



Attracted to Problems • Parshat Miketz

Sometimes it's hard to understand what activities and traits distinguish a leader from a follower. This is especially true because the very word "leader" is used today to describe someone who runs a country and also someone who volunteers to run a bake sale. This indiscriminate range can lead to cynicism. If everyone's a leader, then maybe no one is.

In the years I've been working in leadership development, I've noticed anecdotally an unmistakable character trait that runs deep in high-impact leaders and is, I believe, a defining feature of leadership. Leaders are attracted to problems. They view issues and conflicts that stymie and repel others as interesting puzzles to be solved. They lean into dilemmas rather than lean back. Such attraction doesn't mean leaders can solve problems instantly, but they aren't intimidated by them. They don't experience despair or helplessness when they encounter a difficult problem or regard it as intractable.

In *Character Above All*, Doris Goodwin Kearns describes Franklin Delano Roosevelt as this type of leader; FDR was a confident problem-solver and decision-maker. Frances Perkins, FDR's Secretary of Labor, said that FDR's "capacity to inspire and encourage those around him to do tough, confused and practically impossible jobs was without dispute." After she met with the President, Perkins did not always have a ready solution to a problem but, Goodwin Kearns describes, she felt "more cheerful, more determined, stronger than she had felt when she went into the room."

Eleanor said this of her husband: "I have never known a man who gave one a greater sense of security. I never heard him say there was a problem that he thought it was impossible for human beings to solve." This is the first quote to appear at the FDR Memorial in Washington, DC. In his four terms as President, FDR faced problems on the national and international world stage that may have toppled those less self-assured. FDR's relationship to the Jewish community was, of course, more complex and has been discussed at length in Richard Breitman and Allan J. Lichtman's National Jewish Book Award finalist, *FDR and the Jews*, and more recently Raphael Medoff's book *The Jews Should Keep Quiet: Franklin D. Roosevelt, Rabbi Stephen S. Wise, and the Holocaust*.

Parshat Miketz, this week's Torah reading, offers us a glimpse of this problem-solving capacity in Joseph. Joseph was a dreamer, but his salvation and that of his family actually came through dream interpretation. No one else had the confidence, expertise, or temerity to help Pharaoh understand his inner confusion. "And Pharaoh said to Joseph, 'I have had a dream, but no one can interpret it. Now I have heard it said of you that for you to hear a dream (*tishma halom*) is to tell its meaning'" (Gen. 41:15).

Word traveled quickly about Joseph's abilities. Just hearing a dream revealed its significance. Rashi focuses on the verb to hear or to listen, translating it as "to pay attention." The word implies more than simple hearing; it suggests listening for understanding. Rashi cites two other

prooftexts to support his reading, Genesis 42:23 and Deuteronomy 28:49. Seforno suggests that Joseph did not guess or speculate but thought carefully about Pharaoh's words, the context in which they were said, and their larger import and significance. Joseph interpreted Pharaoh's dream on a national economic scale, thinking about the dream politically rather than personally.

Joseph's talent makes an appearance in another story about the ruler of a large empire and a Jewish courtier: Nebuchadnezzar and Daniel. Chapter four of the book of Daniel opens with Nebuchadnezzar in a similar state to Pharaoh of confusion and fear: "I had a dream that frightened me, and my thoughts in bed and the vision of my mind alarmed me. I gave an order to bring all the wise men of Babylon before me to let me know the meaning of the dream" (Dan. 4:2-3). Nebuchadnezzar was desperate to have someone explain his own mind to him. When none of his own dream interpreters, magicians, or exorcists could help, he turned to Daniel, regarding him as a person of deep intelligence and intuition. He said to him, "Tell me the meaning of my dream vision that I have seen" and said of Daniel that "the spirit of the holy gods" rested in him and that "no mystery baffles him" (Dan. 4:6). Daniel was able to explain the dream successfully.

Deborah Ancona and Hal Gregersen in their article, "The Power of Leaders Who Focus on Solving Problems" (*Harvard Business Review*, April 16, 2018) studied leaders who were problem solvers to identify common threads in their behaviors and dispositions. "Most striking," they conclude, "is that none of these leaders has any expectation that they will attract 'followers' personally — by dint of their charisma, status in a hierarchy, or access to resources. Instead, their method is to get others excited about whatever problem they have identified as ripe for a novel solution." These leaders pursue "their own deep expertise" and bring others along for the ride, seeking out talent and the kind of team that can take on complex issues. They got better by engaging in increasingly complicated work.

Joseph's skill at dream interpretation later spilled over into governance where many of the same tools were required: careful observation, listening, analysis, strategic vision, and execution. These bundled talents could easily have led Joseph to taut his own abilities. But as Joseph matured and his influence grew, he did not take credit for his problem-solving abilities: "Joseph answered Pharaoh, saying, 'Not I! God will see to Pharaoh's welfare'" (Gen. 41:16). Rashi on this verse explains that Joseph was telling Pharaoh, "The wisdom to interpret dreams is not my own, but God will answer. He will put in my mouth an answer that will be for Pharaoh's welfare."

Joseph answered to a higher authority than Pharaoh and, thereby, felt confident in summoning the God of the Hebrews into his conversation. In *Not in God's Name*, Rabbi Jonathan Sacks writes, "Every text needs interpretation. Every interpretation needs wisdom. Every wisdom needs careful negotiation between the timeless and time." Joseph brought wisdom into his interpretation, and, because of his intimacy with God, his insights became timeless. Joseph became more than a shrewd and capable vizier; he eventually became, in the court's eyes, a widely respected man of conviction because he was more than a problem-solver. He was a problem solver who gave God the credit.

What's the hardest problem you've ever solved?
How did you solve it, and who got the credit?