

# CENTER FOR MODERN TORAH LEADERSHIP

Center for Modern Torah Leadership



חרות ואחריות

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"Taking Responsibility for Torah"

## CHARISMA REVISITED, or: THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN WINNING IT ALL AND TOTAL VICTORY

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Maybe – just maybe – this time is different. In the wake of yet another dispiriting scandal involving a brilliant and charismatic Orthodox educator, I have been encouraged by a series of thoughtful, serious, and practical public responses. Noteworthy among these was SBM alum Rabbi Elli Fischer's

["On 'Hard' and 'Soft' Charisma in Jewish Education: Toward a Taxonomy of Risk"](#). Rabbi Menachem Schrader then wrote this extremely valuable comment:

*Rav Amital, the great rabbi Rabbi Fischer referred to, was crucially aware of his own charismatic potential. He diffused its dangerous side in 2 ways:*

1. *by insisting on his students' obligation to think things out themselves, and come to their own conclusion, even if it contradicted his own.*
2. *by bringing Rav Lichtenstein in to be Rosh Yeshiva together with him, knowing full well they would frequently disagree on many matters. This created an intrinsic counterpoint to the charisma of his persona, requiring the talmidim of the yeshiva to weigh the conflicting views of their religious mentors, and deciding which if any approach should be adopted.*

Now Monty Python fans are aware that approach number 1 does not work on its own – telling people that they “are all individuals” does not disaggregate the herd of independent minds. So I want to focus on the remarkable second approach.

Rav Amital's invitation to Rav Lichtenstein was humanly remarkable for the willingness to share power and influence (and let us not forget Rav Sabato's similar invitation to Rav Rabinovich). It was pedagogically remarkable because it seemingly

squared a circle by emphasizing the value of intellectual and ideological diversity in the context of a highly ideological institution with a fundamentally intellectual agenda.

Could this model be transferred to day schools and high schools?

Let's first point out the obvious objections.

*Yeshivat Har Etzion was the rare pushmipullyu that could make up its mind which head to follow when, rather than freezing in place, or painfully splitting, or suffering from severe autoimmune diseases.*

*Day schools can't possibly afford the salaries of two heads of school, or two teachers in each classroom.*

*This kind of complexity is appropriate for high school students, but sixth graders need clarity and direction above all else.*

*This kind of complexity is appropriate for the intellectual elite, but not for the masses.*

And so on and so forth. In many contexts many of these objections are well-taken.

So here is a radical suggestion. What if we tried to transfer this approach to a larger rather than a smaller scale? What if we tried to run the entire Orthodox community, or at least the Modern Orthodox community, with that value in mind?

Let me propose the following metaphor. In some contests, the goal is to win as thoroughly and resoundingly as you can. But in professional sports, this is rarely the case on the macro-level. Sports require competitive balance, so richer teams accept self-imposed limits to allow poorer teams to compete. This doesn't diminish the intensity of any particular game, or season, or playoff series. Each team tries to win every game. But it means that

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everyone understands that total victory is self-defeating.

Many years ago, I asked a young woman just graduated from seminary whether her institution encouraged independent thinking. She assured me that it did. I responded by asking her to tell me about a time when her teachers had clearly disagreed about a matter of hashkafah. After a few minutes, she said that she had the impression during a session on shiddukhim that one teacher had strongly favored looking for Torah scholarship as a first priority, while another favored looking first for excellent middot. That is certainly a vital issue, but I think there should have been more. So: What hashkafic topics do teachers openly and passionately disagree about in your local school?

For example, I am very glad that there are Orthodox clergy who respond passionately and unselfconsciously to human suffering of any kind, even if their responses are not what I would have said or done. I am glad that there are Jews who think Rashbam is the rishon closest to peshat. I am glad that some Jews think the Rav's philosophic framework is far too wedded to a past academic moment. Now I generally prize deliberation and rational self-consciousness; I see Rashbam's overall approach as a step back from the likeliest meaning of Torah; and my hashkafic positions live in constant productive dialogue with the Rav's works. But my world would be poorer, and Torah-interpretation would be less capable of approximating Divine will, if I convinced everyone to agree with me.

Of course boundaries are important, and obviously Rav Amital and Rav Lichtenstein had much in common. But the purpose of boundaries is not only to wall out, but also to wall in, and for our own sakes we need to keep people in whom we strongly disagree with.

When Eldad and Meidad prophesy in the camp – in other words, when they show signs of being able to prophesy outside of the presence of Mosheh – Yehoshua asks Mosheh to punish them. Mosheh responds with an idealistic vision in which every

Jew is a prophet. It seems that Mosheh is right, but is he completely right? A midrash tells us, after all, that the content of their prophecy was that Mosheh would be transferring his position to Yehoshua.

I suggest that Mosheh was more right than Yehoshua. In a binary game, spiritual anarchy is better than spiritual totalitarianism.

But Yehoshua had a point. Constitutional democracy is better than either. G-d chose not to make us all prophets, because G-d wanted us to be thinking about and through Torah.

Mosheh Rabbeinu was the sun; Yehoshua the moon. To shed any light in the presence of Mosheh one had to be a supernova; Yehoshua could be the foreground for an entire galaxy.

The Torah tells us clearly that Mosheh's model was nonrepeatable. Perhaps it also means that we should not try to repeat it, but rather celebrate the responsibility imposed by the permanent absence of legislative prophecy, and the extended absence of any prophecy.

We should be patient in judgment – which means that we need to make sure to hear and encourage passionate disagreement;

We should raise up many students – even or especially if they will fight for positions we think are wrong (but we should tell them clearly when they are wrong, badly wrong, or culpably wrong);

We should build a fence around the Torah, so that we can have the freedom to err without fearing that every error will uproot our Tree of Life.

Here is a final thought exercise: What are the people, positions, ideas, practices, that you oppose with might and main, and still recognize are sometimes more right than you are? Or if not more right, at least sometimes capture aspects of the holy or the good that your own positions cannot?

In a community which has genuine answers to those questions, I suspect that conventionally run institutions will nonetheless be more open, and I hope that teachers with natural charisma will be less likely to fall into negative habits.

Shabbat shalom!

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