

The
Eleven
Irreducible
Laws

of

Rabbinic
Leadership



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SIMPLY JEWISH FOUNDATION

Table of Contents

Introduction	4
1 The Law of Keter/The Crown	6
2 The Law of Chochmah/Rational Intelligence	8
3 The Law of Binah/Emotional Intelligence	10
4 The Law of Da'at/Spiritual Intelligence	12
5 The Law of Hesed/Compassion	14
6 The Law of Gevurah/Influence	16
7 The Law of Tiferet/Attraction	18
8 The Law of Netzach/Victory and Courage	20
9 The Law of Hod/Respect and Empowerment	22
10 The Law of Yesod/The Inner Minyan	24
11 The Law of Malchut/Legacy	26
Conclusion	28
About the Simply Jewish Foundation	29

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Introduction

Leaders are born. But they are not born leaders. No one comes out of the womb ready to take command of life. Leadership is learned.

I have taught leadership for more than 18 years, and the more I learn, the more I realize that there is a set of principles that all great leaders share. I have examined them and chosen those that are most vital for rabbis. I call them the Eleven Irreducible Laws of Rabbinic Leadership.

The purpose of this presentation is to explore these laws and participate in exercises that will make them real to you. There is some risk involved, and you may feel uncomfortable sharing with colleagues. You decide what you can and cannot say. But even if you do not choose to share all you discover, please do not ignore it for yourself.

Let me begin by answering three questions: What do I mean by law?; What do I mean by irreducible?; and Do I practice what I preach?

What do I mean by law? I use the word in a scientific rather than legal or halachic sense. These Eleven Irreducible Laws of Rabbinic Leadership are the leadership equivalent of the Law of Gravity or the Law of Thermodynamics. They are built into the very fabric of leadership, and there could be no leadership without them. These laws are not invented but discovered.

What does it mean to be irreducible? Irreducible means that you cannot do less than these 11 things. They are the bedrock of rabbinic leadership. You can, and most likely will, think of additional laws that you feel are as essential as these. Fine. You can add to these 11 laws, but you cannot subtract from them.

Do I practice what I preach? No. Some of these laws I learned long after I had violated them big time. Some of them I am still learning to master. Leadership is not a project with a beginning and an end. It is a never-ending process. In no way do I pretend to stand here as the Leadership Rebbi, but rather as a fellow traveler who would love some company along the way.

1 The Law of Keter/ The Crown

Notes

1

The Law of the Crown says that you can lead only those people whose leadership abilities are less than your own. For example, if, on a hypothetical leadership scale from one to ten you are a six, you will find that you can lead fives and under. You will also find that you cannot lead sevens and above. Why? People follow those whose leadership capabilities are greater than their own; people do not follow people whose leadership capacity appears weaker than their own. How do you know the limit of your leadership? See who follows you. Look at the people who really listen and adhere to what you have to say. Are they people you would call leaders? Are they people of power and influence? Or are they people of lesser stature? This is not a moral judgment; it is an assessment of the kinds of people who are willing to accept you as their leader.

Exercise:

On a scale of 1 to 10 (one being low, ten high) rate your leadership ability:

List the names of five of your strongest followers. Rank these people on the same 10 point scale. Are you leading leaders? Or are you leading people low on the scale?

Think of someone who is at least two levels above you (or if you rate yourself as a ten, think of someone you admire for their leadership ability). What does that person have that you do not? What can you learn from that person to raise your crown? How could you incorporate what you learn into your own leadership style?

2 The Law of Chochmah/ Rational Intelligence

Notes

2

The Law of Chochmah refers to your ability to think rationally and explain your positions logically.

People want reasons for things, and simply relying on tradition without giving an explanation as to why a specific mitzvah matters is becoming less and less compelling to people. Yet helping people to understand what tradition is trying to say and do in their lives is still not sufficient when it comes to making a great leader.

What makes a great leader is the quality of vision he or she presents to others. You have to know what you believe and why you believe it. You have to know and be able to explain why it is you feel your understanding of Judaism is worth following. You have to have passion for your Judaism and be able to communicate both that passion and the Judaism that stimulates it.

Exercise:

The primary medium of rabbinical IQ is teaching.

Choose a mitzvah you find compelling. Briefly answer the following questions: 1) Where did this mitzvah come from? 2) What was its original intent? 3) What value did it add to people's lives in the past? 4) What value does it add to people's lives today?

Choose a mitzvah you find far less compelling. Answer the same questions.

Imagine that you are responsible for creating an ad campaign promoting each of these mitzvot. Come up with a slogan to entice people to investigate each mitzvah for themselves.

3 The Law of Binah/ Emotional Intelligence

Notes

3

The Law of Binah says that leaders must have the ability to read people on an emotional level, to be able to enter into social contracts with diverse types of people, and to be able to communicate not only rationally but emotionally. EQ is the ability to not only feel your feelings and the feelings of others, but to forge strong emotional bonds with people.

The primary medium of rabbinical EQ is I/Thou dialogue. Martin Buber tells us that there are two primary ways of encountering the world: I/It and I/Thou. Both are necessary but only the second adheres to the Law of Binah.

When you engage someone or something as a Thou you step out of set patterns of thought and feeling, and enter into a realm of response that is not premeditated or determined by past experience.

An I/Thou dialogue has no script. You do not know what the other person is going to say, and you do not know what you will say. You are completely open to the other, and without the defenses of projection, rote, and past conditioning. You listen in the present and do not filter what is being said through the experiences of your past. There is an immediacy to the I/Thou moment that evokes a profound humility bordering on selflessness. You do not label yourself or the other. You are simply present to what is unfolding and responding in accord with it.

Exercise:

Think of a person you know who seems to be a master at understanding and empathy. How do your empathic skills rate compared to his or hers? What can you learn from this person that would enhance your EQ?

4 The Law of Da'at/ Spiritual Intelligence

Notes

4

The Law of Da'at addresses the spiritual dimension of life: your sense of God's presence. For rabbis, IQ is demonstrated by how well you can read a text; EQ by how well you can read a person; SQ by how well you can read the Handwriting on the Wall (Daniel 5:5).

All too often, rabbis are not comfortable speaking about God. Indeed a review of the marketing materials of major rabbinical schools in the United States revealed that very few even mention God, let alone refer to God as a central factor in becoming or being a rabbi. Yet people are looking for a direct encounter with God and things spiritual. It is no longer sufficient to read the Book, they want to meet the Author.

Central to the Law of Da'at is prayer. How often do you talk to people about their prayer lives? How often do you pray with people? How comfortable are you talking about God? To God? How do you respond to people who turn to you for spiritual healing? Answering these questions will help you assess your level of SQ.

Exercise:

Shabbos at the Improv. Stand on the Bimah and have trusted colleagues call out the title of a prayer along with a seemingly unrelated topic. Then (much like a *petichtah* of a sermon) give a three-minute *drash* that meaningfully links the topic to the prayer. For example: The *Barechu* and canned laughter on a sitcom. How would you use the latter to introduce the former?

***El na r'fah na* (Numbers 12:13).** Have trusted friends present you with specific (though perhaps hypothetical) spiritual problems. Then, with no more than 30 seconds of self-quieting silence, create a prayer that addresses the problem. Discuss with your friends whether or not they felt your prayer could touch the heart of another person.

5 The Law of Hesed/ Compassion

Notes

5

The Law of Hesed speaks to your ability to enter into another person's pain without making it your own. It rests on and goes far beyond the EQ dimension of the Law of Binah. The Law of Binah focuses on your ability to empathize with another's plight, the Law of Hesed speaks to your ability to help heal another's pain by redirecting his or her life. The Law of Hesed requires the skill of *yechidut*.

Yechidut is the ability to connect with and prescribe healing direction for another's soul. This requires you to drop your sense of self and enter fully into the soul of another. The most direct means to develop the art of yechidut is meditation.

Meditation has many benefits but with regard to the Law of Hesed, its chief benefit is to shift your consciousness from self to selflessness, from *Neshamah* to *Yechida*.

From the perspective of Yechida consciousness, all things are interconnected. Reality is seen as an infinite latticework with each part impacting upon every other part. From this perspective, you can see where the vessels of a person's life are broken and where *tikkun*/repair needs to be made. You know not only how a person feels, but what spiritual work they must do (both *tikkun haolam*/care of the world and *tikkun hanefesh*/care of the soul) to heal themselves.

Exercise:

Set aside twenty minutes a day, twice each day, for silent meditation. If you do not already have a meditation practice, try the following. Sit comfortably on a cushion or chair. Close your eyes. With every out-breath, sigh the Name Yah. Slowly soften your sighing until the Name is no longer audible. Sit and repeat the Name of God. If your mind wanders, gently return your attention to the repetition of the Divine Name. At the conclusion of your meditation, offer a short prayer of thanksgiving to God.

6 The Law of Gevurah/ Influence

Notes

6

Leadership is influence. Nothing more. Nothing less (John Maxwell).

You can measure the strength of your leadership by gauging the extent to which you influence the behavior of others. It is not enough that people listen to what you say, they must also do what you suggest.

Those who think they lead and yet have no followers are only taking a walk (Anonymous).

Exercise:

List five areas of influence you have over people whom you lead. What motivates them to follow your advice? How do you grow your influence?

A corollary to the Law of Gevurah is Hillel's *One Foot Judaism*: rabbis must be able to articulate their vision of Judaism while standing on one foot. People cannot follow a vision they do not understand or do not find compelling. You must know who you are and for what you stand.

Exercise:

To Be Is To Stand For (Abraham Joshua Heschel). In 25 words or less, articulate the heart of Judaism as you understand it. In twenty five words or less, define your vision of the rabbinate. In 25 words or less, express the goal toward which you labor and seek to move others? Review your three paragraphs, and shape them into one powerful statement.

Read your statement over, set it aside, and in 30 seconds or less, verbally articulate your vision.

7 The Law of Tiferet/ Attraction

The Law of Tiferet says that people who follow you tend to be similar to you in age, attitude, values, skills, and background. Intellectual rabbis will attract intellectual people, musical rabbis will attract musically gifted people, social action rabbis will attract social action minded people, and so on.

Creating a well-rounded community may require you to seek out leaders very different from yourself who can attract people to your community who are very different from those you yourself attract.

Cantors and educational directors may serve as broadening factors in your community if you allow them to. Some rabbis see their assistant rabbi, cantor, or educational director as a competitor for the loyalties of the people in their community. Rather than nurture the leadership ability of others in such a way as to broaden the scope of people who will be attracted to their community, many rabbis seek to squelch the “competition” for fear of losing their own leadership edge. Just the opposite is true: raising up loyal leaders only enhances one’s leadership position.

Exercise:

List the five most important qualities you would like to have in the people on your board or leadership team. Make a list of the committee chairpeople in your community and, on a scale of 1 to 10, rate each person on how well he or she embodies these qualities. Now do the same for yourself. Compare these two lists. What do they have in common? Where do they differ?

List the 10 most central qualities about yourself (intellectual, funny, easy-going, etc.). Look at your congregation or organization as a whole and write down in what ways your organization reflects your personality. What could you do to make your organization more well-rounded?

Notes

7

8 The Law of Netzach/ Victory and Courage

There are two aspects to this law: victory and courage. The first refers to your dedication, the second to your integrity.

The Law of Victory says that you cannot expect people to be more passionate about your vision than you are. You must be completely dedicated to your vision and willing to do everything necessary to achieve it.

The danger here is that you will sacrifice other essential elements of your life in pursuit of your dream. Avoiding this pitfall requires you to be very clear about what really matters to you and to make these things the central priorities in your life.

The Law of Netzach says that anything less than complete devotion to victory will fail, but it does not say how you are to define victory.

Exercise:

List the five most important things you want from life. Review the vision of your rabbinate you wrote for the Law of Gevurah. Compare your vision with your list of life desires:

In what ways do they jibe? In what ways do they conflict? What does this say about what you must do?

The second aspect to the Law of Netzach refers to courage: are you willing to risk everything for the sake of your personal integrity? Compromise is a part of life, and the Law of Netzach is not saying that you should be inflexible. But compromising your integrity is never a good idea. There are somethings that are just not negotiable.

Exercise:

List five Jewish and five personal principles that you would refuse to violate even if it meant losing your job. Do people know these things about you? How have you been tested regarding these?

Notes

8

9 The Law of Hod/ Respect and Empowerment

Respect has to be earned; it does not come with your title or position. People will respect those who: 1) respect others; 2) say what they mean/do what they say; 3) add value to people's lives; 4) demonstrate success; 5) raise up other leaders.

1. We show respect for others when we positively reward good work; address problems and concerns; involve them in decision making; keep them informed; treat them fairly and equally. Hold a meeting with your staff and board and ask them how well you do these things.

Notes:

2. The issue here is trustworthiness. How do you know that you are trusted by others? Ask a friend to tell you what people say about you behind your back.

Notes:

3. People should be better off with you than without you. What value do you think you add to people's lives? How do you know you actually do this?

Notes:

4. Imagine two coaches: the first has never won a game, the second has never lost. Which team would you rather be on? People respect success. How do you define success? How do people know that you are successful?

Notes:

5. A great leader nurtures other leaders. In what way do you raise up new leaders in your organization? In what way do people see you as empowering rather than controlling?

Notes:

10 The Law of Yesod/ The Inner Minyan

According to the Law of Keter, you lead only those people whose leadership abilities are less than your own. The Law of Yesod says you cannot grow as a leader unless you surround yourself with people whose leadership abilities are greater than your own.

Following the Law of Yesod takes create courage. It requires you to constantly compare your leadership potential with that of people who are superior to yourself. It means that you are willing to admit weaknesses and do what you can to address them.

Yet how else are you to grow as a leader?

To adhere to the Law of Yesod, you need to develop a *minyan* of close and valued advisors to whom you can turn for direction and help. This is not a minyan of followers, but a minyan of people who understand your vision and who love and respect you enough to tell you the truth, even when it hurts.

Most rabbis who follow this law do not use colleagues in this inner minyan. There is a subtle but often unmistakable competition among rabbis that seems to undermine the intent of the law. Similarly, they usually refrain from including members of their congregations in the minyan, not because of competition but rather because it is often difficult to be yourself among members of your community.

Many rabbis choose to create a circle of non-Jewish clergy and helping professionals. They are the least caught up in Jewish *mishugas* and are better able to focus on leadership issues.

Exercise:

Think of your work life in terms of a company. Who would you want on your board of directors? What qualities would you look for in board members? What direction would you provide them? With what mission would you charge them? How can you attract to your inner minyan the people who will be most helpful to you?

Notes

10

11 The Law of Malchut/ Legacy

The Law of Malchut says that great leaders leave a legacy that continues to shape their communities long after they are gone. For example: Abraham Lincoln's Gettysburg Address redefined the American experiment with the phrase "of the people, by the people, and for the people" and continues to guide the United States today. That's legacy.

Exercise:

Imagine that you are planning to leave your job within 12 months.

List 3 fundamental principles you wish to continue after you are gone.

List 3 essential programs you wish to be maintained or expanded.

List 3 central policies you wish to see perpetuated.

Do the leaders of your community value the same principles, programs, and policies? Will they continue them without you? How can you make sure that your legacy lives on after you?

Notes:

Another aspect of the Law of Malchut is succession. If it doesn't matter to your community if the vision of the next rabbi extends your own, then your leadership is quite limited. If it doesn't matter to you, then you were never their leader in the first place.

Exercise:

Write a "Help Wanted" ad for your rabbinic replacement. Be specific as to the qualities and skills you are looking for in a successor.

Imagine that your successor is arriving one month after you have already left your position, and that the two of you will have no opportunity to meet. Write a brief letter to the new rabbi (no longer than one page) outlining your legacy and just what it is you expect him or her to do regarding it.

Share both your ad and your letter with your board of directors.

Notes:

Conclusion

Leaders are born, but leadership is learned. It is an art that must be continually practiced and honed.

The history of Judaism can be read as a series of great leaders inspiring people with great visions, each rooted in Judaism's foundational vision of Ethical Monotheism: One God necessitating one world, one humanity, and one moral code—justice and compassion for all.

Too often we imagine that to be a rabbi is automatically to be a leader. Not so. In fact, many congregations don't want their rabbis to lead. They prefer their rabbis to be clerks rather than prophets, employees rather than rabbes. They want a rabbi who will carry out orders rather than set people aflame with vision.

Most rabbis, however, feel called to lead. The 11 Irreducible Laws of Rabbinic Leadership can help you become the leader you wish to be—helping you withstand the pressure to be a clerk and setting you more strongly on the path of the prophet.

the Simply Jewish Foundation

reinventing judaism for the 21st century

Who We Are

Established in 1998 by Rabbi Rami M. Shapiro, the Simply Jewish Foundation is a private nonprofit think tank for a Judaism devoted to *t'shuva* and *tikkun*, returning to God and godliness.

The Simply Jewish Foundation actively seeks partners—both individuals and organizations—to work closely with us in areas of common interest. We function in many roles including facilitator, entrepreneur, evaluator, sponsor, developer, and colleague.

What We Do

In addition to our collaborative efforts, the Simply Jewish Foundation maintains three on-going projects:

- The Sh'ma Center for Contemplative Judaism offers personal spiritual mentoring, workshops and retreats.
- WWMD® promotes Jewish ethics among children through a variety of school, home, and internet programs asking the question What Would a Mensch Do?®
- The Simply Jewish Fellowship links together individuals who are living and developing the ideas outlined in our Simply Jewish Manifesto.

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