

Where Have All the Leaders Gone?

by Dr. Erica Brown

Reflective Questions

- How does use of power define leadership?
- What is the difference between power and influence?
- What are your negative associations with leadership?

Biblical Sources

A leadership parable:

8 One day the trees went out to anoint a king for themselves. They said to the olive tree, 'Be our king.' 9 "But the olive tree answered, 'Should I give up my oil, by which both gods and men are honored, to hold sway over the trees?' 10 "Next, the trees said to the fig tree, 'Come and be our king.' 11 "But the fig tree replied, 'Should I give up my fruit, so good and sweet, to hold sway over the trees?' 12 "Then the trees said to the vine, 'Come and be our king.' 13 "But the vine answered, 'Should I give up my wine, which cheers both gods and men, to hold sway over the trees?' 14 "Finally all the trees said to the thornbush, 'Come and be our king.' 15 "The thornbush said to the trees, 'If you really want to anoint me king over you, come and take refuge in my shade; but if not, then let fire come out of the thornbush and consume the cedars of Lebanon!' (Judges 9:8-15)

23 God sent an evil spirit between Abimelech and the citizens of Shechem, who acted treacherously against Abimelech. 24 God did this in order that the crime against Jerub-Baal's seventy sons, the shedding of their blood, might be avenged on their brother Abimelech and on the citizens of Shechem, who had helped him murder his brothers. 25 In opposition to him these citizens of Shechem set men on the hilltops to ambush and rob everyone who passed by, and this was reported to Abimelech. (Judges 9:23-25)

God also made the men of Shechem pay for all their wickedness. The curse of Jotham son of Jerub-Baal came on them. (Judges 9:57).

The Limitations of Power

- 1) If, after you have entered the land that the Lord your God has assigned to you and taken possession of it and settled in it, you decide, "I will set a king over me, as do all the nations about me," you shall be free to set a king over yourself, one chosen by the Lord your God" (Deuteronomy 17:14-15).

- 2) "Samuel prayed to the Lord and the Lord replied to Samuel, "Heed the demand of the people in everything they say to you. For it is not you that they have rejected; it is Me they have rejected as their king" (I Samuel 8:7)
- 3) "The day will come when you cry out because of the king whom you yourselves have chosen; and the Lord will not answer you on that day" (I Samuel 8:18).
- 4) "No. We must have a king over us, that we may be like all the other nations. Let our king rule over us and go out at our head and fight our battles" (I Samuel 8:19).

Abuses of power

1 Some time later there was an incident involving a vineyard belonging to Naboth the Jezreelite. The vineyard was in Jezreel, close to the palace of Ahab king of Samaria. 2 Ahab said to Naboth, "Let me have your vineyard to use for a vegetable garden, since it is close to my palace. In exchange I will give you a better vineyard or, if you prefer, I will pay you whatever it is worth." 3 But Naboth replied, "The Lord forbid that I should give you the inheritance of my fathers."

4 So Ahab went home, sullen and angry because Naboth the Jezreelite had said, "I will not give you the inheritance of my fathers." He lay on his bed sulking and refused to eat. 5 His wife Jezebel came in and asked him, "Why are you so sullen? Why won't you eat?" 6 He answered her, "Because I said to Naboth the Jezreelite, 'Sell me your vineyard; or if you prefer, I will give you another vineyard in its place.' But he said, 'I will not give you my vineyard.'" 7 Jezebel his wife said, "Is this how you act as king over Israel? Get up and eat! Cheer up. I'll get you the vineyard of Naboth the Jezreelite." (I Kings 21:1-7)

Text Questions:

- Why is Ahab so despondent?
- How does Jezebel understand the king's power?
- How does Jezebel get the vineyard for Ahab?

1 Rehoboam went to Shechem, for all the Israelites had gone there to make him king. 2 When Jeroboam son of Nebat heard this (he was in Egypt, where he had fled from King Solomon), he returned from Egypt. 3 So they sent for Jeroboam, and he and all Israel went to Rehoboam and said to him: 4 "Your father put a heavy yoke on us, but now lighten the harsh labor and the heavy yoke he put on us, and we will serve you." 5 Rehoboam answered, "Come back to me in three days." So the people went away. 6 Then King Rehoboam consulted the elders who had served his father Solomon during his lifetime. "How would you advise me to answer these people?" he asked. 7 They replied, "If you will be kind to these people and please them and give them a favorable answer, they will always be your servants."

8 But Rehoboam rejected the advice the elders gave him and consulted the young men who had grown up with him and were serving him. 9 He asked them, "What is your advice? How should we answer these people who say to me, 'Lighten the yoke your father put on us?'" 10 The young men who had grown up with him replied, "Tell the people who have said to you, 'Your father put a heavy yoke on us, but make our yoke lighter'--tell them, 'My little finger is thicker than my father's

waist. 11 My father laid on you a heavy yoke; I will make it even heavier. My father scourged you with whips; I will scourge you with scorpions.' " 12 Three days later Jeroboam and all the people returned to Rehoboam, as the king had said, "Come back to me in three days." 13 The king answered them harshly. Rejecting the advice of the elders, 14 he followed the advice of the young men and said, "My father made your yoke heavy; I will make it even heavier. My father scourged you with whips; I will scourge you with scorpions." 15 So the king did not listen to the people (II Chronicles 10).

Text Questions:

- What does the king ask for three days? Name other three day periods in the Bible.
- Why doesn't Rehoboam listen to the elders?
- Why did the people push back when they did not resist Solomon's harsh labor?

Secondary Sources:

Nogah Hareuveni in *Tree and Shrub in Our Biblical Heritage* makes the case that this plant, the *atad* was not the Lycium, as commonly assumed because although it has many of the properties associated with a bramble, it does not easily catch fire or set fire to other plants. Dr. Ephraim Hereuveni believes that it is actually a tree called the *Ziziphus spinachristi*, which was brought to Israel by way of Africa. It is a large tree with shade and has widespread roots. Hareuveni believes that were this parable told as an insult to the people's choice of leader, they would not have listened, thus Jotham had to pick a tree with presence. Although the tree offers much shade and height, it is known to be harmful to fruit trees. Farmers had to eliminate them from fields if they wanted to create a fruit orchard since the *atad* had a choking effect. The trees were then commonly cut for kindling, see "Come and take refuge in my shade"

Tree and Shrub in Our Biblical Heritage (Kiryat Ono: Neot Kedumim, 1984), trans. Helen Frenkley: 59-65.

"...Only worthless, low, power-hungry scoundrels are interested in ruling."

James Kugel, *How to Read the Bible* (New York, Free Press, 2007): 411.

"...the tension between human craving for security and the insecurity risked by allegiance and obedience to an imageless and unfathomable divinity. The larger story holds out blueprints of security – a nation (and a system of tribal affiliation), a land, institutions of leadership (judge, king, priest, prophet, and patriarchy) or cult (ark, ephod, and temple)- only to undermine and fracture them by recounting their fragility, corruption or irrelevance."

David M. Gunn, "Joshua and Judges" in *The Literary Guide to the Bible*, eds. Robert Alter and Frank Kermode (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1987): 116-117.

"If the sovereign is powerful enough to protect the people against hostile neighbors, he will also be powerful enough to abuse the people for reasons having nothing to do with collective security. The possibility that rulers will betray the ruled is inherent to the nature of rule itself and may or may not be rooted in the psychology of those who inhabit high office."

Moshe Halbertal and Stephen Holmes, *The Beginning of Politics: Power in the Book of Samuel* (Princeton:

Princeton University Press, 2017): 166.

The Fight for a Constitutional Republic:

“Kings scarcely recognize themselves as mortals, scarcely understand that which pertains to man, except on the day they are made king or on the day they die.”

John Milton, *Complete Prose Works of John Milton*, ed. Don M. Wolfe, vol. I (New Haven: 1953-1982): 432 as seen in Wilson: 44.

“The meaning is that it is a form of idolatry to ask for a king who demands that he be worshipped and granted honors like those of a god. Indeed he who sets an earthly master over him and above all the laws is near to establishing a strange god for himself, one seldom reasonable, usually a brute beast who has scattered reason to the wind.”

John Milton, *Defensio* in *John Milton: A Critical Edition of the Major Works*, eds. Stephen Orgel and Jonathan Goldberg (Oxford, 1991), 38-39 as cited in Wilson: 42-43.

“For roughly 100 years – from the time of Bertram until the time of Spinoza – European Protestants made the Hebrew Bible the measure of their politics. They believed that the same God who thundered from Sinai, and who later sent his son into the world, had revealed to Israel the form of a perfect republic. They labored with the help of their rabbinic authorities to interpret his design and attempted in their own societies to replicate it as close as possible. In the process, they made crucial contributions to the political thought of the modern world.”

Eric Nelson, *The Hebrew Republic* (Boston: Harvard University Press, 2011): 139.

Closing Thought

“Managing one’s grandiosity means giving up on the idea of being the heroic lone warrior who saves the day. People may beg you to play that role; don’t let them seduce you. It robs them of the opportunity to develop their own strengths and settle their own issues.”

Ronald A. Heifetz and Marty Linsky, *Leadership on the Line* (Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 2002): 171.