Leading from Both Sides of the Mehitza

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Rabbi Nissan Antine is the Senior Rabbi of Beth Sholom Congregation in Potomac Maryland. He received his ordination from YCT Rabbinical School in 2006. He is a past president of the International Rabbinic Fellowship, a rabbinic organization with over 240 members. Maharat Hadas (Dasi) Fruchter is the Assistant Spiritual Leader at Beth Sholom Congregation in Potomac, MD. She was ordained by Yeshivat Maharat in June of 2016, and also completed an M.P.A. in Non-Profit Administration and an M.A. in Jewish Studies from New York University's Wagner School of Public Service. This article appears in issue 31 of Conversations, the journal of the Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals.

But when Moses' father-in-law saw how much he had to do for the people, he said, "What is this thing that you are doing to the people? Why do you act alone, while all the people stand about you from morning until evening?"

—Shemot 18:14

As spiritual leaders, it is often our instinct to act alone. Even if we are trained to be collaboratively minded and value the importance of teamwork, many of us still are drawn to the enticing option of getting things done ourselves, with our own rules and on our own time. The research on leadership that has emerged recently has shown, however, that good leadership is characterized by collaboration and the coming together of shared strengths.

We want to present the unique case of shared leadership in the context of Orthodox synagogue life. In 2016, Beth Sholom Congregation in Potomac, Maryland, hired a female professional, a graduate of Yeshivat Maharat, (the co-author of this article) to serve on its clergy staff. We have learned a tremendous amount in the two years since this decision was made, and one of most striking

lessons was around the importance of a shared-gender leadership team in Orthodox shuls.

We have several goals in this article. First, while it won't be a comprehensive review, we will present the idea of shared leadership. We will then move on to a discussion of our own experiences, highlighting an argument for the responsibility of shared-gender leadership in Orthodox synagogues. Finally, we will offer a case study on how our approach generated a dynamic response to an American moment around women coming forward in cases of sexual harassment and assault.

An article in the Harvard Business Review, In Praise of the Incomplete Leader (2007), pushes back against the idea that puts a single leader on a pedestal. Rather, the authors suggest that it is time to move away from the idea that one person has it all "figured out." A changing world, they argue, requires us to lead differently, and it is only "when leaders come to see themselves as incomplete—as having both strengths and weaknesses—will they be able to make up for their missing skills by relying on others." In addition to a concrete benefit, there is also an important spiritual value to leading with your strengths and letting others lead with theirs. When Avraham responds "hineini," Rashi comments that he responds with humility. A tremendous insight is brought forth through Rashi's comment: Humility does not mean making oneself so small to the point of disappearance; it means realizing what gifts you have and saying hineini—you're present and ready to use them. Other models of collaboration—Moshe, Aharon, and Miriam being the prime examples—teach us this same lesson. One cannot, and should not, lead alone. Each leader's skills were important to transition a group of slaves to becoming Am Yisrael.

If possible, it is an incredible thing for a community to be managed by more than one clergy member. A good collaborative team should include leaders of diverse interests, background, and life positions, holding each other accountable, all bringing their strengths to the table. Upon reflection, however, the two of us want to suggest that while considering the approach of shared leadership in Orthodox synagogues, gender should be take a front seat when considering diversity. Women should be a part of synagogue spiritual leadership in matters of organizational participation, Torah scholarship, spiritual mentorship, halakhic guidance, and pastoral care. Neither of us believes that there should be a model of male spiritual leaders for the men only and female spiritual leaders for the women only. All congregants benefit from the perspective and guidance of male and female spiritual leaders with their distinct gendered experience and

background.

That said, at the most basic level, much of shul action happens when the community is separated by a mehitza. Families celebrate semahot, men and women come to say Kaddish for the first or last time, or they show up to shul for the first time after an extended illness or joyous milestone. These moments often happen during communal prayer, when men and women are already sitting on their respective sides of a mehitza. A spiritual leader on one side, though able to offer a supportive glance from afar, may have a difficult time really being present and addressing the emotional and spiritual needs of congregants on the other side. Furthermore, while some community members who feel comfortable addressing all issues with their clergy members, others feel more comfortable when they can choose the gender of their clergy member, particularly on deeply intimate matters.

In two years, there have been more moments than we can count that underscore this approach. A few months ago, a woman came to shul at the end of 11 months to say her final Kaddish. Had the male clergy co-author been the only clergy member present, he would have had no idea that this was her last Kaddish because of the mehitza, unless she had told him in advance. The female clergy was present, saw the nuance in the woman's emotional presence, and learned that she was showing up for the final Kaddish for her father. She quickly arranged and guided the mourner in reciting a tefillah that we say on completion of the Kaddish. Imagine the scene: The female clergy member, holding and guiding her through the tefillah, clutching her hand as she navigated this important transition. The male clergy member, able to get up right after and see what was happening, announced the deceased relative's name before sharing a Mishna in his memory. There are countless times we have a feeling after minyan, as we walk into our respective offices, that what we just accomplished needed to be done together. This very holy and special moment demonstrates the unique need for a mixed gender clergy partnership in Orthodoxy.

While the anecdote above is primarily about female spiritual leaders assisting those on the women's side of the mehitza, there have been many times after our female spiritual leader gave a sermon on a given Torah topic that men in the shul have commented how important it was for them to hear Torah from a woman filtered through her experience and learning background. Because of our partnership, the issue of sexual harassment and assault came to the foreground. A few months ago, as a result of much deliberation and planning, we started a conversation around sexual harassment and assault. To the two of us, a typical

sermon did not seem to be the right approach to engage in meaningful conversation about such an urgent and sensitive subject, one that is—for good reason—so central to media discourse right now.

While it is a complex discussion and we went back and forth on the particulars, we came to three conclusions: First, we must speak about it and bring the conversation to our community. This is not just an issue of “them,” but also of “us.” Sexual harassment and violence happens in our Jewish community; it includes both victims and perpetrators, and we too are implicated and impacted by the discussions that are happening. Part of being a Kehilla Kedosha (a holy community) means that we provide support and strength for people who are struggling and in pain on an entire range of issues, including victims of sexual harassment and assault. Our spiritual communities should be places where we can bring our anxieties and full selves, regardless of how challenging the conversations are.

Second, for the two of us, a male-female clergy team, it was important to give a sermon together, to model what conversations on this topic can look like between men and women. The conversations between the two of us leading up to the sermon were very significant as they enabled us to better understand the way that many men and women were struggling with these issues. Therefore, our presentation began with a shared sermon where amidst words of Torah about the weekly Torah portion, the female clergy member shared a story of her own sexual trauma, while the senior male clergy member modeled listening and response.

Third, in the spirit of collaboration and shared leadership, we believed that our talk should be followed by a community driven space for discussion, reflection, and action. We were fortunate to collaborate with the Jewish Coalition Against Domestic Abuse (JCADA) and mental health professionals within our community to facilitate three breakout groups after the sermon. One group for men only, one for women only, and a mixed gendered group facilitated by JCADA that was about asking difficult questions and getting more information and resources. Our deep hope was that anyone who wants to ask hard questions was able to feel like they can—that in our spiritual community, there would be room to hold nuance in a world increasingly unable to do so. Therefore, we provided the types of spaces that can model what asking hard questions in a patient, gentle, and curious way can look like.

While we certainly did not have all the answers, we knew that it was critically important to create a space that would provide support for those affected by harassment and assault, encourage victims and bystanders to find their voice to

protect themselves and others, and enable all of to grapple with these challenging questions together, as a community. In order for this unique model to come to fruition, the two of us needed to work as a unit, bringing forward our honest perspectives as we grappled with the issues.

Conclusion

Joseph Raelin (2005), leadership scholar, encourages practitioners to move from conceptions of leadership that are serial, individual, controlling, and dispassionate to what he calls “leaderful” organizations, which champion leadership that almost sounds virtue based—it is concurrent, collective, collaborative, and compassionate. We believe that it is time to move in that direction. Most Orthodox settings are exclusively led by men. In the last century or so, we have seen a dramatic change in attitudes and practices throughout different types of Orthodox communities when it comes to the role and participation of women in various aspects of Jewish intellectual, communal, and, in many instances, ritual life. Our communities will grow stronger in Torah observance and vibrancy with the introduction of mixed-gender communal and spiritual leadership models. We are fully aware that this is only the beginning of the conversation. The examples and stories for why it is important to have mixed-gender leadership teams are now rushing in. We look forward to being in partnership with our larger community in thinking about these issues.