"Lessons in Leadership," by Rabbi Jonathan Sacks

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Change is necessary

Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks published “Lessons in Leadership” in 2015. Professor Ronald Heifetz who wrote the Forward points out that the rabbi is stressing that people of all religions and cultures should not sit passively and rely on the decisions of authorities and even God, and that Sacks encourages “a change of people’s attitude, values, and behavior.” This requires thought, action, and perseverance. “One has to sift through what to keep (as part of their lives), what to discard and which innovations will enable (them) to survive.” Progress “demands not just someone who provides answers from on high, but changes …. As Sacks put it… (we need to) become God’s partner in the ongoing work of creation.” God, or we might say the Torah, also changes. “Sacks suggests that since the partnership between God and humankind is real, perspectives flow both ways. Deliberation takes place – top down, bottom up. God (wants us to change and) changes the (divine) plan based on dialogue (between humans and the divine). We must learn to listen; God listens too.”

Jonathan Sacks is one of the great leaders of Jewry today. He served as Chief Rabbi of the United Hebrew Congregation and the Commonwealth for twenty-two years from 1991 until 2013. While this recent book focuses on the lessons that each of the 54 biblical portions teach about leadership, he writes that he is speaking about a general ongoing approach to life. He speaks of all kinds of leaders, of countries, communities, families, parents, as well as leadership of

one’s personal life, becoming what the Torah wants individuals to become. “The Lord may be our shepherd, but no Jew was ever a sheep.” He writes: “Applying inflexible rules to a constantly shifting political landscape destroys societies,” and to do so in our personal lives, destroys our lives and makes it impossible to be all that we can be. He notes that “the Torah does not contain a word that means “obey” because blind obedience is not a virtue in Judaism.”

Maimonides

This stress on change and not authority may appear to be an improper view, especially of a religious leader. But the wisest Jew Maimonides said the same thing in the twelfth century. He wrote that this is why God placed eyes in front of our faces, not in back. While the term “tradition” is used frequently in discussions about Jewish values and practices usually in a praiseworthy fashion, Maimonides warns us to be skeptical of traditions, no matter what their source and no matter how many people insist that the tradition is correct. He writes in his Commentary on the Aphorisms of Hippocrates that people must test all traditions, whether they are medical treatments taught by the famed physicians Hippocrates (c.460-c.370 BCE) and Galen (129-c.200 CE) or Jewish values by learned rabbis, and examine whether these traditions are logical, help improve people and society, and conform to science. No one would rely on medical advice that is over two thousand years old without examining modern scientific findings; other traditions are no different.

Reliance on God is wrong

Sacks warns us not to “leave everything to divine intervention…. It is not what God does for us that changes the human situation. It is what we do for God.” People need leaders, who are “unafraid to face the challenges of today and build for tomorrow instead of, as so often happens, fighting the battles of yesterday.” One cannot rely on yesterday’s decision; “no two generations are alike.”

We dare not sit passively while alive and seek God in a realm beyond life. We must seek God in life and in how we live. God gave us a mind, a body, and society, and we must treasure them and constantly seek to improve them. We are not defined by what happens to us but by how we respond to what happens to us.

What do the Bible and others say?

The failure of leadership, whether of others or of oneself results from a failure to act, “Judaism is God’s call to human responsibility.” According to the Bible commentator Rashi to Genesis 6:9, God whispered to the patriarch Abraham,

“Don’t wait for me. Go on ahead.” When God called out to Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, after they ate the forbidden fruit, “Where are you,” it was a call “not directed only to the first humans. It echoes in every generation.” Righteousness is not leadership.” True leaders have “the courage not to conform…. They have a vision (of the future), not what is, but what might be. They think outside the box. They march to a different tune…. Dead fish go with the flow. Live fish swim against the current.”

Rather than repeating ancient mistakes, following the traditional practices of old, people need to change. Israel’s first prime minister, David Ben-Gurion, said, “since the world never stops for a moment, and the pattern of power changes like the movement of a kaleidoscope, you must constantly reassess chosen policies towards the achievement of your aims.” The philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein wrote that his aim in philosophy is “to show the fly the way out of the fly-bottle.” Sacks explained: “The fly is trapped in the bottle. It searches for a way out. Repeatedly it bangs its head against the glass until at last, exhausted, it dies. Yet the bottle has been open all the time. The one thing the fly forgets to do is to look up. So, sometimes, do we.”

“Why did God call on Abraham to challenge Him (regarding God’s decision to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah in Genesis 18)? Was there anything Abraham knew that God did not know? The idea is absurd. The answer is surely this: Abraham was to become the role model and initiator of a new faith, one that would not defend the human status quo but challenge it.” Exceptional as many societies were, one of the most remarkable phenomena in history is that, according to the Torah, God chose the very people who challenge heaven itself.

“What is it that made Jacob – not Abraham or Isaac or Moses – the true father of the Jewish people?” Jews are called “Children of Israel,” one of Jacob’s names. Because more than the others, Jacob faced repeated crises, stumbled at times, and suffered. “But Jacob endured and persisted…. To try, to fall, to fear, and yet keep going: that is what it takes” to grow.” Winston Churchill wrote: “success is going from failure to failure without loss of enthusiasm.” The Lubavitcher Rebbe said, we need to recognize that a descent can lead to an ascent.

Women

Unlike many of his Orthodox rabbinic contemporaries, Jonathan Sacks emphasizes that women should, like men, be leaders, not just acquiescent wives. The Torah teaches that there were “six courageous women without whom there would not have been a Moses”: Moses’ mother, his sister, two midwives, Moses’ wife, and

Pharaoh’s daughter who adopted Moses. Four of these women were not Abraham’s descendants. Leviticus Rabba 1:3 states that Pharaoh’s daughter acted so well “that (she, among nine others) entered paradise in their lifetime.” There were also seven female prophetesses: Sarah, Miriam, Deborah, Hannah, Abigail, Huldah, and Esther (Megilla 14a) and great female Torah scholars “from the Mishnaic period (Beruriah, Ima Shalom) until today.” Without women there would have been no Moses and no Abrahamic faiths. Women changed the world in the past and should do so today.

This is a great book that opens the mind and frees individuals from improper stultifying traditions. It is filled with wisdom, and generally contains more than one wise statement on every page that encourages us how to live.