



“Do Not Be Afraid of Anyone”: On Courage and Leadership

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As the book of Deuteronomy opens, the Israelites stand poised to enter the Promised Land. One of God’s covenantal promises has been amply fulfilled—the Israelites are now “as numerous as the stars in the sky” (Deuteronomy 1:10; cf. Genesis 15:5; 22:17; 26:4)—and another, the promise of land, will soon follow suit.



Having been given the command to set out from Horeb (Sinai), Moses stops to recount to the Israelites how and why he came to appoint “chiefs of thousands, chiefs of hundreds, chiefs of fifties, and chiefs of tens, and officials” for each tribe (1:15). Seeing how populous the people have become, Moses realizes he cannot “bear the burden” (1:9) of the people alone and he seeks help from others in leading and adjudicating between them.¹ In installing the new judges, Moses gives them critical instructions: “Hear out your brothers and decide justly between any man and a fellow Israelite or stranger. You shall not be partial in judgment; hear out the low as well as the high. Do not be afraid (*lo taguru*) of anyone, for judgment is God’s” (Deuteronomy 1:16-17).

Why does Moses begin his speech with this particular recollection? Perhaps the Torah wants

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to remind us that divine blessings come coupled with expectations, promises with demands. Bible scholar Patrick

¹ Deuteronomy’s account of the process of appointing leaders differs from the one offered in Exodus. In the latter, Moses’ father-in-law Jethro plays a critical role; in the former, he is totally absent. For an explanation of why, cf. what I have written in “Does Everyone Hate the Jews? And: Is There Wisdom Outside of Torah?” CJLI Parashat Yitro 5774, available [here](#).



Miller notes that for the Torah, “fulfillment [of God’s promises] does not mean that all is perfect and there is nothing left to do, as if the story of God’s way with Israel were a fairy tale that comes to an end once the primary goal is reached.” On the contrary, the thrust of Deuteronomy is that “the blessing brings with it demands and responsibilities, indeed in a way not true before the promise was accomplished. From here on, Deuteronomy stresses that that blessing, gifts, and prosperity, by their very existence, place burdens, require leadership, and demand shared responsibilities and work.”² God wants Israel to build a just society and Moses thus understands that “a trustworthy judiciary is a sine qua non for a covenant community. It is the judges’ task to ensure that the land given in *promise* will be a land kept in *Torah*.”³

The judges are instructed to hear out the Israelites, here described as “your brothers,” *ah_eikhem*—any temptation the judges might have to haughtiness or grandiosity is dismissed with the reminder that all Israelites are their “brothers” and sisters. As Bible scholar Jeffrey Tigay points out, “Deuteronomy regularly uses this term [*ahim*, brothers] to emphasize the equality and fraternity of all Israelites, whether king or servant, prophet or king.”⁴ Moses also goes out of his way to emphasize that the stranger—that is, the non-Israelite living amongst the Israelites—must be treated equitably. He further admonishes the judges to hear out the weak and not just the strong. The simple meaning of these words is that both sides of a case must be listened to without bias. But Tigay notes that the verse may also be insisting that the poor be allowed to bring lawsuits, since “it was often difficult for the poor to get their day in court if they could not afford to pay the judge a fee for hearing their case.”⁵

² Patrick D. Miller, *Deuteronomy* (1990), p. 28.

³ Walter Brueggemann, *Deuteronomy* (2001), p. 28.

⁴ Jeffrey H. Tigay, *Deuteronomy* (1996), p. 12.

⁵ Tigay, *Deuteronomy*, p. 13.



But administering justice can be difficult; corruption and cowardice are ever-present temptations. So Moses adds a bold word of instruction to his new appointees—"Do not be afraid of anyone, for judgment is God's." The judges are reminded that it is easy to be partial because people are easily intimidated by the wealthy and powerful. Moses emphasizes that judgment is God's—which could either mean that the judges should not fear the powerful because God will protect them, or, more likely, that they "ought to fear offending God more than [they] fear offending any human."⁶ As King Yehoshaphat will later exhort the judges he appoints: "Consider what you are doing, for you judge not on behalf of human beings, but on behalf of the Lord, who is with you when you pass judgment. Now let the fear of the Lord be upon you; act with care, for there is no injustice or favoritism or bribery with the Lord our God" (2 Chronicles 19:6-7).

What exactly is Moses referring to when he admonishes the judges to fear no one? The Talmudic Sage R. Joshua b. Korhah teaches: "Whence

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do we know that a disciple who is present when his master judges a case and sees a point which would tell in favor of a poor person or against a rich one, should not keep silent? From the words of the text: 'Do not be afraid of anyone'" (BT, Sanhedrin 6b). Even though in general one is expected to show deference to one's teacher—and this traditionally includes not speaking in his presence—here the younger judge is instructed that where justice is at stake, he must speak his mind rather than yielding.⁷ According to the simplest, most straightforward interpretation of R. Joshua's words, then, Moses' concern is that junior judges

⁶ Tigay, *Deuteronomy*, p. 13.

⁷ Rashi (1040-1105), s.v. "*she-yosheiv*," assumes that R. Joshua must be discussing a case where the disciple is sitting and watching his master judge but is not himself a judge. In that case, too, the student must speak his mind. What drives Rashi to offer this interpretation, I surmise, is his assumption that *of course* a fellow judge, no matter how junior, must speak up if he fears justice will not be served.



will be excessively submissive to more senior ones. Although deference surely has its place, where the potential for injustice rears its head, too much deference is a dangerous thing.

But R. Barukh Ha-Levi Epstein (1860-1941) offers a very different interpretation of R. Joshua's statement—one that seems further from the simple meaning of the Talmudic Sage's words but closer to the meaning of the biblical text itself. Why, R. Epstein asks, does R. Joshua warn a disciple not to keep silent when he sees a point in favor of a poor person or against a rich one, and not speak similarly about a case when he sees a point in favor of the rich person and against a poor one? After all, the point of rendering judgment with integrity is impartiality. The Talmudic Sage's concern, R. Epstein insists, is not that the young judge will fear his teacher but that he will fear the well-heeled litigant standing before him. What Moses wants, Epstein writes, is for judges not to be afraid to rule against the rich and powerful (Torah Temimah to Deuteronomy 1:17, #25).

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Moses' warning to judges can easily be extended to religious leaders more generally. Fear of speaking one's mind can run very deep in Jewish life (and, obviously, not just there). Concern lest a

leader alienate her mentor or incur the wrath of her teacher is a potent force which drives people to silence even when they feel (even when they *know*) they should speak up.

Moreover, if we are enjoined not to fear our teachers too much, how much the more so must we not quake in the presence of our peers. Sometimes, when we see an organization losing its way, or compromising its mission, or selling out its values, it is necessary to speak up regardless of who will disapprove. If unease in the presence of teachers and colleagues were not enough, anxiety lest one alienate a prosperous financial supporter can all too often be paralyzing. These are three of the most common fears of communal leaders: fear of mentors,



fear of colleagues, and fear of the powerful. Moses' words are like a stick of dynamite thrown into a crowd of anxious communal professionals: Despite everything, do not be afraid!

What Moses asks for in judges—and
by extension, what we should look
for in rabbis and communal

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leaders—is courage. But just what is courage, and what does it entail? Some philosophers argue that to be truly brave is to be fearless.⁸ Yet total fearlessness strikes me as both impossible and undesirable. The fact is that courage requires taking risks, risks which can be costly—in terms of influence, reputation, or even livelihood. It is natural to be apprehensive in the face of real danger. It is also salutary to be at least somewhat fearful in the face of peril, since fearlessness can easily become recklessness. We should be careful not to confuse brashness and impulsiveness with courage. Courage, it seems to me, is not fearlessness but rather a refusal to be governed by our fears. The beginning of courage is to admit that we are afraid and at the same time to recall that fear is only one factor in our decision-making—and not the most decisive one.

Does Judaism demand that we have no fear? The book of Proverbs teaches: “Happy is the person who is always afraid, but one who hardens his heart falls into misfortune” (Proverbs 28:14). Gersonides (Ralbag, 1288-1344) explains that it is a good thing to be afraid when we face a genuine threat because this enables us to devise a plan to escape harm. One who cavalierly dismisses a source of danger will behave impetuously and thus invite calamity. Gersonides emphasizes that fear can be constructive in public life as well as private. After all, he argues, both Temples were destroyed because of leaders who refused to surrender to foreign rule; this rebelliousness and “hardness of heart” is what led to national disaster

⁸ Cf., for example, Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book 3, Chapter 6.



(Ralbag, Commentary to Proverbs 28:14).⁹ In some circumstances, fear can be a sign of maturity and responsibility. Fear is insidious only when it crowds out all other factors and considerations.

Returning to the Israelite judges, their mandate is not to be utterly without fear but rather to maintain a sense of freedom and integrity in the face of very real risks. Significantly, when Moses tells the people the kind of people he wants as judges, he singles out those who are “wise, discerning, and experienced” (Deuteronomy 1:13). Exodus describes the same appointees as “capable men who fear God, trustworthy men who spurn all ill-gotten gain” (Exodus 18:21). Intellectual acumen is critical (Deuteronomy’s emphasis), as is moral probity (Exodus’). Moses implicitly makes a crucial point: Courage alone is not enough, and at times may even be dangerous (after all, one could argue that many terrorists are courageous). Courage is a value when it is entwined with wisdom and discernment, with patience, self-discipline, and an uncompromising sense of integrity.

As the Israelites journey forward, Moses reminds them of what kind of society they have been called upon to create. Subtly, he reminds them—and us—that the kind of society (or community) they (and we) will have depends on the kind of leaders they have. Wisdom and acuity are critical, as are uprightness

and a commitment to justice,
including (and perhaps especially)
justice for the weak and vulnerable.
And yet, Moses warns, all of this will
come to naught without one vital,

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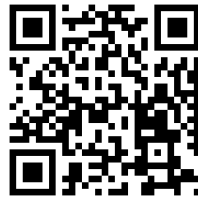
⁹ Cf. similarly, R. David Altschuler (18th century), Metzudat David to Proverbs 28:14. For a very different interpretation of our verse, cf. Rashi, who explains that what a person should always fear is not danger but sin. And similarly, cf. the comments of Meir Leibush Malbim (1809-1879). For the same two interpretations among modern academic scholars, compare Richard J. Clifford, *Proverbs: A Commentary* (1999), pp. 245-246 (“fear and dread of an oppressor”), with Roland Murphy, *Proverbs* (1998), p. 216 (“they fear their own weakness”).



indispensable virtue: The courage to say and do what is right regardless of who will disagree or disapprove.

Shabbat shalom.

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