

# Moses, Miriam, and Aaron — Three Models of Leadership

A D'var Torah on *Parashat B'shalach* (Ex. 13:17 – 17:16)

By Alan I. Friedman

*“Vay’hi b’shalach Par’oh et-ha’am....”*  
*“Now when Pharaoh let the people go...”*

*Parashat B'shalach* is the Exodus story. It tells how — following the ten plagues, culminating in the death of the Egyptians' first born — the Israelites, led by Moses, leave Egypt, taking with them the bones of Joseph, and encamp on the shore of the Sea of Reeds. We read how Pharaoh has a change of heart and sends his army to pursue the Israelites and bring them back to Egypt. But God miraculously parts the Sea, enabling the Israelites to cross safely to the other side. The pursuing Egyptians, however, drown as the waters close over them.

In thanksgiving, Moses, Miriam, and the Israelites sing a song of praise to God. The “Song at the Sea” (*Shirat Ha-yam*) vividly recounts Israel's miraculous deliverance, by God, from the pursuing Egyptian army. It celebrates God's compassionate intervention and offers assurance for God's everlasting presence in Israel's future.

Exceptional leaders share certain qualities like a strong personal ethic and a compelling vision of the future. Frequently, great leaders emerge in response to a crisis as they attempt to achieve a bold new vision.<sup>1</sup> Is leadership the consequence of an individual's intrinsic attributes; do traits produce the leader? Even though writers are fond of compiling lists of virtues held in common by leaders, it is clear that leaders exhibit a wide range of qualities.

Let's look first at Moses. Moments earlier, the sea had closed over the Egyptians. Moses didn't call a meeting for the following morning; he didn't wait for the people to gather round; he didn't even take the time to teach them the words of the song and rehearse them. “Rather, when the moment was ripe with exhilaration and passion, he began to sing, and the people responded ... The timing was essential, and Moses used the power of the moment to carry the nation along.”<sup>2</sup>

Taking initiative is a basic principle in organizing the masses. Moses realized that acting quickly and decisively was the way to rally the people.

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<sup>1</sup> *The Seven Faces of Leadership*, by Robert J. Allio; Xlibris Corporation; 2003.

<sup>2</sup> Aviva Cayam, Social Worker; *The Jerusalem Report*; (January 31, 2000).

He knew that “people seek direction and respond to those willing to take charge.”<sup>3</sup> So Moses began to sing, and the people fervently followed.

Miriam waited until Moses was finished. Then she “took a drum in her hand, and all the women went out after her with drums and with dances. And Miriam chanted for them...”<sup>4</sup> Miriam’s model of leadership valued delay. She “recognized the power of timing, holding back until the people were ready. Being a leader often demands restraint, not impulsivity. It means relating to followers in ways that build confidence and understanding.”<sup>5</sup>

Also, by using musical instruments to encourage broader participation, Miriam demonstrated the importance of building consensus. The women of Israel responded to Miriam’s sensitivity and compassion and followed her in song.

It might seem that Miriam was merely repeating her brother’s words, but this is not so. A comparison of the two songs shows significant differences. Miriam chose to address the people in a language they could understand. She transformed Moses’ magnificent but lofty prophetic song into a chant easily learned by the women who heard it.<sup>6</sup> Miriam’s song is neither an imitation of Moses’ song, nor an inferior version of it. It is uniquely Miriam’s, and it attests to her personal initiative and great influence as a leader.

Moses was an elitist leader, closer to God than to the people. In fact at one point, he refused to care for the people in a manner that he considered feminine: “Why have You ... place[d] the burden of this entire people upon me? Did I conceive this entire people or did I give birth to it, that You say to me, ‘Carry them in your bosom?’”<sup>7</sup>

Though Moses did not regard his leadership role as requiring a close connection to the people — a doubtless source of friction — this is precisely where Miriam excelled. Miriam’s leadership was guided not by stressing her individuality but by forming a network of human relations.<sup>8</sup> It was Miriam who enabled dialogue with the people. Through her unique brand of feminine leadership, Miriam was able to bridge the gap between the grumbling masses and their “distant” leader.

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<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> Exodus 15:20-21.

<sup>5</sup> Aviva Cayam; *op. cit.*

<sup>6</sup> Commentary on *Parashat B’shalach* by Professor Tovah Cohen, Department of Literature of the Jewish People; Bar-Ilan University; Israel.

<sup>7</sup> Numbers 11:11-12.

<sup>8</sup> Professor Tovah Cohen; *op. cit.*

Miriam's leadership style more closely resembled that of her brother Aaron than that of Moses. As High Priest, Aaron was deeply involved with the people, concerned for their peace and well-being. Miriam, too, worked on behalf of the masses. Perhaps it is for this very reason that she is called Aaron's sister<sup>9</sup> — that she exemplified her brother Aaron's style of involved leadership.

The leadership styles of Moses, Miriam, and Aaron can also be contrasted in terms of their perspectives or world views. In dealing with the day-to-day issues of putting God's commandments into practice and molding the Israelites into a Godly nation, Moses decidedly operated in the *present*. On the other hand, Miriam's focus was on the *future*. So confident was she of the ultimate liberation of the people from bondage that she even arranged for the women to take musical instruments with them in anticipation of a joyous celebration.<sup>10</sup> Aaron was the diplomat who managed to direct the people's energies constructively. His leadership was derived from the *past* in that, as the eldest son, he was most connected to the previous generation.<sup>11</sup>

A particular aspect of Moses' leadership is worthy of mention. Moses plays many roles throughout the book of Exodus, but some of his most memorable moments occur when he places himself between God and the Israelites. Time and again, Moses intercedes on the people's behalf — even when they've sinned, even when it means putting his own life on the line.<sup>12</sup> Steadfast, unwavering support for those in one's charge is the mark of a truly great leader.

Are leaders made or born? Evidence suggests that leadership emerges when individuals seize opportunities to develop themselves as leaders. They become leaders when they are given the chance to practice the craft of leadership in challenging situations.<sup>13</sup>

Over the last 80 years or so, researchers have been studying the relationships between birth order, personality, and leadership. One researcher, Frank Sulloway, concluded that birth order is profoundly important to the development of human personality and human history. He found that birth order is the single best predictor of personality traits and a less significant influence on leadership behaviors.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Exodus 15:20.

<sup>10</sup> "Three-Way Biblical Leadership," The Jampacked Bible Online.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> *Moses on Management*, by Rabbi David Baron; Pocket Books, a division of Simon & Schuster, Inc.; 1999; p. 207.

<sup>13</sup> Robert J. Allio; *op. cit.*

<sup>14</sup> *Born to Rebel: Birth Order, Family Dynamics and Creative Living*, by Frank J. Sulloway; Pantheon Books; 1996.

Another researcher, Benjamin Dattner, examined how trait theories of leadership could be combined with Sulloway's findings to explain birth-order differences in leadership styles.<sup>15</sup> Other researchers<sup>16</sup> found a correlation between birth order and certain personality traits related to leadership. First-borns tended to be high achievers, perfectionists, organized, rule keepers, and detail oriented. (Is this not a description of a High Priest?) Middle children tended to be flexible, diplomatic, and social; and female middle children — like Miriam — tended to be very relationship oriented. Last-borns were predominately risk takers, idea people, creative, and questioning of authority. (What a match to Moses!)

Moses, Miriam and Aaron forged a successful three-way partnership. They constituted a powerful leadership team that dealt successfully with the trials and ordeals of a forty-year journey in the wilderness. “Miriam’s role as spiritual leader complemented the roles of Moses, the legislator, and Aaron, the peacemaker.”<sup>17</sup> Each covered for the other’s shortcomings<sup>18</sup> and, together, they succeeded in guiding the Israelites from slavery in Egypt to freedom in the Promised Land.

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<sup>15</sup> “Birth Order and Leadership,” by Benjamin Dattner, PhD., Principal, Dattner Consulting LLC; 2004.

<sup>16</sup> E.g., Lucille K. Forer and Walter Toman

<sup>17</sup> Maria Goldrich; Kolot: A World of Jewish Voices.

<sup>18</sup> The Jampacked Bible Online; *op. cit.*