

AVODAH: The Jewish Service Corps
Torah Portion – Va-Yigash

The Leader as Servant

When Joseph finally reveals himself to his brothers, he knows that they will feel a mixture of guilt and fear about their treatment of him. To set their minds at ease, he tells them:

Now do not be distressed or reproach yourselves because you sold me to this place. It was to save life that God sent me ahead of you... So it was not you, who sent me here, but God; and he has made me a father to Pharaoh, lord of all his household, and ruler over the entire land of Egypt.

[Genesis 45:5,8]

Clearly, Joseph understands his position of leadership as a role he must play in order to fulfill purposes larger than his own. This idea of “servant leadership” has been a fixture of popular writing about corporate management ever since Robert Greenleaf wrote his essay *The Servant as Leader* in 1970, but as the rabbinic texts cited below demonstrate, Jews have been considering the responsibilities of authority for a very long time.

1. Once Rabban Gamaliel sought to appoint Rabbi Eleazar ben Hisma and Rabbi Yohanan ben Gudgadya to positions of authority. He sent for them, but they did not come. He sent for them a second time, and when they came, he said to them: “Do you think that I offer you authority? It is servitude that I offer you! As it says (in I Kings 7:7): *And they spoke to [King Rahavam] saying: If you will be a servant to the people today...* [Horayot 10a-b]

2. The King is to be accorded great honor. The attitude of his subjects towards him should always be that of awe and reverence... And just as the Torah accords great honor to the King and requires all to pay him honor, it requires him to cultivate a humble and lowly spirit. He must not exercise his authority in an overly arrogant manner. He should deal graciously and compassionately with the small and the great, conduct their affairs in their best interests, and be careful of the honor of even the smallest among them... He should put up with the troubles, burdens, grumbling and anger of the people even as a nursing father puts up with a suckling child. The Torah calls the King “shepherd,” and we can see the way that the shepherd acts from the following verse: *Like a shepherd, he pastures his flocks; he gathers the lambs in his arms and carries them in his bosom; gently he leads the mother sheep.* (Isaiah 40:11)

[Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah*, Laws of Kings 2:1,6]

QUESTIONS: Do you agree with the idea that leadership is mainly about service? How does that idea of leader as servant challenge your notion of what it means to be a leader?

What are the main obstacles faced by leaders as they try to function as servants? How can these obstacles be overcome?

Maimonides compares the king to a nursing father and a shepherd. Do these seem like good models of communal leadership to you? Why and why not?