commentaries.

Examining the Commentators' Solutions to the Problem:

Rashi (Rabbi Shelomo Yitzhaki, France, 1040–1105) states that Aaron was instructed to approach the altar (in addition to being told to perform the service of the sin offering) because he “was ashamed and afraid to approach. Moses [therefore] said to him: Why are you ashamed? [It was] for this that you were chosen!”

The commentators attempt to explain what Rashi means by “It was **for this** you were chosen” for a leadership position. What exactly is the valued attribute Aaron possessed deeming him worthy of such an exalted position?

Degel Mahaneh Efraim, in the name of his grandfather the Baal Shem Tov (Rabbi Moshe Hayyim Efraim of Sudilkov, Poland, 1742–1800), states that Moshe told Aaron: *the very fact that you are bashful/reticent and humble, that you possess fear and reticence before God, and consider yourself unworthy—for this reason, you were chosen.* He highlights the quality of **humility** for a leader.

Minhah Belulah (Rabbi Avraham Rappaport, Italy, 1520–1596) however, cites the midrash that “the altar appeared to him in the image of a [golden] calf; therefore he was frightened. As is known, one’s imagination concretizes that which troubles the mind and resides there constantly. Aaron couldn’t remove his thoughts from his [enabling role] in the matter of the [golden] calf, always remembering that sin . . . he, therefore, perceived the altar in the image of a calf. And Moses’s saying that “**that’s** why you were chosen” means that you were chosen because you constantly remember the sin and are embarrassed on account of it—and were therefore chosen to serve in the role of high priest.

Aaron is chosen not because he is perfect but rather because of his **contrition** and his embarrassment concerning the one sin of his. He does not forget his lapse in judgment. His almost obsessive preoccupation perhaps indicates that he is willing to **take responsibility** for his deeds—both past and present—a worthy trait for a leader.

Ramban (Nahmanides, Rabbi Moses ben Nahman, Spain, 1194–1270), on the other hand, quotes the same midrash but concludes that Moses is telling Aaron to embrace an element of haughtiness or overconfidence and not to be so “low-spirited” because God has forgiven him. In other words, Aaron was chosen for the position, indicating that God has forgiven him, and therefore being overly modest or

hesitant is inappropriate. An obsessive preoccupation with the past can be paralyzing; the leader must move on and act at times with an almost overly **confident determination and assertiveness**. When chosen for a position, one needs to rise to the occasion.

The Ketav Sofer (Avraham Binyamin Sofer, the son of the Hatam Sofer, Hungary, 1815–1871), like the Minhah Belulah above, notes that a leader is not chosen because he is perfect. He, however, takes it one step further suggesting that a leader should actually be “one who has a box of reptiles hanging from his back,” meaning that he comes with baggage. And this is what Moshe meant when he exhorted Aaron saying—why are you so concerned/reticent; Aaron was concerned lest he become haughty having been elevated to such an exalted position (in contradistinction to Ramban’s interpretation that Aaron was worried that he wasn’t worthy). So Moses tells him not to worry—because he was actually chosen on account of his having sinned and thereby would not become haughty.

Perhaps a leader who comes with, and/or is aware of, his challenges will be less likely to become haughty and will be able to empathize with others. The Ketav Sofer then is not extolling the attribute of humility like the Minhah Belulah, but rather cautioning against cultivating an outsized and even **unwarranted sense of humility**.

An unexpected interpretation is offered by **Sheraga Hameir** (Rabbi Sheraga Feivish Schneebalg, 20th century, London / Benei Berak, in a footnote to *Be’er Mayim Hayyim*, the 16th-century supercommentary on Rashi) who suggests that “why are you embarrassed?” should really be understood as “why are you tarrying?” (based on his understanding the Hebrew ט.ו.ב.). Accordingly, Moses cautions Aaron not to tarry in his offering of the sacrifice since he was chosen on account of his willingness to accede to the call to duty, as demonstrated in [Exodus 4](#) where according to Rashi, “Aaron did not delay [fulfilling] God’s mission to go to Egypt and thereby merited the priesthood instead of Moses [who delayed accepting the mission].” Therefore Aaron is reminded by Moses why he was chosen and why “he must immediately offer the sacrifice and not delay.”

The quality of **embracing one’s obligation as a leader** and fulfilling it in a timely and highly professional manner seems to be the point of Sheraga Hameir’s comment.

Let’s look at one last comment and switch the perspective from Aaron’s leadership qualities to Moses’s. **Be’er Yitzhak** (Rabbi Yitzhak Horowitz, Galicia, 19th century, one of Rashi’s most important though less well-known supercommentaries) notes that Aaron did not “consider himself worthy for the position . . . so he walked slowly” becoming immobilized. “And when Moses realized this via Aaron’s movements and facial expression,” he encouraged Aaron by speaking the words “approach the altar” in a manner that would inspire and embolden him to continue. As my student Jeremy Fineberg (RS ’19) astutely suggested, Moses was able to motivate Aaron precisely because he chose his words carefully. Moses is displaying a developed **intuitive sense** allowing him to motivate others and facilitate their successful completion of a task or acceptance of an obligation.

According to Be’er Yitzhak, Moses is aware of the tension a leader may encounter when the attribute of humility (which Aaron possessed) comes into conflict with the need to assert oneself in order to complete the task required of one’s position.

Having reviewed six commentaries offering various paradigms of leadership, we should reflect on the different attributes that were highlighted:

Being humble. Contrite/remorseful. Confident/determined. Accepting of responsibility. Tried by personal challenges, past and present. Dependable/professional. Intuitive. Empathic. Inspiring/capable of facilitating the success of others. Choosing words carefully.

Which of these resonate most strongly with us? Which are the most and least important in our leaders?

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