



Moses and the Journey to Leadership: Timeless Lessons of Effective Management from the Bible and Today's Leaders

Norman J. Cohen, Jewish Lights Publishing, 2007

Dr. Norman J. Cohen's new book, *Moses and the Journey to Leadership: Timeless Lessons of Effective Management from the Bible and Today's Leaders*, addresses the contemporary search for leaders with vision and integrity, by focusing on a great biblical leader whose life and actions in antiquity offer wisdom and inspiration for our own time.

Cohen explores how leaders are not simply born, but molded through life's victories and failures, triumphs and defeats. No one exemplifies this process better than Moses, the most important and celebrated character in the Hebrew Bible. Faced with great internal and external challenges, Moses was sculpted into a great leader not only by circumstance, but also by his own determination and devotion to his people.

In his powerful and probing examination of the enduring texts in the biblical tradition, Cohen assesses Moses's journey to leadership and its lessons on the vision, action, and skills needed to be a successful leader. Cohen relives Moses's development from lonely shepherd to founder of a nation, emphasizing key points that the reader can utilize to enrich the different leadership roles one may be called upon to play in one's daily life, whether in business, religion, politics, education, or other arenas.

Cohen draws from Moses's life to provide guidance on how to articulate one's expectations of others, as a group and as individuals; empower others to lead more responsible, ethical lives; support co-workers and family even when they fail; and challenge others to reach their highest potential.

The Leader's Unique Song

Exodus 15:1-21

Passing through the Red Sea, the Israelites witness God's power. While they walk on dry land, with the waters forming walls on their right and left, the Egyptians are inundated by those very waters and obliterated. The children of Israel see (*va-yar*) the strong hand (*yad*) of God, which delivers them from the hand (*yad*) of the Egyptians, from the Egyptians' power (Exodus 14:28-31).¹

Though it is God who seems to act, nevertheless it actually is Moses's hand that divides the waters: "Then Moses held out his hand over the sea and the Lord drove back the sea with a strong wind ... and turned the sea into dry ground. The waters were split" (14:21). And it is Moses's hand that destroys the Egyptians: "The Lord told Moses: 'Hold out

your hand over the sea, that the waters may come back over the Egyptians"' (14:26). Moses is described in God-like terms: Just as God divides the waters on the second day of creation, thereby creating the earth, now Moses creates a new patch of dry land in the midst of the waters of the Red Sea, partnering with God in this moment of redemption. The creation cannot come to fruition—God's plan for humanity fulfilled—without the actions of leaders like Moses.²

So the Israelites, many of whom have doubted Moses's ability and motivation, and have been highly critical of him, now see him as God's partner in this redemptive moment: "They believed in the Lord and in Moses,

[God's] servant" (14:31).³ He is perceived as the faithful instrument of God's will, and therefore it is fitting to refer to him by the title *Eved Adonai*, God's servant.⁴

To have faith in one implies the faith in the other, and, by extension, to doubt or speak against Moses is tantamount to speaking against the Divine.⁵

The Nature of the Song at the Sea

The Israelites witness and understand the ramifications of the miracle God has wrought for them as they face the waters of the sea and are pursued by Pharaoh and his Egyptian soldiers, and, as a result, their faith in God and in Moses, their leader, is

renewed. As a reward for their faith, the rabbinic tradition emphasizes that the spirit of God's Presence rests upon them, enabling them to sing a song of praise and redemption. As they read the biblical text, the Rabbis frequently point up that contiguous passages have a causal relationship. The verse "They believed in Adonai and in Moses, [God's] servant" (14:31) is immediately followed by "Then sang Moses and the Children of Israel" (15:1), as if the people's ability to sing was the product of their belief.⁶

Many modern-day leaders suffer from speech impediments and work hard to overcome them. Winston Churchill had a lisp, which he struggled to correct. And Churchill perhaps will best be remembered for his inspiring speeches during the battle of Britain. Part of what enabled him to become such a great communicator was how the British people responded to his leadership initiatives.¹¹

Their words of song and praise, as the Rabbis note, are the result of God's Holy Spirit resting on the Israelites and Moses. This meaning is underscored by a poignant wordplay: Then Moses and Israel are able to sing (*yashir*) the song (*shirah*) because God's Spirit rests (*sharta*) upon them.⁷ God's Shechinah is the source of the song of praise, creating a powerful irony: God is both the source and the object of the song! Their faith in both God and Moses leads to their ability to sing, as noted by the use of the simple

word *az*, which can be understood

as either "then" or "therefore." Here we can translate: "Israel believed ... therefore (*az*) Moses and the Children of Israel sang" (14:31–15:1).⁸

Perhaps it is the faith that the people have in Moses as their leader that enables him to sing this majestic song of praise to God. How is it that Moses, who describes himself by saying, "I am not a person of words ... I am slow of speech and slow of tongue" (4:10), suddenly turns into Israel's singer of God's song?⁹ And not only does he give voice to *Shirat ha-Yam*, the

Song at the Sea, but some sources claim that he composes the entire song by himself. He finds the words to express what all the people are experiencing and feeling.¹⁰ Even great leaders often need the support and faith of their followers to find the strength to overcome obstacles, such as, in Moses's case, a speech impediment. Without the sense that the people care about them, leaders are often overwhelmed by the myriad personal challenges they face.

But precisely how is the song uttered? Do Moses and Israel sing while they are still in the midst of the waters or do they praise God once they emerge from the Red Sea and have witnessed the Egyptians drowning? It is possible that the people of Israel sing praises to God as they are crossing the sea. If so, they utter the words of the song while still unsure how it will all turn out. Their fear and anxiety, their sense that their fate is hanging in the balance, all suffuse the notes of the Song, as do their hope and faith.¹² When Pharaoh's chariots and soldiers enter the sea (15:19) ... then Moses and Israel sang (15:1).¹³ As they walk on the dry land, discovering that deliverance from the hands of Egyptians is indeed possible, Moses and Israel begin to utter praises of God.

Most commentators assume that Israel and Moses sing this song of redemption after their salvation is guaranteed. It involves a retrospective understanding and internalization of all that they have experienced and what it will mean for them in the future. It encompasses a sense of the past and present, which points them toward the future, captured by the initial verb in the future tense: "Then Moses sang/will sing [*yashir*]" (15:1).¹⁴

But not only does the future tense verb *yashir* indicate that this song will be sung again in the future, as if it were a paradigmatic song to be repeated by future generations, but this interpretation gains



Norman J. Cohen, Ph.D.

expertise in Torah study and *midrash* (finding contemporary meaning from ancient biblical texts), he lectures frequently to audiences of many faiths. Dr. Cohen was a participant in Bill Moyers' *Genesis: A Living Conversation* series on PBS.

His books include *Self, Struggle & Change: Family Conflict Stories in Genesis and their Healing Insights for our Lives*, *Voices from Genesis: Guiding us through the Stages of Life*, *The Way into Torah*, *Hineini in our Lives: Learning How to Respond to Others through 14 Biblical Texts and Personal Stories*, and *Moses and the Journey to Leadership: Timeless Lessons of Effective Management from the Bible and Today's Leadership*, all published by Jewish Lights.

Dr. Norman J. Cohen is Provost of Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion, where he is also Professor of Midrash. Renowned for his

Moses and the Journey to Leadership: Timeless Lessons of Effective Management from the Bible and Today's Leaders (continued)

greater force by the use of the word *az*, here translated as “then.” Though *az* can be taken to refer to both the past and the future, the tradition enumerates many of those verses in which *az* clearly points us to future events.¹⁵ In fact, the Rabbis say that young infants, and even embryos in their mothers’ wombs, open their mouths and sing at the sea.¹⁶ Also indicating that the song will be repeated by future generations is the addition of the redundant phrase *va-yomru laimor*, “and they said, saying,” before the song’s opening words (15:1). In the midrash, the Rabbis emphasize in this regard that “We shall tell our children and our children will tell their children that they should recite a song such as this when God performs miracles for them.”¹⁷

The word for song, *shir*, is close to the root *shur*, which means “to glimpse into the future.” As Moses leads Israel in this song marking their deliverance from the hands of their Egyptian taskmasters, he enables them to see the possibility of ultimate redemption. As Miriam demands of them, “Sing to the Lord,” *Shiru l’Adonai*, we are tempted to complete the imperative with the messianic phrase from Isaiah 42:10, *shir hadash*, “a new song.” According to the rabbinic tradition, ten songs span all of human history, moving from the redemption from Egypt to the coming of the messianic age, of which *Shirat ha-Yam* is one. This series culminates with the song of redemption in Isaiah 42, which is also enunciated in Psalm 149:1.¹⁸

Who Sings the Song?

As we have already noticed, it is not clear whether the words used at the outset of the song refer to the past or to the future. However, there is an even greater lack of clarity when it comes to who actually is singing. The verbs are both singular (*yashir*—he sang; *ashirah*—I will sing) and plural (*va-yomru*—they said). Therefore, we as readers are left in the dark as to exactly how the Song at the Sea is performed. When it says, “*Az yashir* [singular] *Moshe u-Venai Yisrael*,” and then “*ashirah l’Adonai*,” does it mean that only Moses sings and the People of Israel merely listen passively, or do the singular verbs somehow indicate that both are involved in some way? Adding to the confusion as to who performs the

song is the phrase *va-yomru laimor*, “and they said, saying” (15:1). This confusion, however, gives rise to several alternative leadership models, each of which can be instructive for us.

The powerful singular verbs lead some commentators and midrashic sources to stress that Moses and Israel sing in unison. Inspired by God’s miraculous deliverance and the presence of the Shechinah, they

raise their voices as if one person were singing.¹⁹ Moses and Israel are seen as being equal, *shekulim*.²⁰ This model breaks down traditional hierarchy in leadership and creates greater unity among the group.

According to one tradition, the People of Israel, deferring to their leader, request that Moses begin the song, but he declines, say-

ing, “No, you shall begin for it is a greater mark of honor for God to be praised by the multitude than by one single human being.” At once, the people sing to God. And only after they finish does Moses also praise God’s name for the signs and miracles that he had been shown.²²

However, the dominant rabbinic tradition holds that Moses is the one who actually begins to sing the words of *Shirat ha-Yam*, and the People of Israel in some way follow his lead. The song is recited antiphonally, though the tradition is not clear as to how that works. The most prevalent view among the Rabbis is that Israel merely echoes Moses’s words. The leader creates the song alone and the people simply repeat what he sings. Though the teachers to whom this tradition is attributed vary, it appears very early and is repeated over the centuries.²³ Occasionally, there is a debate as to what the people repeated—is it all of Moses’s exact words or simply the initial keyword signifiers?²⁴ The notion that it is Moses who sings and Israel who merely echoes his words and melody is a masculine model of the strong frontal leader who transmits a vision that the people are to follow. Moses is the “I” standing before the people, leading them in song.²⁵ In this model, only the leader possesses the wisdom and insight to articulate what they must believe and how they must act.

However, some traditions suggest that Israel does not simply mimic Moses’s recitation of the song. A number of sources emphasize that, following Moses’s singing of a particular phrase of *Shirat ha-Yam*, Israel repeats what

Paul Russell of PepsiCo points out the importance of the individual you place in front of the people as their leader. People need “icons,” world-class people whom everyone looks to as the leader or expert and is willing to follow.²⁶

One of the most unusual aspects of Ernest Shackleton’s Antarctic expeditions was the absence of any leadership hierarchies. He emphasized that everyone was equal and all would share equally in the division of labor throughout the voyages. Everyone did not have equal status, but all were equally valued and involved. On Shackleton’s boats, all hands took turns scrubbing the floors and caring for the dogs.²¹

Moses has sung and then completes the line, illustrating another form of leadership. They follow his lead, pick up his melody and words, and then add their own. Moses, for example, sings, “I will sing unto the Lord, for He is highly exalted,” and the people repeat after him and then finish the line, “I will sing unto the Lord, for He is highly exalted. The horse and rider He has thrown into the sea” (15:1).²⁸ This is a powerful example of leadership development and underscores the nature of the leader’s mentoring role.

Miriam’s Song and Model

The notion that the Israelites sing antiphonally at the sea is first suggested by Philo of Alexandria, who imagines that they form two choruses, Moses leading the men and his sister, Miriam, leading the women.²⁹ Though Miriam’s song is relegated to two verses and one line of actual song (15:20–21), its content is exactly the same as the first line of Moses’s song: “Sing to the Lord, for He is highly to be praised. The Horse and rider He has thrown into the sea” (15:21). It seems that Miriam essentially plays the same role—leading the women, who follow her, as Moses does for the men.³⁰

Yet, Miriam plays a unique role, even compared to her brother, Moses, since the biblical text emphasizes that all the women go out after her with their timbrels, and they praise God through ecstatic dance and song. Miriam is here identified by name for the very first time in the Bible and she is referred to as *ha-Neviah*, the Prophetess, and as the “sister of Aaron.” The tradition interprets

these titles as signifying that Miriam prophesies the birth of Moses (she is five years old when Moses is born)

for she is “only the sister of Aaron when she utters the prophecy.”³¹ Yet, it is significant that at the moment of Moses’s greatest triumph Miriam is also identified as a prophet, like her brother, and is thought of as Aaron’s sister. We would expect her to be called “Moses’s sister!”³² This stresses the special role Miriam plays.

Miriam’s song is clearly different from Moses’s song. Moses’s singing is described by the verb *yashir*: He sang his song to the people, while Miriam, by contrast, is said to literally “respond” to [the women] (15:21).³³ The word used is *ta’an*, which comes from the root *anah* (answer). Moses sings in front of the congregation, but Miriam reacts to those around her, responding to them and their songs. Hers is a feminine model, one of sensitivity and response, through which she encourages her sisters to sing their own song. Her empowerment of the women to sing their song is clear from the words she utters. In contrast to Moses leading the people by himself, *Ashirah l’Adonai*, I will sing to God, Miriam urges her sisters to sing themselves, *Shiru l’Adonai*, “Sing to God!” Miriam’s model as a leader is clear: to enable those around her to find their own voices through which to praise God. They need not merely emulate or echo the leader’s song.³⁴ Great leaders understand that each person must be encouraged to raise his or her voice.

Larry Bossidy, former CEO of Allied Signal, realized that developing new leaders is the key to profitability as well as the sustainability of a company. Can those you lead initiate change on their own? Protégés, such as Mary Petrovich, were encouraged by Bossidy to devise their own methods for achieving the company’s goals once they had been trained. He understood that there was a difference between mentoring future leaders and telling them exactly what to do.²⁷

The tradition goes even further in positing the uniqueness of the song of Miriam and the women. Though it is only one line, in contrast to the nineteen lines of the song of Moses, the Rabbis stress that Miriam and her sisters actually sing an entire song by themselves, which is different from Moses’s song.³⁵

The women’s song is distinctive because they utilize *tuppim*, drums or timbrels, to accompany their song and dance. According to a frequently cited tradition, the women anticipate that God will perform miracles for them and that even though they leave Egypt in the middle of the night, in such a rush that they aren’t able to prepare food for the journey, they make sure to bring along musical instruments.³⁶ Like all other righteous individuals, they are prepared for the moment of redemption!³⁷ The song of the women is echoed in the drums they carry with them from Egypt; this is understood as expressive of their innate faith in the future. As women, understanding the potential of birth as a means of overcoming past suffering and death, they are ever attuned to possible moments of transcendence. They are always ready to break into song.³⁸ They teach us that all leaders need to have the capacity to celebrate the potential inherent in every new moment as well as the coming to fruition of their vision.

Drawing from the Two Leadership Models

Miriam’s entire life is associated with water. Not only does she first appear at the Nile to save Moses’s life, but her very name (Miriam—*mar yam*, bitter sea or water) is perhaps tied to *Marah*, the place of bitter waters, mentioned, as we will shortly see, immediately after *Shirat ha-Yam* at the end of Exodus 15. It may also be hinted at in Exodus 17, when Israel complains that there is no water to drink when they reach Rephidim, also identified as a place of strife and bitterness (17:7). Furthermore, in recog-

nition of her song, the tradition envisions a well springing up in the desert that accompanies the Israelites on their trek through the wilderness for most of the next forty years. It is therefore called “Miriam’s well.”³⁹

According to the Rabbis, this well, due to the piety of Miriam, dates back to the beginning of the world, having been formed on the second day of Creation, when God separated the waters, and all the patriarchs and subsequent leaders of the people had access to it.⁴⁰ And finally when Miriam dies at Kadesh, the well and its life-giving waters disappear (Numbers 20:2).

As the Israelites proceed on their journey through the desert, they carry with them both the song of Moses, the powerful singular song of the male, as well as the responsive chords of Miriam, who empowers others to sing their songs. The challenge for each of us who are blessed to play any kind of leadership role is to recognize that there are two different leadership models—one masculine, the other feminine—both of which we must tap. But to do so, we have to get in touch with that other side of ourselves and strive to make it a more active part of who we are as leaders. Those of us who are men must search for the softer, more open and responsive part of our being, so as to help us respond better to others. This will enable us to show others that they, too, can raise their voices in song. Those of us who are women can begin to draw on the more assertive sides of ourselves that will enable us to take a stand when necessary, share our vision, and help us to speak our minds and hearts when necessary.⁴¹

Excerpt is from *Moses and the Journey to Leadership: Timeless Lessons of Effective Management from the Bible and Today's Leaders* © 2007 Norman J. Cohen (Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights Publishing). \$21.95 + \$3.95 s/h. Order by mail or call 800-962-4544 or on-line at www.jewishlights.com. Permission granted by Jewish Lights Publishing, P.O. Box 237, Woodstock, VT 05091.

- 1 They also emphasize the power signified by God’s hand in *Shirat ha-Yam*, the Song at the Sea, itself: “Your right hand, O Lord, glorious in power, Your right hand, O Lord, shatters the foe” (Exodus 15:6).
- 2 Meier, *Moses: The Prince, the Prophet*, p. 107.
- 3 Benno Jacob’s commentary to Exodus 14:30–31 and *Me’am Lo’az* to Exodus 14:31.
- 4 Sarna, *JPS Torah Commentary to Exodus* 14:31. He is called the *servant of God* or some version of this over thirty times in the Bible.
- 5 For example, *Mekhilta d’Rabbi Ishmael, Massekhta d’Beshallah, parashah 7*, *Mekhilta d’Rabbi Shimon* to Exodus 14:31; and *Midrash ha-Gadol* to Exodus 14:31.
- 6 Among many parallel traditions, see *Mekhilta d’Rabbi Ishmael, Massekhta d’Beshallah, parashah 7*; *Midrash Tanhuma Buber, Beshallah 11*; *Midrash ha-Gadol* to Exodus 14:31; and *Shemot Rabbah* 22:3.
- 7 In addition to the sources mentioned in note 6, see also *Me’am Lo’az* to Exodus 15:1 and Rabbenu Bahya to Exodus 15:1.
- 8 Rashi and Ramban to Exodus 15:1, as well as the *Or Hayyim*.
- 9 Meier, *Moses: The Prince, the Prophet*, p. 108, and Wiesel, *Messengers of God*, p. 193. Wiesel reminds us that while stutterers have difficulty speaking, they have no problems singing.
- 10 See Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities*, vol. 1, pp. 345–346, and Benno Jacob’s commentary to Exodus 15:1.
- 11 Hayward, *Churchill on Leadership*, pp. 98–99.
- 12 Zornberg, *The Particulars of Rapture*, pp. 216–17.
- 13 See, for example, Ramban and Sforno’s comments on this passage. See also *Me’am Lo’az* to Exodus 15.
- 14 Zornberg, *The Particulars of Rapture*, p. 224.
- 15 See, for example, the classic midrashic interpretation of Exodus 15:1 in *Mekhilta d’Rabbi Ishmael, Massekhta d’Shirta, parashah 1*.
- 16 For example, *Mekhilta d’Rabbi Ishmael, Massekhta d’Shirta, parashah 1*, P.T. *Sotah* 23a; and *Me’am Lo’az* to Exodus 15:1.
- 17 *Shemot Rabbah* 23:12.
- 18 *Mekhilta d’Rabbi Ishmael, Massekhta d’Shirta, parashah 1*, *Yalkut Shimoni*, vol. 1, *remez* 241–242; and *Midrash ha-Gadol* and *Midrash Lekah Tov* to Exodus 15:1, among many parallel traditions.
- 19 *Or Hayyim* and *Me’am Lo’az* to Exodus 15:1.
- 20 For example, *Mekhilta d’Rabbi Ishmael, Massekhta d’Shirta, parashah 1*; *Yalkut Shimoni*, vol. 1, *remez* 241; and *Midrash ha-Gadol* to Exodus 15:1. See also Moshe Alshich’s commentary to Exodus 15:1, in which he emphasizes that the words *va-yomru laimor*, “they said, saying,” indicate that the People of Israel are not passive, but rather sing along with Moses.
- 21 Morrell and Capparell, *Shackleton’s Way*, pp. 89–91.
- 22 *Midrash Va-Yosha*. See a re-creation of this midrash in Ginzberg’s *Legends of the Jews*, vol. 3, pp. 33–34.
- 23 This tradition is cited very early, in *Sotah* 5:4, and is repeated in *Sotah* 6:2–4; P.T. *Sotah* 23c, and B.T. *Sotah* 27b and 30b. It is also found in many midrashic compilations, including *Shemot Rabbah* 23:9. See also Benno Jacob’s commentary to Exodus 15:1.
- 24 See also, among several parallel traditions, *Mekhilta d’Rabbi Ishmael, Massekhta d’Shirta, parashah 1*; *Yalkut Shimoni*, vol. 1, *remez* 241; and *Midrash ha-Gadol* to Exodus 15:1.
- 25 See my *Self, Struggle and Change*, p. 25.
- 26 Woolfe, *Leadership Secrets in the Bible*, p. 202.
- 27 Among many sources, see *Mekhilta d’Rabbi Ishmael, Massekhta d’Shirta, parashah 1*; *Midrash Tanhuma ha-Nidpas Beshallah 11*; *Midrash ha-Gadol* to Exodus 15:1; and *Me’am Lo’az* to Exodus 15:1.
- 28 Philo, *De Vita Mosis*, 1, 180.
- 29 Noel Tichy, *The Leadership Engine* (New York: Harper Business, 1997), pp. 41, 85.
- 30 Note, for example, *Mekhilta d’Rabbi Ishmael, Massekhta d’Shirta, parashah 10*; the *Mekhilta d’Rabbi Shimon* to Exodus 15:21; *Pirkei d’Rabbi Eliezer*, chap. 42; and *Midrash ha-Gadol* to Exodus 15:21. This parallelism may, in part, stem from a literal reading of *Az yashir Moshe u-Venai Yisrael*, in which *Bnai Yisrael* is understood not as “the Children of Israel,” but rather as “the sons of Israel.” See also Zornberg, *The Particulars of Rapture*, p. 225; and Burton L. Visotzky, *The Road to Redemption* (New York: Crown Publishers, Inc., 1998), p. 138.
- 31 Note, among several parallel sources, B.T. *Megillah* 14a and *Sotah* 12b–13a.
- 32 Visotzky, *The Road to Redemption*, p. 137.
- 33 The text actually says, *ve-taan lehem Miriam*, Miriam responded to them, where the object is masculine, *lahem*. Why it isn’t *lahen*, “to them”—the females—is not clear.
- 34 Benno Jacob’s commentary to Exodus 15:21.
- 35 Sarna, *JPS Torah Commentary to Exodus* 15:20–21, which alludes to such traditions as found in *Saadia Gaon’s Commentary* to Exodus 15:21; Rabbenu Bahya to Exodus 15:21; and Hizkuni to Exodus 15:21.
- 36 *Me’am Lo’az* to Exodus 15, 20–21.
- 37 Among many parallel citations, see *Mekhilta d’Rabbi Ishmael, Massekhta d’Shirta, parashah 10*; *Mekhilta d’Rabbi Shimon* to Exodus 15:20; *Pirkei d’Rabbi Eliezer*, chapter 42; Rashi to Exodus 15:20; and *Yalkut Shimoni*, vol. 1, *remez* 253.
- 38 Zornberg, *The Particulars of Rapture*, pp. 225–230.
- 39 B.T. *Taanit* 9a and *Bamidbar Rabbah* 1:2 and 19:23. See also Zornberg, *The Particulars of Rapture*, p. 232, concerning this tradition.
- 40 *Mekhilta d’Rabbi Ishmael, Massekhta d’Vayassa, parashah 5*.
- 41 See my *Self, Struggle and Change*, p. 25.