



The Wexner Foundation Electronic Beit Midrash Parashat Toldot

Social Entrepreneurship: Change We Can Believe In

By Ariel Beery

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As much of the United States basks in the afterglow of a historic election campaign, and as Israel prepares for its own election in only a few months, one question has been on the minds of many concerned with the future of our People and our World: how does a nation prepare an individual to lead? And how does that nation then know the choice is a good one?

Few leadership transitions are as questionable, and as full of drama, as the one between Isaac and Jacob, as told in Parashat Toldot. The focus on leadership – and its impact on the People as a collective – is framed from the beginning of the section, as the story tells of the line of leadership transition, from Abraham to Isaac. Set on this stage, the story shows us Rebecca’s vision concerning her two children: the young, she being told, leading the many (or the Older, however you translate the Hebrew word Resh-Bet).

Re-reading the story through this lens, we see that there are two potential leaders for the Children of the Covenant: one, chosen by his father since he possessed the qualities the previous generation held to be elemental to leadership, and the other, chosen by his mother and her vision, possessing cunning and raging ambition. Through deceptive campaigning, Jacob captures the mantle of leadership – but the act of election is not enough; it takes seven long years of hard work, and then another, and then an act of humility and a decision to relinquish ambition, before Jacob is able to pass his final test and emerge as a leader in his own right.

It is as if the Torah tells us that leadership should be earned, and cannot be given. Election, to follow this thread, is not sufficient; hard work and self-sacrifice are necessary before an individual can wear the mantle of leadership.

**Of course, this is not the only story the Torah tells about leadership. Abraham, too, was** designated to lead. When elected he stepped into his role, and went where he was told. But it was his decision to risk everything, twice, and confront G-d himself over Sodom, that earned him his place in our tradition. Joseph felt his election from an early age, but it took jail time and countless tests before he emerged as a leader of our People. Moses, too, was designated to lead—but it was after proving he was willing to be



the responsible one where there is no responsible one, defending his brethren and risking his life, that this reluctant individual became the greatest of our leaders.

Risk-taking and humility, mixed with a boldness forged by a passion for social justice—the recipe the Torah suggests makes a good leader—are the marks of a social entrepreneur. A contemporary term, but an ancient concept, social entrepreneurship is the practice of seeking to solve problems through the launch of risk-taking ventures with few initial resources and large aspirations. Our People were built by these types of individuals, and our State was developed thanks to the pioneering attitudes of their Halutznik ancestors. In short, the Jewish People has built and sustained itself thanks to the risks and the associated rewards of those who threw themselves all-in for the sake of the greater collective.

The training of social entrepreneurs, and thereby leaders, should therefore respect the place of risk and possible failure in the production equation. By rewarding those who have succeeded against all odds, and understanding that contemporary and sustained on-the-ground success, as opposed to models of leadership recognizable to the previous generation, should determine communal decision, our community will be able to better provide leadership to tackle our future challenges.

Or, in other words, nation cannot prepare a person to lead; that person must prepare herself, building herself up through her own deeds, supported when her work meets communal demands. And a nation will know that choice is a good one when that person accepts the job of leadership with humility, out of a sense of duty and not ambition—since leadership need always be about the people and their challenges, and not the individual and her aspirations. It is our job to prepare the groundwork for these leaders to emerge. By investing in the seeds and the platform to grow them, we will grow a future crop of leaders for ourselves, and for the world.

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