

“The Perils of Leadership”

By Rabbi David Wolpe

Joseph was the first of his siblings to die. The Midrash explains: “Why did Joseph die before all his brothers? Because he exercised great authority.”

Our tradition is well aware of the perils of leadership. When Joshua tells Moses that Eldad and Medad are prophesying, the Midrash imagines the reaction of Moses’ wife Zipporah. Hearing that there were two more prophets in Israel she sighed, “Oy to their wives!” Leadership takes a toll on the leader, and on the leader’s family.

Leadership is not a happy business: Jeremiah is persecuted by his own people; Samson is killed; David’s life is constantly imperiled. Greatness is never a guarantee of ease: America’s preeminent leader, Abraham Lincoln, was attacked in language that makes today’s scurrilities seem mild.

Leadership is essential and criticism of leadership healthy. Power should never be unchecked, and if authority becomes unresponsive it is unworthy. The Romans told the story of the Emperor Hadrian, who brusquely dismissed a complaining woman in the street, telling her he had no time. “Stop being King, then!” she answered.

But we who are led have a responsibility as well. Leaders are human beings, flawed, often mistaken, but seeking and hoping to succeed. Rather than demonizing those with whom we disagree, our language should be measured and our humanity engaged. As we rail against leadership in all fields of life, we should be mindful that criticizing bad solutions is ever easier than implementing good ones.