Introduction: Learning How to Canoe the Mountains

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The crisis consists precisely in the fact that the old is dying and the new cannot be born; in this interregnum a great variety of morbid symptoms appear.

—Antonio Gramsci (twentieth-century Italian philosopher)

The old shall be made new and the new shall be made holy.

—Rav Kook

Introduction

We are far from the olden days when people were religiously observant because of social pressure, let alone theological concerns. Older religious leaders may easily consider the difficulties in engaging younger people in their congregations and complain how the seminary did not prepare them for such challenges. We rabbis were trained in education, liturgy, and pastoral care, as well as more recondite subjects like the Talmud. The new leadership tools that we must master include social media, technology use, and business acumen. Such was the case before 2020–2021 and the COVID-19 tragedy.

A couple of years ago I came across a book that speaks to our challenging time, Canoeing the Mountains, by Tod Bolsinger. Subtitled Christian Leadership in Uncharted Territory,¹ the book examines
how church leaders must reframe their work considering today’s challenges. The title refers to the adventurers, Meriwether Lewis and William Clark, who led an expedition in the early 1800s, having been sent by President Thomas Jefferson. Their goal was to find a way west to the Pacific. They had assumed they would find a water route there, hence the canoes they had taken. Instead they found themselves in the mountains. They had signed up to explore the new world on a boat. They were river pioneers. They had planned to row their way there. Now what?

We face a similar situation. Our preparation has not prepared us. Our plans will not work. Our functions are largely irrelevant. What is then the leadership model for our uncharted territory? Lewis and Clark were fortunate to have a nineteen-year-old Native American, Sacajawea, with them. She told them that they could trade their canoes for mountain gear and that the expedition was changed but was not over. She helped them reframe. The task, of course, was more than just switching out horses for canoes. And our work will be more than learning how to Zoom our Torah class. We will have to adapt our mindset, our expectations, and our understanding of reality.

Disruption for us is not a choice but a reality, and the leadership challenges are severe. The book by Bolsinger focuses on five vital lessons. They are:

1. The world in front of you is nothing like the world behind you.
2. No one is going to follow you off the map unless they trust you on the map.
3. In uncharted territory, adaptation is everything.
4. You can’t go alone, but you haven’t succeeded until you’ve survived the sabotage.
5. Everybody will be changed (especially the leader).

The first three of these lessons are pretty easy to understand: We have never seen what is coming, our past and present leadership must translate into agency for our future leadership to work, and we will have to be nimble in adapting to the changes. The fifth lesson, too, is not hard to grasp: we will not only change our methods; our own character will be tested by the changes and we will become a different sort of leader. Perhaps we will be more collaborative than before, or more reflective than in the past. The
fourth lesson is the most intriguing to me: there will be sabotage from our fellow travelers, and we must survive it. What sort of sabotage and why?

In this article we will look at all five lessons and apply them to the future of the Reform rabbinate.

The Five Vital Lessons

1. The world in front of you is nothing like the world behind you.

Psychology tells us about transference: when a patient imagines feelings one has for a personal relationship are now directed to the professional treating the person. Another way to look at it is using the wrong map. In pre-GPS and TSA days, it would be possible to drive in a city you had just landed in and find the map was wrong. It could be you had the wrong map, but it could also be that you had taken the wrong plane! You are consulting a perfectly good map, but it doesn’t work because you are in the wrong city! That’s why the lake is not where it is supposed to be. You think you are in Chicago, but you are in Detroit!

As rabbinical students we learned about psychological transference not because we would be adept at using it for therapy but so that we would recognize when our congregants were transferring to us their inappropriate feelings.

These days our understanding of the world we face is going to be endangered by our using the wrong maps. The maps we will be tempted to use are outdated. Our maps were outdated before 2020, of course, but the gap between them and reality is so much bigger now. After the COVID-19 crisis the notion that synagogue programming will be contained in the building is both impractical and unethical for those who will need to socially distance still. So, what does a future look like in which many different platforms must be used even by small, underfunded congregations? And, of course, there may also be many large, underfunded congregations. Will we measure success by membership numbers? Facebook likes? Financially will we be supported by members, or Facebook viewers with Venmo contributions? Will our competition be the congregation down the road or the synagogue two thousand miles away? There are many possibilities and no certainties.
2. No one is going to follow you off the map unless they trust you on the map.

Agency is the name of the game for rabbis who want to be relevant. Agency implies competence in our craft but also an earned trust. Agency is the informal authority that comes from showing up on time, doing our job well, and not making too much drama about it. Synagogue leaders—with some dysfunctional exceptions—will support rabbis who prove their worth by being dependable and competent. My teacher Rabbi Jacob Marcus, z”l, used to call a good rabbi “an able man”—later in life he meant woman too. This may seem faint praise, but for him it was a huge compliment. To be able is to be competent but also trustworthy, to have earned agency.

In short, if there is trust in an organization there is the possibility of adapting to that which is unknown. Without trust, there will never be a successful adaptation. While we cannot successfully anticipate the future, we can work in the present to cultivate a culture of trust, one in which there is very little gap between professed values and actions. I once worked at a place where many people were involved in creating a vision for the future. The dedication to strategic thinking was impressive. Countless meetings were held with numerous PowerPoints, subcommittees, and thoughtful statements of values and objectives. At some point I mentioned the famous adage that culture eats strategy for breakfast. I remember a member of my executive committee castigating me for what he perceived to be a slight against the strategic planning committee. Alas, I don’t make the rules. Without a culture of respect and honesty the best strategic plan will fail.

Culture, of course, always starts at the top if it is to permeate the rest of the organization. Lewis and Clark were really good at exploring the unknown or President Jefferson would never have picked them. Nor would a team join them in their exploration. Competence does not ensure success, especially when things don’t unfold according to the map. Without the competence, however, there is no journey to begin.

For rabbis, the competence has been in part our ability to translate Jewish texts and traditions for modern applications. It has also been serving as a trustworthy executive whose response to people’s needs has played out throughout one’s tenure. As we
all know, a mispronounced word in the Torah is usually easier to overcome than a missed phone call after a death in the family.

3. **In uncharted territory, adaptation is everything.**

We hear it a lot these days: it is all about the pivot. If our style cannot change, if our perspective cannot be enlarged, then we will never make it to our destination. As Isaiah taught, “Enlarge the site of your tent!” At some point in their journey Lewis and Clark had to go from the geography of hope to the geography of reality. It was not going to be a short and pleasant canoe ride to the Pacific Ocean. Adaptive leadership starts with a harsh recognition of reality. Of course, we get disoriented when the world is not what we expect. The trick is not to quickly search for some solution but rather to promote the kind of growth that a leadership team needs in order to adapt to the new reality. Anxiety of others will push us towards quick fixes and not the kind of transformational work that only bears later fruit. And yet this is what we must do.

The one thing that will not be changing in the years ahead is the geography of adaptation. Questions will be more important than answers. Creating a team that is trustworthy and challenging is vital. The process will trump the product. It will be important to remember that leadership is not about authority but rather about that which is essential. In the future determining what is essential and what is nonessential will mean the difference between an organization that will survive and one that will die. The synagogue will not be all things to all people. Leaders will have to say no. I like to say that the essence of strategy is denial. If Lewis and Clark had thought they were in the canoe business, we would not even know their names today. I cannot tell you the difficult choices that a synagogue will be making in the future, but I can promise you that without the right structure in place to make those choices, to face the challenges head on, the future will be grim.

4. **You can’t go alone, but you haven’t succeeded until you’ve survived the sabotage.**

For Lewis and Clark, two of their men, Moses Reed and John Newton, were not mentally on board with the changes they had to make. Their grumbling was becoming contagious. They were part
of the team but sought to knock their leaders off course. Lewis and Clark needed to respond to the threat but not react, the difference being between creativity and defensiveness. Sabotage is a normal symptom of a stressful change. It will always appear. Bolman and Deal’s excellent book about reframing problems explains why we should expect such sabotage. In it they show why people resist change and how one can respond to this resistance. It will help not to take the sabotage personally, just like one doesn’t take the weather personally—or shouldn’t—and to also spend our energy on the emotionally strong and not the saboteurs. This of course takes discipline. Think of Winston Churchill during the Blitz: *Keep calm and carry on*. But also know that you can’t act alone; therefore you need allies who will support the difficult work while those who want the easy and inappropriate way out will try every seductive tool at their disposal. There are always people involved who like the chaos and resent the leadership. One must plan well for this betrayal, or the mission will be diverted. If it is worth supporting your organization then it will be worth protecting it from the saboteurs. Honest leaders also are aware that at times they may be guilty themselves of resisting change in order to protect their turf (i.e., outdated notions of what their work is supposed to entail). Protecting one’s time and setting boundaries is appropriate. Preconceived notions of what rabbinical work looks like in the future is not helpful.

5. **Everybody will be changed (especially the leader).**

We are not so objective when things are humming smoothly, even less so when the world is turned upside down. We are also reactive, and one way we react is by finding a quick fix and sharing it with others. This is exactly what we should not be doing. Acknowledging that we must change begins in learning how to be a better listener. And the listening must be performed not only with the usual sources but with the marginal that have not been privy to our ears. Are we only listening to our board leaders and members? Is that going to work in the future? Most of us rabbis have been trained for a very different world than the one we’re in now. We’ve been comfortable with the formal authority that we see in our certificates, our offices, and our vestments. None of these will matter much in the future. So many of the people we
will need to meet in the days ahead are not in our buildings and not on our membership rolls. We have to get out of the palace mindset and start thinking about the street mindset. Think back to Lewis and Clark. The great breakthrough was when they listened to a voice that had been ignored, that of Sacajawea. For our purposes, she represents not only the oft-unheard feminine voice of their time but also in general those who are not heard enough. Those who have great wisdom to share and are genuine but have not been in the boardroom. In order for us to lead effectively we will have to listen to them more. We will have to invite them into the conversation.

**Conclusion**

This article was not to give specific advice to navigate this uncertain future we face. I do hope that these musings and the central metaphor employed does present us with a way of taking stock of how prepared we are for the journey ahead. The only things I can promise is there will be surprises and there will be a need for true leadership. We are prepared to meet that which we are not prepared for if we remember the five steps to guide us:

1. The world in front of you is nothing like the world behind you.
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If we work the steps with those we trust and train ourselves to adapt and transform, then I believe the future will be met with much success and even enjoyment. Many of us did not expect this pressure or these challenges, but here we are. Perhaps the ancient Rabbinic declaration applies especially to us: *lechach nitzarta!* For this were we created!³

**Notes**

Bolsinger published a follow-up volume, also highly recommended: *Tempered Resilience: How Leaders Are Formed in the Crucible of Change* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2020).
