

Styles of Leadership: Two More Talmudic Stories

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I want to thank Katherine Olivetti for her incisive remarks. I agree that analytic institutes do go through spiritual crises, that these crises are often triggered by disputes concerning the nature of the training, and that the outcome, whether toward an acrimonious split or toward a creative renewal, is hugely influenced by the style of leadership. To amplify the discussion about the quality of leadership, permit me to draw yet again on two Talmudic stories. The first concerns a bitter dispute concerning the ritual purity of a specific construction of clay oven (Baba Metzia 59). One rabbi, Eliezer, was so passionately certain of the correctness of his position that he called out, "If the *halakha* [law] is with me, may this tree fly." And the tree hovered in the air. But the rabbis replied, "In these matters, we do not listen to flying trees." R. Eliezer continued, "If I am right, may this stream flow uphill." And miraculously it did. Rabbis were once again unimpressed. Finally, in desperation, he turned towards heaven and cried out, "If the *halakha* is with me, may a heavenly voice speak forth." And behold, a heavenly voice called out, "The *halakha* is according to R. Eliezer." The rabbis responded: "In such matters, we do not listen to heavenly voices." As a result, the clay ovens, which he had declared kosher, were publicly destroyed. R. Eliezer himself, who refused to yield, was excommunicated and died outcast and alone, although universally acknowledged as the most brilliant theoretician in his generation.

Elsewhere (Abramovitch, 1995, and in press), I have discussed this remarkable story as exemplifying the shift in Jungian world from a prophetic mode of Self expression toward one in which guidelines and ethics committees are the major determinants of what is acceptable behavior. There are times when even brilliant, charismatic individuals must bow to new rules and procedures, such as not listening to flying trees, nor listening to heavenly voices. A passionate belief in the truth is not necessarily the proper indicator of the correctness of the point of view. Yet the question must remain: when should I sacrifice "my truth" for the well-being and integrity of the community and yield to the view of the majority, and when should I stick to my guns.

This dilemma is taken up by another narrative (Ketuvot 8b). At that time, funeral rituals became horrendously elaborate and expensive. Processions, musicians, sarcophagi and such posed an enormous financial burden on the bereaved relatives. The conditions were so dire that mourners even abandoned their loved ones in the street and fled to another locality to avoid fiscal ruin. This was a community crisis par excellence. It was none other than Rabban Gamliel, the once authoritarian leader of the House of Study, who resolved the crisis. The text states that he "humiliated" himself by having his body buried simply and cheaply in plain white linen shrouds. This time he did not command but led by example, and his example provided decisive. People adopted his model of "simple burial" and abandoned the ostentatious display. Such simplicity remains the hallmark of Jewish burial unto this day. Rabban Gamliel, it would seem, learned something

from the previous conflict and discovered another style of leadership. One can oppose the majority not only through a power complex but also via teaching by personal example.

Katherine Olivetti notes that many training programs do not provide a welcoming context for “the psychospiritual dimension of the analytic process” or sharing the experiences of the numinous. Here, too, I tend to agree with her basic point. In our institute, we have taken a small step in that direction when we revised our training program. We decided that each topic dealt with in a theoretical seminar be directly followed by an experiential session on that same topic. Shadow in theory followed by shadow in practice. In subsequent years, these sessions became increasingly given over to group supervision but still linked to the topic of the theoretical seminar. As in many groups, our tutors meet periodically with the training group for an open discussion of issues and concerns and inadvertently to socialize the candidates to the values of our group. I am glad to report that recently candidates felt free enough to confront me with a possible unconscious act of favoritism on my part. I felt proud that they had absorbed the values of speaking out and challenging authority, especially if he is the head of the institute.

I believe we do need to continue to think deeply about our organizational life and strive to discover creative, Jungian solutions to spiritual crises, authoritarian leadership, or an equally dangerous lack of leadership.

References

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