

# FEWER MACHERS, MORE UNTERSCHLEPPERS PLEASE

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If you pick up a Jewish publication and leaf through the events listings, you are bound to find advertisements for a large and ever-growing selection of Jewish leadership courses. Originally these were restricted to 16-19 year olds but the net has widened and now almost everyone from tiny tots to their parents is encouraged to take a certificate or diploma in leadership. Each new programme is hailed as a vital project for Anglo-Jewry and attracts generous funding accordingly.

This obsession with churning out more leaders is misguided. The market in leaders has been saturated for years. Already every Jewish teenager you meet is likely to have multiple qualifications in the field – and there has never been any shortage of Jews willing (and now trained!) to lead, occasionally they've

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even been good at it. But while the Jewish people has produced more than its fair share of competent leaders, and some great leaders, there has been a distinct dearth of applicants for the position of follower. Witness the workings of any Jewish organisation and you will invariably see a dozen people vying to make decisions on a committee and virtually nobody prepared to do the work the committee decides on. Synagogues and societies have a cornucopia of event planners, meeting chairmen and mailshot designers, but precious few people willing to shop for the food, set out chairs and tables, or stuff envelopes. All big *machers* and no *unterschleppers*, as the saying goes.

This has long been a problem. Ever since Moses managed to lead the grumbling and mutinying Children of Israel through the desert, even without FZY or AJ6 training, the major weaknesses have not been with the leadership but the followership. We are absolutely lousy followers. Even, or perhaps especially, when followers have professed to be following the path of their teacher, their interpretation is usually so far removed from the intention of their nominal leader as to be unrecognisable. Could the Ba'al Shem Tov have ever imagined that calling for a personal, anti-authoritarian approach to religion would spawn the rigid, *rebbe-worshipping chasidic* sects?

All great Jewish leaders from Jesus to Moses Mendelssohn have suffered the fate of their visions being twisted by poor followership into something they never intended. Even the Masorti movement of today is increasingly straying from the traditional Judaism of its founder Louis Jacobs.

Our inability to produce good followers must stem in part from the low value placed in Judaism on followership which, unlike leadership, is rarely celebrated. Our greatest prophets often questioned or disobeyed God: Abraham argued over the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah; Jonah fled to Tarshish; Moses was reluctant to return to Egypt to speak to Pharaoh. This disobedience does not attract heavy censure from the rabbis. I have



always thought it a bit unfair that Noah, on the other hand, one of the few people to obey God's instructions to the letter when told to build an ark and collect examples of every species, is actually castigated by the rabbis for not suggesting to God that isn't he perhaps being a bit hasty?

The attitude of the rabbis is reflected in everyday Jewish life. There is a feeling that if Abraham *et al* could take orders from God as constructive suggestions for further debate, then we are certainly not going to take instructions from each other. We are a stiff-necked people and – shamefully – a little proud of it. We are self-congratulatory about being a nation of individualists who don't blindly follow orders. Surely though a happy medium could be found between the latter and a total disinclination to do anything except tell other people what to do? Besides, much of the enthusiasm for leadership today has less to do with the celebration of the individual conscience than a widespread taste for the status of authority and scorn for the work of the *unterschlepper*.

We must stop cultivating this. I propose a freeze on all leadership courses and a diversion of the excessive funds being spent on them to the urgent establishment of a new Jewish Followership Course. I would be prepared to lead it.

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