Charisma: A Note on the Dangerous Outer Boundary of Spirituality

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For the past several years, I have contributed postings to a number of websites on the subject of the dangerously charismatic teacher in schools. The material was based on my book on Jewish school management that was published at the beginning of 2010. The section on the charismatic teacher was entitled “The Pied Piper.”’[i]

Tragically, between the time that the section was originally written (in 2007) and the time the book was published, a former Jewish Studies teacher at our school was arrested on very serious charges of sexual molestation and assault. His alleged offenses were committed in Israel. Following his arrest, an investigation in Toronto unearthed many issues of concern. He had exemplified many of the good and many of the bad characteristics of the charismatic teacher, especially one active in the religious life of the school. While in Toronto (as a shaliah) he had been immensely popular; had been idolized by students and by some staff; was a talented musician, much in demand locally as a singer at weddings and other community celebrations; and was also used by NCSY as a youth leader and resource. Many former students testified to the profound religious influence he

had on their lives. Others—as it emerged—had far darker, tragic, and damaging memories.

The whole episode and its aftermath caused me many hours of reflection, and made me reconsider fundamentally many other encounters throughout my life with charismatic rabbis and teachers—in both personal and professional capacities. I concluded that although many good teachers and rabbis have elements of charisma in their personalities and style, the overtly charismatic personality almost always masks far more sinister agendas, and must be treated and managed with the utmost caution. The tipping point is where the personality of the teacher/rabbi is more important than the content of his message or teaching. Sadly, most readers of this article will be familiar with examples from within our own community, let alone examples from other educational and religious communities.

Where, though, are the boundaries? At what point does charisma become dangerous? In a community (and a wider world) where an elusive quality called "spirituality" is constantly sought as representing the "authentic" in the religious quest, how can the individual, or the community, or the responsible leader, distinguish the teacher with integrity from the predator?

It can be difficult; but there are some obvious danger signs. They may be present in different combinations, and seem to have some degree of overlap with recognized patterns of cult behavior, although they are rarely so blatant. They may include, but are not limited to:

The personality of the rabbi/teacher becomes the most important part of his presence, rather than the content of what he is teaching. When people go to a shiur, or a workshop, or a lesson, to see what "X" is doing or saying—rather than what "X" is teaching—a personality cult is in the making. The same applies when their conversation is about X's latest action, or remark, or appearance—rather than X's "Torah." A truly spiritual personality, in a Jewish context, is concerned to bring people to God, not to himself (more rarely—herself).

Extreme emotional or pseudo-intellectual manipulations are being used to demonstrate that X, and only X, has "the answer." A spiritually and intellectually honest teacher will rarely deal in absolutes.
The teachings and views of others—particularly rivals for the charismatic teacher's popularity—are openly disparaged or undermined.

In an institutional or community setting, the followers of the charismatic rabbi/teacher become a group within a group. They do not mix with others, and see themselves as an elite.
Individuals or small groups regard themselves as favored protégés of the teacher. When they no longer uncritically accept the teacher's philosophy or Torah, they are quickly dropped; disillusion—often accompanied by feelings of betrayal—sets in.
Counseling, advice and guidance are being given on deeply personal, perhaps intimate matters, far beyond the training and competence of the rabbi/teacher. The personalities we are describing will often invite such disclosures.
There is one clear sign that should immediately raise red flags:

The rabbi/teacher teaches, or shows by behavior, that he or she is exempt from the rules that apply to others. Mesmerized followers accept that "it"—whatever "it" is—is permissible or not problematic because the rabbi/teacher has special reasons, or a special argument, or special circumstances, or special authority, to justify the behavior. Often, there is an accompanying condition: Don't tell anyone about this, because no one else can understand.

This is most obvious in a sexual context, but any and every such instance is suspect. Are meetings and encounters taking place at times, places, and in circumstances that violate accepted norms and practices? Are improper communications passed between individuals? Are money, gifts, favors, special treatment being exchanged?

The sad list goes on. Unfortunately, in our community context, too many people who should know better willfully ignore such danger signs, arguing that the ends justify the means. The word "kiruv" frequently figures in such discussions. It takes a great deal of courage, and a great deal of conviction, to stand up against this type of activity.

We live in a time of extremes. Some of the religious leaders of our age have embarked on a battle against the world we live in. The argument that to be a loyal Jew (a "Torah Jew") involves rejection of science and culture has to involve an emotional, not an intellectual position, and ipso facto it has to involve rejection—usually vehement rejection—of others. Parallel or analogous political positions and beliefs will generate similar behaviors. They all encourage extreme personalities. Tolerating, let alone encouraging, extreme personalities makes the group vulnerable to unhealthy influence and behavior.

We need charisma—it has an honorable history in leadership, certainly including models of Jewish leadership—but we need it to be combined with uncompromising, uncompromised, and comprehensive integrity. That integrity has to be religious, emotional, behavioral, and intellectual. But it is very difficult to be a charismatic moderate!

[i]The character of the Pied Piper remains a seductive and sinister figure in folklore. According to legend, in 1284 130 children mysteriously disappeared from the medieval German city of Hamelin (Hameln). A man dressed in colorful (“pied”) clothing, and playing a pipe mesmerized the city’s children with his music. Bewitched, and entirely under his control, they blindly followed him out of the city to an unknown destination, and were never seen again. (Also by playing his pipe, he had lured the rats that plagued the city to their deaths by drowning in the local river. The town council refused to pay him for his services. In an act of revenge, he worked his magic on the children.) The poet Robert Browning (1812–1889) immortalized the story in verse (“The Pied Piper of Hamelin”).