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Parallel disgraces—and we are to blame

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Plutarch and his “Parallel Lives” would have had a field day with the leadership news out of the United States and the State of Israel. Here, the president is on the verge of being “indicted” (that is what “impeached” actually means) for bribery, breach of trust, obstruction of justice and, perhaps, contempt of Congress. In Israel, the prime minister—Trump’s closest foreign ally—is under indictment on charges of bribery, fraud, and breach of trust.

Both Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and President Donald Trump insist the charges against them are baseless and politically motivated. Bibi calls it a “coup” from within the establishment and wants to “investigate the investigators.” Trump blames his troubles on the FBI, the mythical “deep state,” and “treasonous” Democrats. He even ordered the Justice Department to “investigate the investigators,” although it now appears that probe will not yield the result he wants.

The parallel is not perfect, of course. The House impeachment process has virtually no support among Republican representatives, who seem more concerned with keeping their jobs than in protecting the integrity of the presidency. In Netanyahu’s case, the decision to indict was made by Avichai Mandelblit, his former cabinet secretary whom he himself appointed attorney general. Also, at least two Israeli television channels, 12 and 13, have reported on closed-door efforts within the Likud to remove Bibi as leader.

Then there are the polls. While 56 percent of Israelis, according to one poll, want Netanyahu to step down, 35 percent do not, while another 9 percent are undecided. Voters here are almost evenly divided, however, with 46.3 percent for impeachment, and 45.6 percent against. Significantly, though, the number of Republican voters who favor impeachment rose from around 10 percent in the middle of last week to 12.2 percent by the time the House hearings adjourned last Thursday.

Differences aside, although the facts seem little in doubt in both cases, a sizable group of voters here and in Israel seem unconcerned about their leader’s behavior. From the perspective of Jewish law and tradition, however, they should be concerned because neither Netanyahu nor Trump measures up to what a leader should be. In Judaism’s view, there are qualities a leader must demonstrate, as personified by Moses, who is considered the paradigm.

The first quality of a leader is willingness to take swift and decisive action to correct a wrong even if doing so works against his or her self-interest. Even though Moses knew he was an Israelite, his exalted station as a prince of Egypt came with so many valuable perks—all of which would be put at risk if he advocated for the Israelites in any way. Yet, as Exodus chapter 2 details, when he saw an Egyptian overseer violently beating an Israelite slave, he acted swiftly and decisively. (See verses 11 and 12.)

The very next day, he came across two Israelites fighting with each other. He intervened, even though getting involved was certain to call attention to his connection to the Israelites. (See verses 13 and 14.) It did, and Moses was forced to flee Egypt or be imprisoned or worse. Arriving in Midian, he saw several women shepherds being harassed by a group of men. He was a fugitive running from the vengeance of the pharaoh himself, so maintaining a low profile was the prudent course, yet “Moses rose to their defense.” (See verses 15-17.)

The second quality of a leader is to understand his or her limits. He or she cannot do it all alone and, besides, there are people who are better qualified for certain tasks. Moses did not lead alone. He had Aaron and Miriam by his side. (See Micah 6:4.) He also “chose capable men out of all Israel, and appointed them heads over the people” to help him. (See Exodus 18:25-26.) When the burden became too much for him even with their help, he appealed to God for even more help. Under God’s direction, he then appointed 70 elders to assist him. (See Numbers chapter 11.)

Contrast this to Trump and Netanyahu. Being president of the United States is arguably the toughest job there is, but Trump is an unapologetic micromanager. He even brags about the high number of “acting” officials in his government, saying “it gives me more flexibility” in hiring and controlling them. Among White House staffers alone, he has had a 33 percent “serial turnover” rate in his first three years, according to the Brookings Institution. He is on his third chief of staff (this one is acting). Thus far, he has had five communications directors, four national security advisers and six deputies, three legislative affairs directors and three press secretaries, among many other turnovers. Being prime minister of Israel is a tough enough job, yet Netanyahu held four ministerial portfolios—health, welfare, agriculture and diaspora affairs—until earlier this week, when he was forced to relinquish them because of his indictment.

There also is the matter of appointing the right people to the right jobs for the right reasons. Moses’ father-in-law advises him to “seek out from among all the people capable men who fear God, trustworthy men who spurn ill-gotten gain.” (See Exodus 18:21.) Moses does just that. That is neither Trump’s nor Netanyahu’s way. The only test for them is whether an appointee will be loyal to them. As we saw at the hearings last week, another test for Trump’s appointments is how much money a person donated to his campaign. Ability to do the appointed task is not relevant to either man.

Another quality required of a leader is in seeing to it that the people’s money is spent wisely for their benefit, not his or her own. Moses required a perfect accounting of himself and of everyone else involved in handling the community’s money. (See Exodus chapter 38.) And, says the Midrash based on the Torah’s narrative, he also insisted that there be two witnesses to every expenditure, even if it was he who was doing the spending. (See Midrash Tanchuma to Pekudei, 5:2.)

Compare that to Trump’s use of government funds to cajole Ukraine into investigating a political opponent, or to his use of his own hotels and resorts for government functions. He also has begun using the presidential retreat at Camp David (which he does not use, preferring to stay at his own resorts at government expense) to “butter up” Republican legislators to vote against impeachment, according to the Washington Post. “The casual itinerary [for the legislators] includes making s’mores over the campfire, going hiking, shooting clay pigeons and schmoozing with Trump officials, some of whom stay overnight with lawmakers,” the Post reports. “During dinners, Trump has called in to compliment members personally.”

Compare that to Netanyahu’s and his wife’s excessive spending of government funds for personal benefit. In June, Sara Netanyahu pled guilty to criminal charges after a long-running investigation documented lavish spending of taxpayer funds on meals, including hiring celebrity chefs to cook for their friends, spending $40,000 on takeout food over two years, and spending $2,500 a month to fill Bibi’s pistachio ice cream craving. According to the newspaper Haaretz, Bibi at one point even tried to bill the government for his cigars.

Finally, another trait we see in Moses (but not in either Netanyahu or Trump) is compassion for those being led. After the Sin of the Golden Calf, for example, Moses risked everything to protect the people from God’s anger. (See Exodus chapter 32.) Netanyahu stubbornly clings to power even though he twice has failed this year to form a new government, thereby putting essential services at risk because, if there is no government, there is no budget. The Israeli health system, for example, is 40 million shekels short of the funds its hospitals need to get through the winter months. A new election, however, will not be held before March, yet Bibi refused to compromise in order to form a unity government.

We need only look at how the refugee problem is being handled on the U.S southern border, or the number of children killed by guns this year alone to realize Trump has little or no compassion of his own.

The blame, however, is not on them but on the voters in both countries. As one Israeli voter told NPR last Friday, “Who cares if [Bibi] took a few gifts? The most important thing is that he protects the country.” Similar sentiments are heard from Trump voters. “Yes, he has faults, but don’t we all?” one such voter told The Guardian newspaper.

A ruling issued by The Council of Cracow in 1595 had this to say about voter responsibility: “...each must promise to act for the sake of heaven and the common good…, and not out of favoritism or self-interest or personal grudge....These electors should not act hurriedly, but should think carefully….”

Then there is this comment by the sage Rabbi Yehudah Nesi’ah in the Babylonian Talmud tractate Arachin 17a, “As the generation, so the leader,” meaning that if a generation is virtuous, its leader will be virtuous. His colleagues, however, saw it the other way around: “As the leader, so the generation.”

Either way, we are being told that a generation gets the leaders it deserves.