

THREE UNLIKELY LEADERS

JOSIAH DERBY

In a novel, the author usually describes the characters in words: Their physical appearance, their mental and emotional states and other traits, that may be relevant as the story unfolds. This is not so in the biblical narrative. While the narrator in the Bible offers an occasional verbal description of the physical appearance of a personality, such as the beauty of Bathsheba or Esther, or the stature of King Saul, only once is a personal trait mentioned: we are told that Moses was the humblest of all men (Num. 12:3) In the Bible, we infer the character traits of people, from their activities and attitudes, and in some instances we can follow their evolution from being flawed personalities to becoming admirable heroes.

I propose now to demonstrate that three men whom God chose to perform certain tasks of leadership, did not at the time of their designation possess the traits of character that would qualify them for those roles. I will try to answer the obvious question: Why, then, did God choose them? The three are, in chronological order, Moses, Gideon and Saul. (This study is based solely on the biblical text as it is commonly understood, without midrashic interpretations or other rabbinic embellishments.)

When the period of the enslavement of the Children of Israel in Egypt, as foretold by God to Abraham (Gen: 15:13), was coming to an end, someone was needed who could lead the struggle for their liberation. Common sense dictates that this person should be an Israelite who had suffered with his people and thus understood their travail. He should be deeply committed to the struggle and eager to engage in it. He would have to inspire his people and infuse them with hope, as well as confront Pharaoh, so one would expect him to possess at least verbal fluency if not the power of oratory. Moreover, once the Israelites are on their way, the leader would be required to have organizational and administrative skills, as well as the ability to meet crises that are sure to arise with a calm, controlled and decisive attitude.

From the text, it is clear that, at least initially, Moses possessed none of these qualities except the very first. He simply did not fit the job description. *Josiah Derby has B.S. and M.A. degrees in mathematics from Harvard University, and was ordained at the Jewish Theological Seminary. He was the rabbi of Rego Park Jewish Center, NY, for 42 years, and is now rabbi emeritus.*

Though born an Israelite, he grew up in Pharaoh's court as a prince. When he finally came face-to-face with the suffering of his people, it was his innate sense of compassion and justice that aroused him to action. But this action was precipitous, tactless, hardly in keeping with what a leader ought to do. He was immediately in trouble; an unpromising beginning.

The story of Moses is so well-known that it is hardly necessary to pile incident upon incident to demonstrate the point. Moses was a reluctant emissary; God had to cajole him into accepting the mission. He tried to escape by pointing to his speech impediment. When the Israelites came to the shores of the Sea of Reeds, how did he handle this crisis? By inaction. God rebuked him and told him to do what was obviously the only possible thing to do (Ex. 14:15). It was Jethro, his father-in-law, who instructed him on how to organize the life of the people in the wilderness. When he came down the mountain with the Tablets of the Covenant and saw the Golden Calf, he lost self-control and smashed them. And so on. Why, then, did God choose Moses to be the leader?

Sometime in the 12th Century BCE, after the Israelites had entered the Promised Land, the northern tribes were harassed by the Midianites and other nomads. To rally the people in defense against the marauders it was necessary to find a man who was a born leader, self-assured, charismatic, determined, having faith in himself and in ultimate victory over the enemy.

For this task God selected Gideon, son of Joash, from the tribe of Manasseh. When summoned by God to become God's messenger and deliver Israel, he demurred. His response reveals an inferiority complex. *'My clan is the humblest in Manasseh and I am the youngest in my father's household'* (Jud 6:15). He was not fit. When God reassured him that he would succeed in his mission, that is not enough for him. He demanded a sign: *'If the dew falls only on the fleece [of wool] and the ground remains dry, I shall know that You will deliver Israel through me'* (6:37). When this happened, he was still not sure and asked for another sign, the reverse of the first. When this, too, was given to him – the fleece dry and the ground wet – and after he had assembled a force against the Midianite encampment, he still hesitated. God seemed to be somewhat impatient with him and told him to go and listen to the dream of a Midianite soldier; as if to say: If you don't believe Me, go and

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believe the Midianites. Could not God have found a man with greater faith and competence?

Early in the 12th Century BCE, sea-peoples from the Aegean, who came to be known as Philistines, settled on the southern coast of Canaan. In the course of the next century, they established a pentapolis of five city-states and began moving inland, threatening the Israelite tribes. They suffered a disastrous defeat when the Philistines captured the Ark of the Covenant and took it to one of their own cities (I Sam. 4). By the middle of the 11th Century, the Israelites felt that only by uniting under the leadership of a king could they meet this threat. They demanded that the prophet Samuel designate someone to be this king. Samuel was against the idea of creating a monarchy, but God said to him: *'Do what the people want'* (8:7).

Now, what kind of a man was needed for this job? Surely, one with at least some leadership experience, perhaps from one of the larger tribes; a man who, if not a hero of wide renown, had demonstrated his valor and courage in the wars with the Canaanites. Above all, a man of great self-confidence who had the power of command, who might succeed in bringing together the Israelite tribes, each jealous for their independence and their territory.

Whom did God designate to become this crucial first King of Israel? It was a young man named Saul, son of Kish, from the tribe of Benjamin. The text tells us that Saul was *an excellent young man*, and notes one particular feature – *he was a head taller than any of the people* (9:2). At the start of the story it appears that Saul did not have the ability to persevere in solving a problem. His father sent him with a servant to search for some lost asses, and when they wandered from place to place Saul was ready to give up. It was the servant who came up with a suggestion to solve their problem (Ch. 9).

Saul disclaimed eligibility for the great honor to be imposed upon him in words similar to Gideon's: *'I am only from Benjamin, one of the smallest tribes in Israel, and my clan is one of the least of all the clans . . .'* (9:21). He was also shy. When Samuel, after anointing him, wanted to present him to the people, Saul was nowhere to be found. He was hiding *among the baggages*. Is this a man fit to be a king, the first King of Israel? Does he possess the qualities that would be needed to create a nation? Why did God choose him?

At times when extraordinary leadership was required, God turned to men who, by all objective standards, were unqualified and unfit. How is that possible? The most obvious answer is that God's deeds are inscrutable; we cannot understand Him nor question Him. Or, in a more theological vein, it matters not who the choice is, for God will transform the person to enable him to perform the assigned task. But these solutions to the problem are simplistic and do not teach us anything.

In one instance, God Himself gave us the answer. When King Saul failed to execute God's order regarding the Amalekites, it became clear that he had not lived up to expectations and had forfeited his right and that of his descendants to the throne of Israel. It was necessary to find a man who would be more faithful to Him. Thereupon, God sent the prophet Samuel to Bethlehem in Judah, there to anoint one of the sons of Jesse to become the next King of Israel (Ch. 16). Eliab, Jesse's eldest son, was apparently a young man of admirable appearance, for when Samuel saw him, *he thought, 'Surely the Lord's anointed stands before Him'*; that is, this must be God's choice (16:6). But God said to him: *'Pay no attention to his handsome appearance and his stature . . . for not as a man sees [does the Lord see]; man sees only what is visible to the eye but the Lord sees what is in the heart'* (16:7). In other words, there are those who possess latent talents, innate gifts which become manifest under special circumstances, just as a piece of iron, when heated and hammered, could become a beautiful sword.

So it was with these three unlikely leaders. Moses, buffeted by the challenges of the sojourn in the wilderness, became *Moshe Rabbenu, Ish HaElohim. There arose no prophet in Israel like Moses* (Deut. 34:10). Gideon, faced with the necessity for action, discovered (to his surprise) that he was a bold leader who could devise strategy that succeeded against overwhelming odds. He became judge and perhaps even a king, at least of Manasseh. Even Saul, troubled though he was, valiantly fought the Philistines, held them back from further encroachment upon the territory of Israel, and gave his life for his people,.

History is replete with such personalities, men and women who rose to greatness when challenged. The Psalmist has said it: *The stone which the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone* (Ps. 118:22).