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Eli Gottlieb

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Mosaic leadership: charisma and bureaucracy in Exodus 18

Eli Gottlieb

Mandel Leadership Institute, Jerusalem, Israel

Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to examine the relations between charisma and bureaucracy, as presented in rabbinic commentaries on Exodus 18 and Max Weber's *Economics and Society*. It aims to show that approaches developed in these texts have important practical implications for contemporary managers and leadership development professionals.

Design/methodology/approach – The paper is an interpretive study. It uses textual analysis to compare and contrast the dynamics of leadership portrayed in each document.

Findings – Like Weber, the Torah treats charisma and bureaucracy as mutually antagonistic forces that co-exist in dynamic interaction. However, where Weber's account is descriptive, the Torah's is prescriptive, advocating forms of leadership that deliberately combine bureaucracy and charisma.

Research limitations/implications – The paper's goal is not to review contemporary literature on charismatic versus bureaucratic leadership. Instead, it seeks to investigate approaches to leadership implicit in two "classics" of very different kinds. As such, the approaches explored here are just two among many other possible approaches. The interpretative method developed here could be used in future studies to examine approaches to leadership implicit not only in Jewish and sociological texts but also in other genres and "wisdom" literatures.

Practical implications – The paper presents three practical implications for contemporary leadership development.

Originality/value – The paper presents a novel perspective on leadership – Mosaic leadership – that highlights the multifaceted and dynamic nature of leadership development. In addition, it shows that management wisdom from the Jewish tradition can be meaningfully compared with ideas developed in other traditions – including the tradition of contemporary management studies.

Keywords Judaism, Leadership, Leadership development, Charisma, Bureaucracy

Paper type Research paper

Much theorizing about leadership has been framed in contrasts. Leadership is charismatic or bureaucratic (Weber, 1978); transformational or transactional (Bass, 1985); dependent on traits or on situations (e.g. Vroom and Jago, 2007; Zaccaro, 2007). Though some attempts have been made to advance more integrative approaches (e.g. Avolio, 2007) much leadership discourse continues to be framed in terms of dichotomies. The appeal of such dichotomies is understandable. Leadership is a complex phenomenon. To get any kind of purchase on it, we are bound to simplify and categorize. But categorization has costs. When we carve nature too neatly we can become blinded to continuities. As John Dewey (1902/1974, p. 339) noted in a different context:

It is easier to see the conditions in their separateness, to insist upon one at the expense of the other, to make antagonists of them, than to discover a reality to which each belongs.

In this paper, I examine the relations between charisma and bureaucracy in leadership. I take as my starting point Max Weber's (1978) account of these relations in his



posthumous classic, *Economy and Society*. I then compare Weber's account with the Torah's description of Moses's leadership in the *Book of Exodus*. I argue that, like Weber, the Torah[1] treats charisma and bureaucracy as mutually antagonistic forces that co-exist in dynamic interaction. However, where Weber's account is descriptive, the Torah's is prescriptive. The Torah goes out of its way – quite literally – to argue that charisma alone is not enough. Even Moses, the Torah's ideal leader and a charismatic *par excellence*, needed a bureaucracy through which to translate his vision into social reality. I show that, in Chapter 18 of the *Book of Exodus*, the Torah intentionally draws our attention to this tension in Moses's leadership to suggest that balance between these two forces is not a compromise but an ideal. I conclude the paper with some thoughts about the implications of this view for contemporary leadership development.

1. Weber's pure types of legitimate domination

Weber argued that all leadership depends ultimately on people accepting the leader's domination of them as legitimate. Claims to legitimacy vary, but according to Weber (1978) they are of three "pure types" (p. 215):

- (1) rational grounds – resting on a belief in the legality of enacted rules and the right of those elevated to authority under such rules to issue commands (legal authority);
- (2) traditional grounds – resting on an established belief in the sanctity of immemorial traditions and the legitimacy of those exercising authority under them (traditional authority); or finally,
- (3) charismatic grounds – resting on devotion to the exceptional sanctity, heroism or exemplary character of an individual person, and of the normative patterns or order revealed or ordained by him (charismatic authority).

To appreciate what Weber has to say about the relations between these different forms of authority, one must bear in mind what he means by the term, "pure type." For Weber, a pure type is a theoretical construct, a useful fiction, designed to represent a phenomenon in the sharpest possible form for purposes of comparison. Weber emphasizes that social arrangements which belong to one or another of these three pure types are the exception and he goes on to describe how each type tends to become transformed into versions of the other two over time. Of particular interest to Weber is what he calls "the routinization of charisma."

Weber (1978, p. 241) defines charisma as:

[A] certain quality of an individual personality by virtue of which he is considered extraordinary and treated as endowed with supernatural, superhuman, or at least specifically exceptional powers or qualities. These as such are not accessible to the ordinary person, but are regarded as of divine origin or as exemplary, and on the basis of them the individual concerned is treated as a "leader."

Charisma is "naturally unstable" and "revolutionary;" it "transforms all values and breaks all traditional and rational norms" (Weber, 1978, pp. 1114-15). At the same time, every instance of charisma is itself destined to become "either traditionalized or rationalized, or a combination of both" (Weber, 1978, p. 244). As Weber, in more lyrical mode, puts it (Weber, 1978, p. 1120):

Every charisma is on the road from a turbulently emotional life that knows no economic rationality to a slow death by suffocation under the weight of material interests: every hour of its existence brings it nearer to this end.

In other words, Weber sees the relations between charisma and other forms of domination as dynamic, with charismatic forces waxing and waning cyclically in interaction with the other types of domination. He identifies no final endpoint to these interactions and he avoids any explicit value statements about the relative worthiness of each type of domination (Weber, 1978, pp. 1133-4):

[T]he three basic types of domination cannot be placed into a simple evolutionary line: they in fact appear together in the most diverse combinations [...]. Every event transcending the routines of everyday life releases charismatic forces, and every extraordinary ability creates charismatic beliefs, which are subsequently weakened again by everyday life.

2. Moses the charismatic

Moses occupies a unique position in the firmament of Hebrew Prophets. He is seen by Jewish tradition not only as the ideal leader but as the ideal person. Maimonides (1135-1204) considered belief in Moses's unsurpassed excellence to be so central to Jewish tradition that he included it as one of his Thirteen Principles of Faith (see Maimonides and Rosner, 1981). This view of Moses is not a late development in Judaism first appears in the concluding lines of the Torah itself (*Deuteronomy*, 34:10-12)[2]:

And there hath not arisen a prophet since in Israel like unto Moses, whom the Lord knew face to face; in all the signs and the wonders, which the Lord sent him to do in the land of Egypt, to Pharaoh, and to all his servants, and to all his land; and in all the mighty hand, and in all the great terror, which Moses wrought in the sight of all Israel.

The Torah portrays Moses as the archetypal charismatic. He is chosen by God and announced through miracles; he establishes his authority through prophetic revelation; he beats back challengers by magical contest. His relationship with the people is deeply personal and their veneration of him unbounded. Even moments of crisis and failure, such as the Golden Calf episode (*Exodus*, 32:1-35) and Moses's striking of the rock at Meribah (*Numbers*, 20:7-21) only serve to underscore the sheer power of Moses's presence: small missteps and brief absences take on disastrous proportions.

This portrayal of Moses fits well with "trait" models of leadership, which propose that successful leaders exhibit particular abilities and personality traits (e.g. Zaccaro, 2007). Similarly, the behavior of the Israelites in response to different episodes in Moses's leadership has much in common with accounts of follower conformity (see e.g. Tepper, 1993). More specifically, though, how does the trajectory of Moses's leadership compare with Weber's account of the routinization of charisma?

Prima facie, Weber's account fits Moses like a glove. As Weber (1978) "predicted," Moses's primary challenge as a leader is to transform his charisma into "a perennial institution," a problem which "inescapably channels charisma into the direction of legal regulation and tradition" (p. 1123). This challenge and its strategies for addressing it continue to interest contemporary scholars in the field of management studies (e.g. Fleishman, 1995). As the books of *Exodus* through to *Deuteronomy* attest, much of Moses's energy is devoted to expounding laws and building institutions (such as the priesthood and judiciary) that will outlive him. And the selection of Joshua as Moses's successor follows almost to the letter the process Weber outlines as "designation on the part of the original charismatic leader of his own successor" (Weber, 1978, p. 247; see also Handy, 1993; Tichy, 1998).

And yet, shifts between charisma and other forms of domination in Moses's leadership do not seem to unfold quite how Weber would have us expect. According to

Weber, such shifts follow a predictable rhythm: charismatic revolution followed by gradual routinization. In the Torah's description of Moses's leadership, a different rhythm is apparent. One such moment is Exodus 18.

3. Moses the bureaucrat

Chapter 18 sticks out of the *Book of Exodus* like a sore thumb. The chapters on either side burst at the seams with miraculous spectacle. Chapter 17 opens in the wilderness of Rephidim, with the Israelites crying out to Moses for water. On God's command, Moses brings forth water from a nearby rock. No sooner have the Israelites slaked their thirst than they are attacked by the Amalekites. An Israelite army led by Joshua engages the aggressors, while Moses channels divine protection through his raised arms, which are directed heavenward by Aaron and Hur. In Chapter 19, the Israelites travel to Sinai for arguably the most spectacular miracle of all: God's revelation of the Torah. The Israelites perform various rites of purification at the foot of Mount Sinai and, as the chapter closes, Moses ascends the holy mountain.

Exodus 18, sandwiched between all this action, takes place far from the battlefield and the only intervention it describes is that of a concerned father-in-law. In place of miracles and heavenly voices, we find a lecture in business administration and perhaps the first recorded instance of organizational consulting. Jethro, Moses' father-in-law, arrives from Midian and finds an exhausted Moses working alone, dawn to dusk, to address the people's daily concerns. Jethro is not impressed (*Exodus*, 18:14-19):

What is this thing that you are doing to the people? Why do you sit by yourself, while all the people stand before you from morning till evening? [...] What you are doing is not good. You will surely wear yourself out, both you and these people who are with you, for the matter is too heavy for you; you cannot do it alone. Now listen to me. I will advise you [...].

Jethro's advice to Moses – in the spirit of what Tannenbaum and Schmidt (1973) termed “boss-centered leadership” – is to delegate (*Exodus*, 18:21-22):

You shall choose out of the entire nation men of substance, God fearers, men of truth, who hate monetary gain, and you shall appoint over them [Israel] leaders over thousands, leaders over hundreds, leaders over fifties, and leaders over tens. And they shall judge the people at all times, and it shall be that any major matter they shall bring to you, and they themselves shall judge every minor matter, thereby making it easier for you, and they shall bear [the burden] with you.

At the chapter's close, Moses implements Jethro's advice in all its particulars, and Jethro – like all good organizational consultants and fathers-in-law – moves on before outstaying his welcome.

4. Chapter 18: a chapter out of time

The contrasting portrayals of Moses in Exodus 18 and the adjacent chapters are intriguing. They invite us to wonder how the charismatic Moses of Chapters 17 and 19 is related to the bureaucratic Moses of Chapter 18. But even more intriguing is the order in which the chapters appear. Chapter 18 appears as if from nowhere; it interrupts the narrative sequence that leads from Egypt to Sinai and seems to have little or nothing to do with the action described in the chapters on either side of it.

A hallmark of rabbinic commentary is acute sensitivity to incongruity and to ruptures in narrative flow. It is thus no surprise that rabbinic commentators noted the fault lines between Chapter 18 and the adjacent chapters. For example, the Mekhilta DeRabbi Ishmael (redacted ca. third to fourth century CE) records a dispute between

Rabbi Joshua and Rabbi Eleazar of Modiin about the order in which the events recorded in Chapters 17 through 19 took place. Similar concerns with chronology mark rabbinic commentaries on the phrase, “It came about on the next day” in *Exodus* 18:13. A straightforward reading of this verse would assume that “the next day” refers to the day after Jethro’s arrival. However, the medieval French commentator, Rashi (1040-1105), generally revered for his incisive logic and clarity of expression, uncharacteristically offers a much more complicated reading:

Now what is meant by “on the next day”? On the day after his [Moses’] descent from the mountain [which took place on Yom Kippur]. You must admit that one can’t say other than [that the next day means] on the day after Yom Kippur. Before the giving of the Torah it was impossible to say (*Exodus* 18:16), “and I make known the statutes, etc.” [since the statutes had not yet been given]. And from the time that the Torah was given until Yom Kippur Moses did not [have the chance to] sit down to judge the people, for on the seventeenth of Tammuz he descended [Mount Sinai] and broke the tablets. On the next day he ascended early in the morning and stayed for eighty days and descended on Yom Kippur. Hence, this section is not written in [chronological] sequence.

Clearly, Rashi is struggling here to retain the verse’s coherence while also acknowledging the rupture in chronology. Rashi’s final statement is an application of the rabbinic hermeneutic principle, “There is no earlier or later in the Torah” – a principle which asserts that the Torah is not written as history, but as instruction. In other words, the order in which events are recorded in the Torah is determined less by the sequence in which they are presumed to have occurred than by the underlying message their telling is intended to convey.

In the case of *Exodus* 18, what might this underlying message be?

5. Order and priority

As the rabbis were well aware, and as contemporary Bible scholars convincingly argue (e.g. Fishbane, 1985, 2008), the Torah employs a variety of literary devices to heighten the reader’s attention to particular features in the text. These devices include: repetitions of specific words or phrases, narrative structures which mirror those used to tell other stories, surprising juxtapositions and formulations which slow down or speed up the pace at which the text is read. I would like to suggest that the insertion of Chapter 18 out of sequence is an intentional literary device that the Torah employs to draw the reader’s attention to the sharp contrast between Moses at the height of his charismatic powers (who calls to mind trait approaches to leadership, e.g. Zaccaro, 2007) and Moses faced with the everyday challenges of management and institution building (who calls to mind situation approaches, e.g. Hersey and Blanchard, 1982; Vroom and Jago, 2007). Like the jumps back and forth in time in Joyce’s *Ulysses* and Kurosawa’s *Rashomon*, the Torah in *Exodus* 18 employs nonlinear narrative to force us to view the recorded events from a new and unexpected perspective. *Exodus* 18 is a kind of “flash forward” to events that occurred after the revelation at Sinai; its interruption of the narrative creates a “montage” that forces the reader to seek connections between it and the scenes alongside it. This juxtaposition is reminiscent of contingency approaches, which attempt to incorporate interactions between traits and situations into their account of how leaders function in different organizational contexts and conditions (e.g. Avolio, 2007).

To appreciate what this interruption might be designed to highlight, it is helpful to imagine how we would have read these chapters if the chronological sequence had been preserved. If Jethro’s visit and the establishment of a legal hierarchy had been

reported after the revelation at Sinai, then the trajectory of Moses's leadership would have followed to the letter Weber's account of the routinization of charisma. Faced with the everyday demands of administration, charismatic leadership becomes transformed into bureaucracy; Moses's charisma begins its "slow death by suffocation under the weight of material interests" (Weber's 1978, p. 1120).

However, by disrupting the sequence, the Torah invites us to think twice about this order. It "pulls us up short" (cf. Kerdeman, 2003). Specifically, it invites us to see Moses the manager not as a diminished version of Moses the charismatic but rather as an integral aspect of the same leader at the same time. The Moses who brings forth water from a rock and receives the Law directly from God's mouth is the same Moses – neither a later Moses nor a lesser Moses – who receives management advice from a flesh-and-blood consultant and establishes a legal bureaucracy to administer God's Law. In other words, the Torah disrupts the order of the chapters to encourage readers to pause and consider the priority we attach to these different forms of leadership. In sense, the Torah exerts a form of "directive leadership" (by defining the reader's priorities).

6. Weber's view and the Torah's view

Thus, one way to read Exodus 18, is as a flag the Torah waves at us to make us stop and think about the tensions between charisma and bureaucracy in Moses's leadership. Being a book of instruction as opposed to a history or a monograph on interpretive sociology, the Torah is not merely describing these tensions. By making Moses the subject within whom these tensions reside, it is implicitly prescribing a particular approach to leadership. It is holding up the interactions between charisma and bureaucracy in Moses's life not as an inevitable compromise but as an ideal to be emulated. It is here that the Torah's view of leadership diverges from Weber's.

Weber takes pains to formulate his discussion in value-neutral terms. In Weber's hands, "bureaucracy" is not a pejorative term but an objective description of a particular form of social organization. Nor does Weber set charisma on a pedestal. He seeks merely to describe its social function. This commitment to value-neutrality is particularly evident in the language Weber uses to describe shifts and interactions between the different kinds of domination. His preferred term is "transformation" and he explicitly distances himself from terms like "evolution" which might be understood to imply a *telos* or desired endpoint.

Thus, Weber's view and the Torah's view concur in acknowledging the tensions between charisma and other forms of domination. But whereas Weber is content to describe them, the Torah – by embodying them in the person of Moses – prescribes them, as an ideal.

7. Mosaic leadership

Thus, in Exodus 18, the Torah advances a distinctive conception of leadership – a conception I will call, "Mosaic leadership." It is Mosaic in two senses. First and most obviously, it is derived from the Torah's account of Moses's leadership in the *Book of Exodus*. Second and more significantly, it insists on viewing the multifaceted, dynamic and often discordant nature of leadership not as a flaw or a compromise but as integral to what it means to lead. In art, a mosaic is not a painting that has been smashed into pieces but rather an integral object, constructed with skill and perseverance from fragments of different shapes, sizes and shades. Similarly, leadership is inherently composite. In counterpoint to the dichotomous conceptualizations noted in my opening

paragraph, Mosaic leadership invites us to embrace this multiplicity. It invites us to study and practice leadership less in terms of either-or and more in terms of both-and.

8. Echoes of Mosaic leadership in contemporary management studies

Echoes of Mosaic leadership can be found in recent research. Uhl-Bien and Marion (2009) account of “complexity leadership” describes the dynamic interactions between formal and informal sources of power in bureaucratic organizations. They argue that, for an organization to function properly, administrative (formal, bureaucratic) and adaptive (informal, charismatic) elements must be “entangled” and that one of the leader’s key roles is to enable and sustain such interactions. This characterization makes much intuitive sense. Isolated from formal structures, innovations are likely to wither on the vine; conversely, exhaustive top-down specification by standard operating procedures extinguishes passion and creativity. Effective leaders find ways to balance these forces and integrate them.

Pearce, *et al.* (2000) argue that balancing charisma and bureaucracy is not only a functional necessity but also a moral one. Drawing on comparative studies of management practices in the USA and post-communist Hungary, they show that bureaucracy has an important upside in fostering fairness and trust within organizations. When it is weak or absent, favoritism and bias lead to shirking and diminished commitment.

Interactions between bureaucratic and charismatic forces are highlighted also in Casey’s (2004) account of emerging tendencies to incorporate spiritual practices into contemporary organizational life. She characterizes these tendencies as a reaction by employees to overly rationalized forms of organization, which leave them feeling “disenchanted.”

Though these studies are few and have so far had little impact on mainstream management theory, they point to a growing acknowledgement that leaders must combine charismatic and bureaucratic characteristics not just in practice, as a compromise, but also in principle, as an ideal.

In a sense, then, these studies are rediscovering ideas about leadership foreshadowed in the Hebrew Bible. As such, they point to the intriguing possibility that the Bible and rabbinic commentaries hold within them many more such nuggets, waiting to be unearthed, polished and read in light of contemporary research.

9. Mosaic leadership and the education of leaders

I believe that the notion of Mosaic leadership outlined above has at least three implications for the practice of leadership education. Each of these implications is as follows.

First, it can serve as a reminder to professionals in the field of leadership development that the theories we construct to help people learn can sometimes blind us to important features of the very phenomena we are trying to teach. Even when leadership theorists take great care to qualify their formulations, the dichotomous terms they coin quickly become reified and set in hierarchical opposition. Consider for a moment the view of a student of leadership whose only access to Weber’s account of the types of domination was a brief textbook gloss on the routinization of charisma. I would be surprised if that student’s view were anything other than some variation on “charisma is good; routine is bad; good decays inevitably into bad.” The notion of Mosaic leadership can perhaps mitigate such tendencies by highlighting the ways in which leadership is composite and dynamic.

Second, it reminds us of the difference between description and prescription in leadership education. Just as Weber's and the Torah's accounts of leadership have different goals, so too do goals differ among contemporary teachers of leadership. For any course in leadership, teachers should ask themselves: is my goal to teach leadership? Or is my goal to teach about leadership? If the former, then what is the ideal of leadership to which I wish my students to aspire? And if the latter, to what end? And according to which conception of worthy leadership?

Third, the model of Moses is a powerful reminder that even the greatest leader cannot do it all. Moses's life is filled as much with challenges, failures and compromises as it is with charisma, triumph and ecstasy. Indeed, some have argued (e.g. Wildavsky, 1984/2008) that it is precisely Moses's remarkable ability to develop and learn from failure that makes him so exceptional a leader. Moses's ability to hear and adopt the advice of Jethro in Exodus 18 is just one such example. The fact that the trajectory of Moses's leadership contains peaks and valleys of so many different kinds makes him a source of important lessons about the roles of learning and perseverance in leadership. When we restrict our use of case studies in leadership to brief accounts of obvious successes or failures, we miss out on the nuance and power of narratives that are extended and ambiguous.

10. Mosaic leadership and contemporary leadership practice

As a cultural psychologist by training and a director of leadership development programs by profession, I am struck also by two further practical implications of the notion of Mosaic leadership. First, for leaders to be effective in contemporary organizations, they need to be highly adept at adjusting the balance between charismatic and bureaucratic elements in their leadership style in response to changing conditions and contexts. As mobility and cultural diversity increase, managers can expect to move between several organizations and across several cultural contexts during the course of a single career. Expectations of leaders, definitions of charisma and bureaucracy, and beliefs about the desirable balance between them, vary considerably by culture and organizational context. To lead effectively across multiple contexts, managers will need to develop the ability to engage deliberately and self-consciously in the kinds of adaptation and balance that Mosaic leadership emphasizes.

Second, an important step toward acquiring such adaptability and balance is the development of sensitivity to undercurrents of bureaucracy and charisma in existing organizations. Unless a leader is able to diagnose with reasonable accuracy the kinds of interaction that are currently taking place within an organization, he or she cannot gauge with much confidence which new elements, if any, to introduce deliberately into the system when he or she assumes a leadership role within it. Development of this kind of sensitivity is unlikely to be achieved by reading books and articles. It is more likely to require extended periods of careful observation of the leadership of others and reflection on one's own leadership practice. Accordingly, those wishing to foster contemporary forms of Mosaic leadership would need to include in their training substantial periods devoted to learning from practice.

Notes

1. For the purposes of this paper, my use of the term, "Torah" assumes that the Torah has an authorial/editorial voice, but it does not make any assumptions about the nature of the

author(s) or editor(s). What I have to say about the Torah's methods or intentions is independent of the theological question of whether the Pentateuch is of divine origin or the product of many human hands.

- All citations from the Hebrew Bible are from the (1917) Jewish Publications Society version available online at: www.mechon-mamre.org/

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Further reading

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About the author

Eli Gottlieb is the Director of the Mandel Leadership Institute and Vice-President of the Mandel Foundation-Israel. He holds degrees in Philosophy and Developmental Psychology from the University of Cambridge and a Doctorate in the Psychology of Education from the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. He has served as a Visiting Professor in Cognitive Studies in Education at the University of Washington, an Adjunct Lecturer at the School of Education at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem and a Visiting Scholar at the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching in Palo Alto. His research examines the relations between cognition, identity and education. Eli Gottlieb can be contacted at: eligo@mli.org.il