

*Review Essay*

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## *The Jewish Spirit of Leadership*

MOSES PAVA

*Leading with Meaning:*

*Using Covenantal Leadership to Build A Better Organization.*

New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003, 169pp., \$25.

Moses Pava begins this important book with a story from his own Yeshiva University classroom. Pava is a professor of business ethics and challenges students at the beginning of his course with a movie that depicts the morally corrupting influence of business. In his words, the film presents “a dark and pessimistic” approach to the pursuit of money. The impersonal “organization as machine” can have a brutal impact on an employee’s integrity. Pava recounts that some students at Yeshiva see the film and reconsider their choice of majors; one even opted out of business for rabbinical school. Nevertheless, Pava believes that those who drop out of business for fear of its possible ethical pitfalls are committing an error of judgment. This, he contends, is not just from a business perspective but from a spiritual and religious one as well. He believes that such students, like Jonah the prophet, are escaping the call of leadership.

Pava uses the rest of the book to introduce texts—from the Bible, Talmud and medieval and modern Jewish philosophy—as springboards to reconsider the ethos of organizations. Organizations are not machines;

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they are covenants. Members of all faiths or no faith can benefit from a reorientation or recalibration of the business mind-set to incorporate more humanity: “Traditional resources can be used to help solve contemporary problems”(intro. xiv). Pava’s premise is not new in the world of leadership literature. A startling number of books are published each year on leadership. An article in the *Harvard Business Review* claims that over 2000 books hit the market in 1999 alone.<sup>1</sup> Everyone is searching for a new angle to be the next airport bookstore best-seller. Leadership sells. Today, however, in the post-Enron climate of business, we want leaders to raise the ethical bar—or if not raise it, then at least read about it.

Leadership books with a religious orientation are one approach to creating greater moral sensitivity in the corporate sector. This has been particularly mined in the Christian community, and a visit to a local book-seller will turn up any number of best-selling books on leadership from a Christian perspective. To illustrate, Laurie Beth Jones wrote her leadership best-seller, *Jesus, CEO: Using Ancient Wisdom for Visionary Leadership*<sup>2</sup> using sacred texts from her tradition to communicate leadership lessons; so did Bob Briner with *The Management Methods of Jesus: Ancient Wisdom for Modern Business*,<sup>3</sup> as did Myles Monroe with *The Spirit of Leadership*.<sup>4</sup> The list goes on. We find fewer from the Jewish tradition, but a book like Connie Glaser and Barbara Smalley’s, *What Queen Esther Knew: Business Strategies from a Biblical Sage*<sup>5</sup> may be appreciated by readers of multiple faiths. In the table of contents, you will find chapters like “Dealing with Life’s Hamans.”

These books are also divided in terms of the leadership theories upon which the authors, consciously or unconsciously, base their writing. Some, like the last book mentioned, use a “great men” theory of leadership (in this case, a great woman). The great men theory uses individuals, historical or fictional, to create biographical portraits of leaders and then distills from their military strategies, presidential accomplishments or personal writings selected leadership lessons for readers. Howard Gardner’s book, *Leading Minds*,<sup>6</sup> is a good example of this genre. Gardner writes one chapter for each of the eleven leaders he chooses — from Albert Einstein to Margaret Thatcher—and uses his last chapter to identify some common denominators such as childhood or educational experiences. Is there something in the background of great leaders that unites them? And, if we can discover what it is, can we bottle it?

The great men theory of leadership is certainly appealing from a religious perspective. While Jesus was never a CEO, a follower may ask

himself WWJD (What would Jesus do?) and rethink a moral conundrum in business. How might Mohammed conduct business or the Buddha, for that matter? Saints and kings, Sufis and priests, may all inspire us to reach inwardly and—in the words of an old hot dog commercial—“answer to a higher authority” when tabulating billing hours and paying taxes. It is at these times that we of the Jewish persuasion ask ourselves, WWMD: What would Moses do?

We all require doses of inspiration to keep us on the straight and narrow, and there is much to learn from the stories of great figures of the past and present who have struggled in leadership situations and emerged victoriously. Jews with an appreciation of the Hebrew Bible and Talmud study the lives of great biblical men and women, prophets and sages to help in our own spiritual formation and guide us through difficult dilemmas by modeling reactions, decisions and strength of character. Consequently, the perceived absence of contemporary heroes and great leaders is a source of consternation; we need guiding lights—moral lodestars—to help affirm our own belief in humanity and its goodness.

There are distinct problems, however, with the great men theory of leadership. Leadership never happens in a vacuum. We might enjoy a good biography, yet the decisions of the great leader it depicts were arrived at within specific contexts. The contextuality of history and circumstance separates the leader in the pages of a book from the real-life decisions of someone behind a desk. The Battle of Waterloo does not look like the financial resource department in a tall office building. Reading about the Battle of Waterloo may transport you from your seat in the subway to a place in your imagination, but the trip back will be harder educationally. Military decisions do not translate easily as resources for specific business dilemmas.

Given this problem, leadership literature has moved away somewhat from great men theories to contingency theories of leadership. Contingency here implies that leadership behaviors are dependent on a set of circumstances that are usually not replicated in other settings. Leadership requires the emotional intelligence<sup>7</sup> and intellectual resourcefulness to respond differently and with nuance to trying circumstances that are often ambiguous in nature. Inspiration never goes out of style, but we still need to give people the resources to adapt more flexibly to their particular circumstances. We need practical advice that helps us orchestrate conflicts,<sup>8</sup> create a vision,<sup>9</sup> ensure the success of that vision,<sup>10</sup> and groom level-5 leaders.<sup>11</sup>

Dispensing advice is popular in a self-help culture, and many of today's leadership books read accordingly. Returning to the bookstore shelves, you may find seven habits or eight ways or twelve steps to great leadership which are not relevant to a specific leader but can be adapted by all to create a personal leadership style. Paring down guidance to a magic number of suggestions can also have its educational limits since leadership is rarely a paint-by-number art.

For these reasons, Pava's book is refreshing. It is intellectually demanding without being patronizing, nor does it reduce the complexities of moral behavior to short refrigerator magnet quotes. From Watergate to W. B. Yeats, Pava uses a rich blend of current events and literature to demonstrate what it means to lead with meaning. From the Jewish perspective, his writing is informed by great Jewish thinkers spanning over two thousand years. While Pava uses biblical figures to exemplify a point, he does not limit his writing to these sources alone. R. A.J. Heschel and Letty Cobrin Pogrebin share pages with the likes of R. Norman Lamm and R. Joseph Soloveitchik. Yeshiva University is mentioned numerous times as a laboratory for business leadership thinking or as a home to those who are able to blend Jewish religious tradition with real-world problems.

Pava's strength lies in the illustrations and advice he offers as an educator; this is unique in leadership writing and sensitizes the reader to what people learn or do not learn in business school. What do we teach in business schools about moral accountability? To highlight only one example, Pava addresses this question specifically:

Accounting research since 1968 has focused most of its energy on showing the statistical link between financial accounting numbers, like earnings per share, and stock market returns. It is as if the only thing that really matters is the bottom line. For the most part, the top accounting journals are extremely reluctant to recognize accounting ethics as a legitimate area of academic research. At best, ethics is tolerated as an avocation. Those hired or promoted at the most prestigious business schools have learned this lesson well (45).

Ethics is not an elective for Pava. It is an essential part of the business curriculum.

The utility of *Leading for Meaning* for Jewish readers, however, is also its weakness for readers from other faiths. This may be true for all faith-based books on leadership. Jewish readers, for whom the Talmud and Maimonides hold deep spiritual meaning, will wrestle with Pava's challenges and their own corporate dilemmas. Jewish readers not familiar with these resources may find within them a voice of tradition they

did not know existed. But readers who come from other faith communities may view these sacred treasures from an understandable distance. They do not share the same hermeneutic world, and, therefore, may not view Pava's "leading" with their own sense of "meaning." After all, despite the religious language that is shared by all people of faith, how many Jewish readers would purchase *Jesus, CEO*? Leadership books that seek to inspire rarely motivate people whose well-spring of inspiration is narrowly defined or limited.

A prime example of this hermeneutic dilemma appears in Jones's other popular work, *The Path: Creating Your Mission Statement for Work and for Life*.<sup>12</sup> Jones uses biblical examples from the New Testament and what she regards as the Old Testament to assist readers in thinking through personal and professional mission statements and how they inform work and life. In assessing the impact of a mission statement on others, she warns readers to be wary of those who criticize or dismiss the sincere attempts of someone to live by his or her mission; living by one's mission, she believes, is a key factor to successful leadership. A look at her choice of texts and the language she uses to interpret them may be instructive:

You're moving along, accomplishing your task and feeling pretty good about things, until you read a critical review of your efforts in the newspapers or hear about them at a board meeting or overhear them in the lunchroom. Others, too, have had the same problems.<sup>13</sup>

The "others" she refers to are biblical figures. Jones wants readers to play a little game. She asks who scoffed or chided the missions of others in a quiz-like fashion using biblical quotations and asking readers to identify the biblical figure and text in which the quotation appears; she then discusses the leadership implications of each citation. This is where it may get a little uncomfortable for readers from other faiths:

*"You Samaritan! Foreigner! Devil!"* [italics are hers], the Jewish leaders snarled. "Didn't we say all along you were possessed by a demon?"

"No," Jesus said, "I have no demon in me. For I honor my Father—and you dishonor me. And though I have no sign to make myself great, there is One who decides true greatness." (John 8:48 The Living Bible)

Questions:

1. What accusations, internal or external, have been, could be, or probably will be hurled at you regarding your mission?
2. What tools do you have in your "shepherd's bag" that have given you victory in small ways before?<sup>14</sup>

We may not all share the same shepherd's bag of leadership. Using a passage of *The Path* where Jews are an example of those who might "snarl" at the mission of Jesus demonstrates the distance between faith-based readers. Jews reading this text may not be able to read between the biblical lines to draw out the leadership lesson, tangled as they are in the polemic reality that religions do not always see eye to eye.

Even those who are Jewish but outside of the Modern Orthodox community may feel alienated by the "insider" language or assumptions in Pava's selection of examples to illustrate leadership lessons. For example, Pava uses Eliezer Berkovits's book, *Not in Heaven*, to make a point about why multiple opinions are preserved in the Talmud, even if we only observe one. This follows from a lengthy discussion about Shimon ben Shetaḥ questioning whether Jews are obligated to return the lost objects of gentiles as they would of Jews—a thorny issue, to be sure. Pava wants to demonstrate that multiple viewpoints are better than single viewpoints. He writes:

From a traditional Jewish perspective, one might even be suspicious about the integrity of the study methods if, after the fact, all members of a community shared uniform beliefs. Objectivity in traditional Judaism does not imply a single output so much as a single process. As long as all members of the community accept Torah as authoritative, and as long as all members are engaged in good faith in the study of text, the resulting meanings are all the words of God (81).

This language and the philosophy of law presented in between the lines may be difficult for Jews who are not Modern Orthodox to accept. For some, the notion that we can be a community without uniform beliefs will be troubling. To others, the idea that the Torah must be accepted as authoritative will present its own dilemma. To non-Jews, this kind of language about multi-valenced approaches to religious law may be totally foreign. Some readers may just get stuck on the fact that the Talmud even entertains the possibility that it would be permissible to steal from Gentiles, and find it hard to continue reading.

Some pages in *Leading with Meaning* are dense with sources and references like these; it often takes Pava a while to get back to generalities. In addition, examples from Yeshiva University may prove interesting to readers of this journal, but too many such illustrations can become distancing for an uninitiated reader. Pava has, however, created a challenge for other authors of leadership books from other faiths. His ideas of corporation as covenant, integrative leadership and the significance of role modeling good leadership may push business leaders of other

faiths to intellectualize their writing and demand more than just another airplane read.

Turning inwardly, the Jewish community today recognizes its own dearth of leadership; Jewish institutions from synagogues to day schools, Federations to social service agencies know with painful intimacy the cost of poor leadership. Whether suffering from the extremes of moral bankruptcy to a more simple lack of professionalization, Jewish institutions today must create clear leadership structures and greater expectations of those at their helms. As Pava wisely reminds us in his conclusion, “. . . our economic prosperity has been purchased through a lessening of our humanity. In order to move forward and build better and more human organizations in the future, we must creatively confront and reengage the spiritual resources of the past.” These are *our* spiritual resources, and we need them today more than ever to confront the complexities of the modern corporation. Pava reminds us that we must lead with meaning, and his work can serve as a very able textbook. Perhaps Pava can be persuaded to use similar resources to address leadership for the non-profit sector to benefit institutions which specifically serve the Jewish community. He can call it, *Those Who Lead for Meaning*.

### Notes

1. This claim is made by Robert Goffee and Gareth Jones in “Why Should Anyone Be Led by You?” *Harvard Business Review* 79, 1(Sept.-Oct. 2000):63-70. It is unclear how the authors arrived at this number.
2. Laurie Beth Jones, *Jesus, CEO: Using Ancient Wisdom for Visionary Leadership* (New York: Hyperion, 1995).
3. Bob Brine, *The Management Methods of Jesus: Ancient Wisdom for Modern Business* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1996).
4. Myles Monroe, *The Spirit of Leadership* (New Kensington, PA: Whitaker House, 2005)
5. Connie Glaser and Barbara Smalley, *What Queen Esther Knew* (New York: Rodale, 2003).
6. Howard Gardner, *Leading Minds: An Anatomy of Leadership* (New York: Basic Books, 1995), esp. 285-306.
7. Daniel Goleman, the proponent of emotional intelligence theory, has joined with Richard Boyatzis and Annie Mckee in writing a book on emotional intelligence and its impact on leadership, *Primal Leadership: Learning to Lead with Emotional Intelligence* (Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 2002). Goleman believes that good leaders manage meaning for their constituents, especially in amorphous situations. Willingly or unwillingly, leaders often set

the tone for the reactions of others. Goleman quotes studies that indicate that even when leaders are not talking, they are watched more carefully than anyone else in a group: “. . . group members generally see the leader’s emotional reaction as the most valid response, and so model their own on it—particularly in an ambiguous situation, where various members react differently. In a sense, the leader sets the emotional standard” (9).

8. This is the title of a chapter in Ronald Heifetz and Marty Linsky, *Leadership on the Line: Staying Alive through the Dangers of Leading* (Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 2002), 101-122.
9. See Warren Bennis, “Forging the Future,” *On Becoming a Leader* (New York: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, 1994), 189-202.
10. John Kotter, “Leading Change: Why Transformation Efforts Fail,” *What Leaders Really Do* (Boston: Harvard Business Review, 1999), 75-91, first published in *Harvard Business Review* 73, 2 (March-April 1995).
11. The level-5 leader is a paradigm of effective leadership created by Jim Collins, *Good to Great* (New York: Harper Business, 2001), 17-40.
12. Laurie Beth Jones, *The Path: Creating Your Mission Statement for Work and for Life* (New York: Hyperion, 1996).
13. *Ibid.*, 173.
14. *Ibid.*, 175.