

Crisis, Leadership, *Shavuot* and our Future

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In this *shiur*, an adaption of a previously given lecture in 5780 in Otniel, Judea Israel, we will talk about four topics:

Crisis: we will talk about current crisis in our world and a definition of crisis.

Leadership: we will see that our current crisis has to do with a lack of leadership. So, we will discuss the ingredients of good leadership by focusing on Jewish leaders in the first 150 years of our Common Era. How did those leaders act in times of crisis those days? (the period before and after the destruction of the Second Temple).

Shavuot: we will take a look at two astonishing people in the Book of Ruth; Boaz and Ruth. And we will see that the Book of Ruth itself can be stated as a *tikkun* for a period of crisis in Judaism.

Our future: we will make some final remarks about our future; our task and mission as Jews, for our Jewish Nation and the world in general. With our great leaders and Ruth in mind; what can we learn for the future of our families, kids, Israel and the people of The Nations?

The first topic: A WORLD IN CRISIS

Experts around the world, including rabbi's, philosophers, sociologists and psychologists, say "*the world is in a crisis*".¹ We do have a global crisis in climate, the way we treat nature and animals (related to COVID-19), hunger and the distributing of food for the poor and the excessive use and waste of food in the West, the problem of war (Ukraine- Russia and Gaza- the North with Hezbollah), refugees and kids without parents, divorce, economics, racism, discrimination and antisemitism (even within the UN), sexuality and sexual abuse of woman and children, safety, and above all: a crisis in leadership and morality.

Some years ago, I attended a lecture by secular prof. Martha Nussbaum. She is considered to be the most influential female philosopher in the world. At the end of her lecture she gave a summary and stated: "*Morality is lost, current leaders are just interested in personal interests and status, instead of interest of the general population and what do we do? We only focus on economics instead of morals and sound relationships. We need love! Love has to be a top-priority on the agenda!*"

Another influential leader is our beloved Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks. His latest book is about morality. In this book he is discussing the problems of the Selfie- society. Modern people, including leaders, are just interested in the 'I' and we have lost the 'We' of strong social bonds and marriage. This is a huge crisis in morality, he says. This notion is also a starting

¹ See also my upcoming book (Q3-2024) *A Life of Meaning and Joy: In Search of Social Identity Man*. Pomerantz.

point of my upcoming book (realizing that Rabbi Sacks was not the first to describe this problem²).

Rabbi Sacks also wrote a book *“Lessons in Leadership.”* Sacks: *“It is fascinating to discover how much in the Torah is, in fact, about leadership, in the sense of a general approach to life: it is all about the responsibility of freedom.”* That is, Sacks says, one of the central themes of Judaism. So, what does Sacks say? If we want to be holy people (and we shall be, because Hashem is holy: *Vaiikra Kedoshim*, 19:2) and to be a holy Nation, we must be good leaders and be responsible (for ourselves and for others and now: *Pirkei Avot*, Ch. 1, saying 14).

But what’s responsibility? A responsible life is a life that gives an answer, a *response*. In all acts aimed at you, it’s Hashem who acts. That’s why the Hebrew word for responsibility, *achrajoet*, comes from the word *acheer*, what means the other/ The Other.

Current topics in the media and science are about the ethics of our leaders and morality in general.

DEFINITION CRISIS

What is a crisis? Is a crisis the same as stress or trauma? And can we say that a crisis is always negative?

The word ‘crisis’ is a Greek word: *‘krinomai’*. It means ‘to separate’, ‘to distinguish’, ‘to judge’. The word crisis has a negative connotation in everyday speech. However, the term is originally neutral. You can say it’s a moment of truth, when we have to decide. The effect of a crisis can be negative or positive. In Judaism we are familiar with the principles of ‘ascending through descending’, *‘tikkun’* and we often say: ‘evil is a chair for good’. In the morning prayer we pray and say: *“Hashem straightens the bent, provides me my every need, firms man’s footsteps and gives us strength”* (*Berachos* 60b). In depth, we can learn a lot from *Tehillim*, for example *Ps. 57: 9 “I shall awaken the dawn.”* Rav. S.R. Hirsch said about this *pasuk*: *“Using one’s spiritual resources, a person can take the darkest night of affliction and turn it into the dawn of a new day”*.

And what about stress? Stress is a normal phenomenon in life and helps us to stay healthy, be safe and to create. There is no good marriage without stress, even crisis, and no house or society is built without stress. Life is full of *Tsuris*, the Yiddish word for ‘worries’. Only long-term severe high-level stress can be harmful, both mentally, psychical, social and existential.

And about a trauma you can say it’s a serious injury sustained after a horrendous event, like a war, an accident in traffic, the loss of a child or a nasty divorce. Most traumas have to do with a loss of trust and are relational-based.

² For a comprehensive overview see my other books (www.mokum-publishers.com).

The underlying themes to describe our current world so far are: radical individualism, hedonism, consumerism, demoralization and a lack of leadership.

When we have our *Tenach* in mind, this sounds familiar, don't you think? There are a lot of crisis displayed in *Tenach*, but one of them is strongly related to our current time and *Shavuot*.

Insert reading of: *Tenach*, Book of Judges (*Sjoftiem*). Ch 21, verse 25.

Rabbi Steinsaltz says: *"This is the conclusion of the story and the entire book of Sjoftiem, this pasuk repeats its familiar refrain. Due to a lack of leadership each man would do what was fitting in his own eyes"*.

This last *pasuk* in *The Book of Sjoftiem* describes a severe state of demoralization and a Selfie culture, due to a lack of leadership. This is the state of society then and in many ways, the state of our society now. So, what can we learn? What can we do?

First of all, we can learn from great leaders in Judaism. That's topic 1. Second, we can learn from the *Book of Ruth*, topic 2.

The second topic: LEADERSHIP

As stated before, current topics in the media and science are about the ethics of our leaders. Some experts are noticing a shift from leadership based on authority and power to adaptive leadership: the primary focus on social interest and the good for humans and nature. So, crisis, can generate a shift in the way leaders put their duties into practice.

Good examples of adaptive leadership can be found in Judaism in the first 150 years of the Common Era (CE). Judaism is in a state of crisis. Its leaders, Hillel the Elder, Gamliel the Elder and Yochanan Ben Zakkai ("Rabban"), try to manage. Two of them played a role before the destruction of the Second Temple (70 CE), and one of them afterwards. During Hillel's life, the Jews lost their independence step by step and were internally divided. They increasingly opposed the Roman rule. Gamliel the Elder (9 BCE – 50 CE), was a Jewish leader during Roman rule preceding the destruction of the Second Temple, which marked one of the biggest crises in Judaism. Rabban Yochanan Ben Zakkai's (30 - 90 CE) leadership was primary directed at the preservation and continuation of Jewish life after the destruction of the Second Temple.

The loss of the Second Temple and the fragmentation of Jewish society resulted in a huge crisis, in which humanity almost lost its 'highest', which means its morality.³ The reaction of the aforementioned leaders, each in their own way, is a plea for *chesed*. This Hebrew word is best translated as 'loving kindness'.

In this *shiur*, I first will describe a definition of leadership and then examine Hillel's, Gamliel's and Yochanan Ben Zakkai's plea for *chesed*.

What is leadership?

A fine definition of leadership can be found in Rabbi Dr. Binyamin Lau's book "*The Sages*" (2007a): "*Leadership means being involved in every aspect of life, where a leader, to the best of his ability, shows full responsibility for that life*" (p. 264). According to Lau, if a leader wants to put this full responsibility into practice, it is necessary to show both creativity and authority. According to Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks (2015), in his description of Avraham's leadership, good leaders are people who are non-conformists. They do not do what the others do, but follow their inner voice, 'a call': "*Avraham was ha'ivri, because the whole world was on one side (be'ever echad) and he was on the other.*" (p. 15). Good leaders have a vision, not of what is, but of what could be. They have influence without power. They are, according to Sacks, the antithesis of Egypt, Greece and Rome [who exert influence through power].

Good leaders take initiative, are honest, are resourceful, work together with others⁴, have an eye for the interests of others and are modest in using the necessary authority. They have to know what accountability means in order to answer what the world asks of them. They are inspired by the wisdom of the code of ethics and are able to act in accordance with this moral.

The crisis

During the early years of our Common Era, the Jewish people seem to recover somewhat from the Hellenistic influences, with their focus on ostentation (physicality and beautiful

³ Jewish morality is the highest according to Nietzsche. The Jews possesses an unparalleled ethical brilliance. The remains of other major cultures can be found in the museums. One only has to compare to feel what is of the first and what of the fifth rank. Which of them has now triumphed, Rome or Judea? (Die fröhliche Wissenschaft, 136).

⁴ So that they share their personal unique talent with other unique talents, and then stand together stronger rather than alone (principle of integrated diversity). The great example is Moses' applying the advice of his father-in-law Jethro: "it is not good [*lo tov*] that you do it alone" (Shemot 18: 17-26). As it is not good [*lo tov*] to be alone (Beresith 2:18). So, it is not good to *be* or *do* it alone.

buildings), knowledge [instead of wisdom], the oppression of minorities (including women and children) and polytheism. The people suffered from Roman rule and internal divisions. Executions, massacres and corruption are the order of the day. Holiness was lost.

All kinds of Jewish splinter groups opt for armed resistance against the brutal ruler. The Second Temple is destroyed in 70CE. One of the Jewish sects would later become a world religion under Roman rule. In 135 CE the end is near, when the Bar Kokhba revolution ends in a massive bloodbath and loss to the Romans. In Masada, the last stronghold of the insurgents, the uprising ends in a mass suicide of the Jewish resistance fighters. Judea becomes Palestine and Jews flee their country. The crisis seems complete. What are the Jews without a Temple and the world without its moral compass?

Leaders in times of crisis

Hillel the Elder, Gamliel the Elder and Yohanan Ben Zakkai are the leaders of that time.

Hillel was famous as a lover of humanity, and even more for his appreciation of the uniqueness of each person he encountered.⁵ He is famous for his summary of the Ten Commandments [*“You will love the other, as yourself and above all the stranger, orphan and widow: the rest of the Torah is commentary. Go and learn it!”*]. Hillel teaches us the necessity of the internalization of the Other as part of our daily life. His character is characterized by kindness, openness and hospitality.

Gamliel, Hillel's grandson, is famous for his creativity and continues his grandfather's policy. He is known as an advocate for the public good and promoter of the quality of life for citizens, especially women.

Yohanan Ben Zakkai is known for his ingenuity and positive attitude to life. Once, when he was leaving Jerusalem, Rabbi Yehoshua was walking behind him and saw the Temple in ruins. This student, in sackcloth and ashes, expresses the loss. Yohanan responds as follows: *“My son, do not worry – we have another form of atonement like it. What is it? Acts of loving kindness [chesed].”* As it is written: *“For I desire acts of loving kindness and not sacrifice.”* (Hosea 6:6).

These leaders intervened, regardless of their role, status and place in history, all in agreement with one of the key characteristics of love (*ahava*) - the act of *chesed*. According to these men, the act of *chesed*, both to oneself and to others, is the demonstration of humanity. To love is an act of *chesed*.⁶

So, in summary: good leaders take responsibility and demonstrate humanity by acts of *chesed*.

⁵ Steinsaltz, A. (2010). *Talmudic Images*, p. 4. See also: Kloens (2024, upcoming). *A Life of Meaning and Joy: In Search of Social Identity Man*. Pomerantz.

⁶ Kloens, G.J. & van Duijn, G. (2017), *Wat is Liefde?*, pp. 183-193.

The third topic: SHAVUOT

During *Shavuot* we study and read the Book of Ruth. In my opinion, it is one of the most important books in *Tenach*. We can learn a lot from it.

The Book of Ruth, with its focus on the exemplary behavior of Ruth and Boaz, stands at the crossroads between society's descent during the era of the Judges (see *Sjoftiem* 21:25) and its ascent during the era of the monarchy. It teaches the timeless lesson of how two individuals can act in accordance with their own conscience and, through small acts of *chesed* and humanity, change the course of history and restore hope and unity to a nation. The Book of Ruth can be considered as a *tikkun* for the crisis, disorder, demoralization and a lack of leadership at the end of the Book of Judges. Ruth and Boaz are responsible people. For example: Ruth takes responsibility for Naomi and Boaz for the remarriage of Ruth.

Question: can the Book of Ruth be considered as a book of reward for *chesed*? In Ruth Rabba 2:14 we learn: *"This Megilla teach you how good is the reward for those who do loving kindness"*. In Targum, Ruth 2:11, we learn: *"And it was told to me by prophecy that there will come forth from you kings and prophets because of [all] the kindness that you have done for your mother-in-law."* So, Ruth's *chesed* surely result in a specific reward, namely, kinship!

In Zohar Hadash, Ruth 25b, we learn: *"I would not be surprised if this Megilla were here simply to trace the family tree of David, who was born from Ruth the Moabite."* This midrash suggests also a central purpose to sketch the background of the Davidic dynasty, the very institution of monarchy.

If we compare the last verse of The Book of Judges and The Book of Ruth, we saw the dreadful chaos, caused by the absence of leadership in the form of the absence of a king and monarchy and the move to its solution: the birth of David HaMelech and the Davidic monarchy: And Oved gave birth to Jesse, and Jesse gave birth to David (4:22). The Book of Ruth functions as a bridge from the leaderless situation at the end of Judges to the monarchy.

Overall: The Book of Judges is characterized by the progressive degeneration in three interconnected areas: leadership, religious and social. Steinsaltz, in his commentary, describes Israel as a people with a *"warped ethical sensibility, along with corrupt religious and national consciousness."*⁷ The Book of Ruth is about the integration of the three aforementioned interconnected areas (leadership, religious and social). In the Book of Judges, we can see and feel the absence of acts of kindness and charity. In the Book of Ruth people supply others with food and take care of the deceased. In the Book of Judges people are nobodies; people without a name and identity. The Book of Ruth is designed to restore the importance of names, identity and recognition of the Other to the national agenda. So, in reading The Book of Ruth, we move from the chaotic period of the judges and the absence of a king, to the birth of the founder of kingship, which anticipates a more stable period of dynastic kingship. We can even state that only a king with the qualities of a Ruth, who is kind

⁷ Steinsaltz, A. E. (2019). *The Steinsaltz Five Megillot*. p.37.

⁸ Steinsaltz, A. E. (2019). *The Steinsaltz Five Megillot*. p.34.

to the point of nullify her own self, can retain leadership without it causing him to degenerate morally and otherwise.

In sum: The Book of Ruth can be considered as a book of hope. In connection with the Book of Judges it's about the theme of ascending through descending. Above all, it is a book about the way Hashem guides events in the world, as He nurtures a person on the margins of society, a female Moabite convert, until she becomes the ancestor of King David himself. One of the Psalms (118: 22) contains a verse that describes the plot of the Book or Ruth: "The stone that the builders rejected became the cornerstone."⁸

Topic four: OUR FUTURE

It is remarkable that the leaders of the first 150 years CE, in times of crisis, one of the greatest crises in history, indicate *chesed*, a characteristic of love, as the core characteristic of leadership. It is remarkable that Ruth and Boaz, as a tikkun for the status of their times (Sjoftiem 21:25), act with *chesed* and responsibility and paved the way for kingship and leadership.

We need the acts of *chesed* in our lives to be human. We need them in times of crisis. We have to show loving kindness to nature, the people around us and especially the refugee, the poor, the orphan and the widow - metaphors for the vulnerable fellowman. With this love characteristic 'in the pocket', we can obtain a healthier balance between the importance of human relations and the care for each other and the economic perspective. By *chesed* we can correct the disorder of The Selfie-society.

Rabbi J. Sacks: *"One of the most profound contributions Torah made to the civilization of the West [and the Israel society as well: my adding] is this: that the destiny of nations lies not in the externalities of wealth or power, fate or circumstance, but in moral responsibility- the responsibility for creating and sustaining a society that honors the image of G'd within each of its citizens, rich and poor, powerful or powerless alike."*⁹

We need leaders who have internalized *chesed* and who are in, and are being placed in, leadership roles to propagate this as the highest moral requirement for leadership. We can start within our families and own community. Current leaders can, we all can, learn a lot from Jewish leaders, like Hillel the Elder, Gamliel the Elder and Yochanan ben Zakkai, the authentic and pious leader Boaz and Ruth as a *chesed* - personality.

Showing *chesed* protects man from selfishness and hubris. Showing responsibility can help us to recover in times of crisis and can prevent future crisis, just by doing good for nature and humanity.

A last remark: The Book of Ruth shows that human *chesed* becomes a model and an incentive for triggering the *chesed* of Hashem. Only after humans have mended their own relationships do they have the right to request that Hashem restore His *chesed* to them. In

⁸ Sacks, J. (2016). Essays on Ethics. p. 211.

the words of Martin Buber: it is all about a living partnership. In the words of Rabbi Sacks: it is all about the responsibility of freedom.

Yishtabach simcha la-ad malkaynu, ham'lamayd tora l'amo yisra-el.

May Your Name be praised forever- our King. Who teaches Torah to His people Israel.

Addition:

To take a closer look at the theme of *chesed*, let's focus on patriarch Avraham, the one who possessed and was able to propagate the property of *chesed* like no other. Many great historical leaders were inspired by his leadership.

Avraham as a prototype

Avraham is the prototype of *chesed*. He shows this loving kindness in the scene, near the trees of Mamre, where he sees three unknown men (*Beresith* 18: 2). Avraham has no idea who these men are, but welcomes them as guests and presents a delicious meal. Remarkable, in these passages of the Torah, are the words in verses 1 and 8. In verse 1 we read 'Avraham sat' and in verse 8 we read 'Avraham stands'. If we take a closer look at these verses in the Hebrew text, and we note that the men turn out to be angels, it becomes clear that 'the act of *chesed*' makes a person stand higher than the angels. Showing kindness is one of the qualities of man as an image bearer that God seeks. Showing kindness is essential to bestow hospitality to the fellow human being. In the Talmud (Shabbat 127a) we learn: "*Hospitality to wayfarers is greater than welcoming the presence of the Shekhina*" – the human is placed above the divine. The Zohar teaches us that hospitality is itself a welcoming of the *Shekhina*.⁹

The aspect of showing kindness is also beautifully reflected in the book of *Tehilim* (Psalms): by showing *chesed* you stand, in His view, higher than the angels (8:6). It is for this reason that thinkers such as the nineteenth-century philosopher Kierkegaard give unambiguous advice to people in crisis: open your door to the outside. In other words, demonstrate *chesed* and focus on the well-being of others rather than your own well-being. This advice is now being adopted in modern science. For example, Cambridge University experts advise practitioners to help their clients with psychopathological complaints focus on the well-being of others, or to do something with the well-being of those in mind. It is a plea for altruism and love.¹⁰

⁹ Thanks to my friend Rabbi Yakov Nagen for this quote and teaching in his book "*Be, Become, Bless*", p. 31.

¹⁰ Based on their research, the Cambridge University experts have a threefold advice: a) elevate behavior to norm (above thinking and feeling), b) self-care through mildness (forgiveness) and c) focus on the well-being of others (with a reference to the work of Victor Frankl). See TED Talk Olivia Remes '*How to cope with anxiety*'.