

Unit 4

Leading Through Prolonged Ambiguity

Facilitator's Guide

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SYNOPSIS

Change in itself is not scary; it is the unknown that accompanies change that is so daunting. Departing from who you are (individually, as a company, community, or a People) to journey beyond how you know yourself without knowing what might become of you along the way is very hard. Yet it is the only way to change. This session provides a framework to work through the prolonged ambiguity that change entails, together with textual references from our biblical change-points, to anchor and orient us when we are feeling a little lost on the way.

Dead fish go with the flow. Live fish swim against the current. So it is with conscience and courage. So it is with the children of Abraham. They are prepared to challenge the idols of the age.

Rabbi Sacks (Lessons in Leadership, p. 15)

Are you prepared to take a stand?

This unit aims to explore the challenge of leading through a complex, ongoing change process. What are the unique stresses of leading in these kinds of environments? How do we pace ourselves and others? What are the potential risks and pitfalls of leading in these kinds of environments? How might we approach the work of leadership differently when the solution is far off, and we must hold steady with no resolution over the course of a prolonged period?

EDUCATIONAL GOALS

Learners will emerge from this session with the following enduring understandings:

- Adaptive challenges tend to take a long time to solve
- Leadership work in this environment involves patience, partnerships, and managing the "heat" - lowering it when it gets too high, and raising it when it gets too low
- Change happens in the productive zone of disequilibrium - leadership work involves supporting people in that zone
- We need to build our own capacity for ambiguity and discomfort, for not knowing, in order to be effective in our leadership work.

NOTE TO FACILITATOR

At this point in the curriculum, your participants will have begun to form a community and connections to one another. You therefore can encourage them further, pushing them to move between the dance floor and the balcony.

Try to elicit the leadership concepts and insights from the participants, rather than "teaching" them the concepts and texts. Ask what resonates most. Try to help them understand their own tolerance for "heat" - when do they shut down? When do they try to lower tension? Are they willing to hear perspectives that are different from their own?

This unit brings to the fore the "Productive Zone of Disequilibrium." This is the space in which we learn, in which we are challenged, but not too fast or too far. Try to pause during the session to help the participants get a sense of where you are as a group. Are you in a "productive zone" of learning? Why? Why not? How can you get, and stay there?

It is recommended that the total running time for this session is 2 hours, roughly divided up as follows:

- Introduction – 20 minutes
- Framing – 10 minutes
- Hevruta Learning & Reflection – 60 minutes & 10 minute break
- Integration & Practice – 20 minutes

You might also choose to facilitate a 60 minute session; in which case, simply halve each of the recommended times. Also, if the purpose of this session for your participants is more focused on practice and application, plan to spend more time on the integration exercises. If it is more theoretical, and focused on Jewish learning, plan to spend more time on the Jewish texts and discussion.

For younger learners, take breaks between each section.

For those unfamiliar with Jewish texts, frame the excerpts as Jewish texts, not as religious texts.

INTRODUCTION

In this session, we will explore the unique challenges and opportunities of leading through prolonged ambiguity. How do we lead when the problem is so complex that we can hardly agree on its definition, let alone on the solution? How do we hold steady when people want a quick and easy fix to the problem? How do we keep bringing attention to the problem when people want to ignore it? How do we protect ourselves for the marathon of this kind of leadership?

What distinguishes a leader from a non-leader is not position or office or role but rather, a basic attitude to life. Others wait for something to happen; leaders help make something happen. While others curse the darkness, a leader lights a light. The sages said that whenever we see the word vayehi, "And it came to pass," it is always a prelude to tragedy. Leaders don't wait for things to come to pass. They say not vayehi but yehi, "Let there be." That was the word with which God created the universe. It is also the word with which we create a meaningful life, one that leaves the world a little better for our presence.

Rabbi Sacks (Lessons in Leadership, p. xxi)

Corridor to Learning

Think of something to which you feel deeply committed. Something you feel, and even say to others, that you care deeply about.

Now think about the past month.

How much time and attention have you given to that person/cause/activity?

Is there anyone in your life who "agitates" you to give attention to that issue?

What do you notice?

In this session, we will explore the gap between what people are saying and what they're doing - that gap is the space of the "heat." The work of leadership is to keep people facing the gap between what people say they care about, and their actual behavior.



Entering the Pool

Ask your participants to imagine a beautiful, long swimming pool. Perhaps it is surrounded by olive trees, wisteria, rose bushes...the sky above is blue, and perhaps you can hear the ocean in the distance. Explain that one side of the pool is quite shallow, while the other very deep. Think about the last time you stuck your neck out for the issue you care deeply about. Now, imagine that the water of the pool is the issue. How did you enter the water? Did you dive in deep, head-first? Slowly creep in from the shallow end? Slip in from the side? Invite your participants to physically position themselves in or out of the "pool" vis a vis the leadership issue about which they care deeply.

Reflection Questions:

- Notice where you are and where others are in the pool. Why are you standing where you're standing? If you're in the shallow end (or not even in the water) what is stopping you from going deeper? If you're in the deep end, what led you to go so deep? How do you feel where you are in the pool?
- Is the leadership issue you care deeply about something that can be resolved by you? Something that can be resolved relatively quickly? How does that affect where you are in the water? What does "prolonged ambiguity" do to where you're willing to be in the water?
- What do you notice about your own willingness to go "deeper"? What do you notice about the group's willingness?
- Is there an issue at play within your group that might need the attention of the group, that feels in some way adaptive? What might it feel like to go "deeper" and raise that issue?

FRAMING

Your goal should be to keep the temperature within what we call the productive zone of disequilibrium (PZD): enough heat generated by your intervention to gain attention, engagement, and forward motion, but not so much that the organization (or your part of it) explodes."

Ronald A. Heifetz (The Practice of Adaptive Leadership, p. 141)

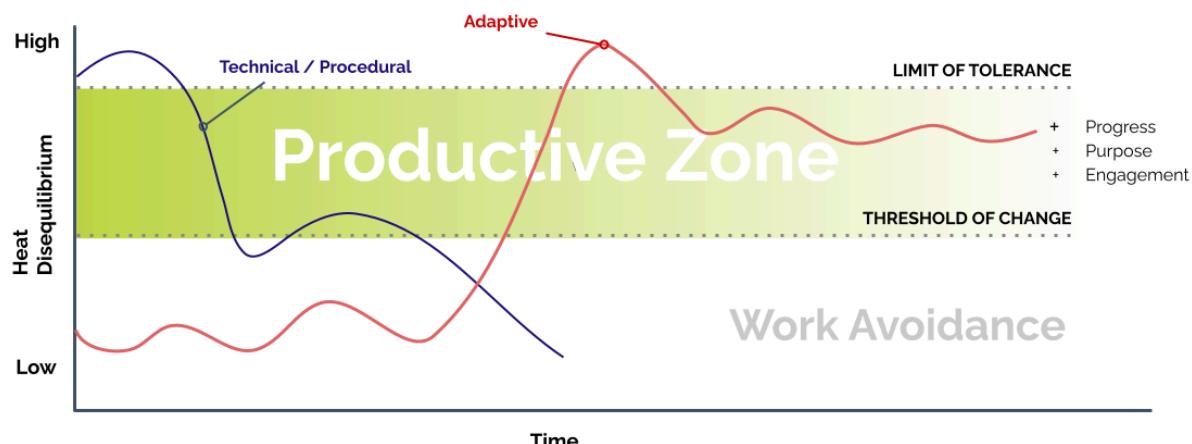
Leadership requires navigating adaptive challenges - change-processes that are murky, in which not only is the solution unclear, but the problem itself is hard to define. Leadership through this kind of change involves challenging people to face the full scope of the problem, to understand their responsibility in mitigating the problem and moving towards a solution.

Often, this involves playing the role of "Chief Disappointment Officer," saying "no" when people want to hear "yes." There is often a range of emotions that result when we are faced with sitting in an ongoing adaptive challenge. People become frustrated, impatient, angry, and scared. They want the problem to go away, to be fixed. They often take out their emotions on the people in positions of authority.

Partly, this is because we prefer to define problems as "technical." Technical problems might start out as distressing, but with expertise and time, we expect them to be solved. Adaptive challenges, the ones that require leadership, often have to be surfaced. They need to be swept out from under the rug. Leadership often involves naming the problem, challenging people to face that the scope of the challenge is greater than they might have been willing to admit. And then, once the problem has surfaced, not only is it not easily fixed, but it cannot be resolved solely through the work of the authority figure. It requires a group effort, and often requires that the group sustain some loss. Nobody wants that. And so, leadership through prolonged ambiguity might be thought of as grief management. The leadership challenge is to help people stay in the loss and the pain and the fear at a level that is tolerable, for the sake of your vision and purpose.

This chart helps identify the nature of leading through ambiguity:

THE PRODUCTIVE ZONE



In the process of change, ambiguity arises. Your tolerance for handling this ambiguity, for being the productive zone of "not knowing," which is the zone in which we can grow and adapt and change, will help you avoid the pitfalls of avoiding the leadership challenge, and of going back to where you came from, to what is familiar.

...believe that we are not defined by what happens to us but rather by how we respond to what happens to us. That itself is determined by how we interpret what happens to us. If we change the way we think - which we can, because of the plasticity of the brain - then we can change the way we feel and the way we act. Fate is never final.

Rabbi Sacks (Lessons in Leadership, p. 296)

Rabbi Sacks reminds us that leadership is a process of growth and change. It requires time and patience, and requires those stepping into leadership to keep the focus and the attention on the moral issues at hand. There is something prophetic in this conception of leadership; we are called to be a voice of conscience, a voice that reminds people of the gap between what they say they value and how they are living, so that the gap can be narrowed, so that we can live according to our values.

When the People of Israel come out of Egypt, they must learn to develop into an independent people, and independent individuals. They must shed their slave mentality of dependence. This process is painful and frightening. On the one hand, they have God's protection: the manna, the fire by night and the cloud by day, protecting them. On the other hand, they are alone in the desert. They crave authority, crave being cared for. But when Moses is delayed on the mountain, they revert to old patterns, and attempt to create an idol to fulfill their desire for authority.

HEVRUTA LEARNING & REFLECTION

Find a learning partner, a Hevruta.

Spend 15 minutes reading and discussing each text cluster.

Text Cluster I

Exodus 32:1-6

א) וַיַּרְא הָעָם כִּי־בָשָׂש מֹשֶׁה לְרֹתֶת מִזְרָחָה וַיַּקְהֵל הָעָם עַל־אַהֲרֹן וַיֹּאמְרוּ אֲלֵיכֶם | שְׁשָׁה־יָלֵן
 אֱלֹהִים אֲשֶׁר יָלַכוּ לִפְנֵינוּ כִּי־זֶה | מֹשֶׁה הָאִישׁ אֲשֶׁר הָעַלְנוּ מִאֶרֶץ מִצְרָיִם לֹא יְعַנְנוּ מִהִיא־הַיָּה לֹא:

ב) וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהִים אֲחָתָן פְּרֻקָּוּ נָזְמִי הַזָּבֵב אֲשֶׁר בָּאוּנִים נְשִׁיכָם בְּנֵיכָם וּבְנָתְיכָם וְהַבְּיאוּ אֲלֵיכֶם:

ג) וַיַּתְפְּרֻקָּוּ כָּל־הָלָם אֶת־נָזְמִי הַזָּבֵב אֲשֶׁר בָּאוּנִים וַיַּבְּיאוּ אֲלֵיכֶרֶן:

ד) וַיִּקְחַ מִינֶּם וַיַּצְרֵר אֹתוֹ בָּחָרֶת וַיַּעֲשֵׂהוּ עֲגָל מִסְכָּה וַיֹּאמְרוּ אֶלְهֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל אֲשֶׁר הָעַלְוֹד מִאֶרֶץ
 מִצְרָיִם:

ה) וַיַּרְא אַהֲרֹן וַיַּגְּבַּח מִזְבֵּחַ לִפְנֵיו וַיַּקְרֵא אֲהָרֹן וַיֹּאמֶר תָּנוּ לְהָיָה מְחֻרָּה:

ו) וַיַּשְׁפְּקִימּוּ מִמְּחֻרָּה וַיַּעַלְוּ עַלְתָּה וַיַּגְּשׁוּ שְׁלָמִים וַיַּשְׁבַּת הָעָם לְאָכֵל וְשָׁתּוּ וַיַּגְּמֹו לְצַחַק: (פ

1. *When the people saw that Moses was delayed in coming down from the mountain, the people gathered against Aharon and said to him, "Get up! Make us a god(s) who shall go before us, for this one - Moshe the man, who brought us up from the land of Egypt—we do not know what has become of him."* **2.** Aharon said to them, "Take off the gold rings that are on the ears of your wives, your sons, and your daughters, and bring them to me." **3.** And all the people took off the gold rings that were in their ears and brought them to Aharon. **4.** He took them from their hands, shaped them with a carving tool and made it into a molten calf. And they exclaimed, "This is your god / These are your gods, Israel, who brought you up from the land of Egypt!" **5.** When Aharon saw, he built an altar before it; and Aharon called out: "A festival to the Eternal tomorrow!" **6.** They arose early the next day, and offered up burnt offerings and brought offerings of well-being; they sat down to eat and drink, and then rose to dance.

Rabbi Sacks (Lessons in Leadership, p. 108)

Aaron blames the people. It was they who made the illegitimate request. He denies responsibility for making the calf. It just happened. "I threw it into the fire, and out came this calf!" This is the same kind of denial of responsibility we recall from the story of Adam and Eve. The man says, "It was the woman." The woman says, "It was the serpent." It happened. It wasn't me. I was the victim, not the perpetrator. In anyone, such evasion is a moral failure; in a leader, all the more so.

Reflection Questions:

- Read Exodus 32:1 closely. What are the elements that led up to the People's demand? What elements of "ambiguity" are they responding to?
- How do you understand Aharon's response? What does it teach us about our instinctive response in the face of people's intolerance of ambiguity?
- As leadership practitioners, we have noticed that when the heat rises, and people feel vulnerable and afraid, there is a strong desire for "kumbaya" moments. Exodus 32:6 feels this way - the People's desire is for everything to be good. What else might Aaron have done to help the People stay in the ambiguity, in the waiting?

Text Cluster II

Rashi on Ex. 32:1 *On the sixteenth of Tammuz Satan came and threw the world into confusion, giving it the appearance of darkness, gloom and disorder that people should say: "Surely Moses is dead, and that is why confusion has come into the world!" He said to them, "Yes, Moses is dead, for six hours (noon) has already come (בא שע - בשש) and he has not returned etc."*

Rashi on Exodus 32:2 *Aaron said to himself: women and children have a love for their ornaments; perhaps the matter will be delayed because they will hesitate to give their ornaments, and in the meantime Moses may arrive.*

Rabbi Sacks (Lessons in Leadership, p.108-109)

There is more than one kind of leadership, and priesthood involves following rules, not taking stands and swaying crowds. The fact that Aaron was not a leader from the same mold as Moses does not mean that he was a failure. It means that he was made for a different kind of role. There are times when you need someone with the courage to stand against the crowd, others when you need a peacemaker. Moses and Aaron were different types. Aaron failed when he was called on to be a Moses, but he became a great leader in his own right in a different capacity. Aaron and Moses complemented one another: no one person can do everything.

Reflection Questions:

- What if you were to conceive of "Satan" as the voice telling you to avoid the heat. The voice that pushes you to imagine the worst case scenario. How might you talk back to Satan?
- Why is ambiguity important here? What is the change the people are going through?
- How does Rashi's interpretation enhance your understanding of the nature of leading in ambiguity? What does ambiguity feel like, according to Rashi? And what is Aharon's instinctive response in the face of the People not knowing how to hold those feelings?
- Have you ever undergone or led a complex, ongoing, change? What did it feel like for you? What did it feel like for those around you? What helped you? How did you help others stay in the heat?

INTEGRATION & PRACTICE

Leadership Exercise

To make progress on a leadership challenge, we often need to moderate the metaphoric temperature around an issue. Remember, growth and change happens in the productive zone.

Here are some tools and tactics to either raise or lower the temperature, depending on the need of the group and the issues surrounding the leadership challenge. Pick one strategy and share how you might use it to make progress on your leadership challenge:

Ronald A. Heifetz (The Practice of Adaptive Leadership: Tools and Tactics for Changing Your Organization and the World, p. 160)

To Raise the Temperature...	To Lower the Temperature...
<p>-Draw attention to the tough questions</p> <p>-Offer multiple interpretations, pushing towards systemic, adaptive, and more vulnerable, emotional interpretations</p> <p>-Give people more responsibility than they're comfortable with</p> <p>-Bring conflicts to the surface</p> <p>-Tolerate/make provocative comments</p> <p>-Name and use some of the dynamics in the room to illustrate the issues facing the group</p>	<p>-Address the aspects of the conflict that have the most obvious and technical solutions</p> <p>-Provide structure by breaking the problem into parts and creating time frames, decision rules, and role assignments</p> <p>-Temporarily reclaim responsibility for the tough issues</p> <p>-Employ work avoidance mechanisms, such as taking a break, telling a joke or story, or doing an exercise</p> <p>-Slow down the process of challenging norms and expectations</p>

Closing Circle

Leadership challenges us to develop an ability to go towards the pain. The idols protect us from the pain from the truth that God is in and out. A faith-filled life is painful. Idols numb that. But then you lose the beauty of transcendence.

- What does "going towards the pain" feels like?
- What are your "go to idols" to numb the pain?
- What helps you when you are "in the heat"
 - what helps you stay productive and open?

TAKE-AWAY EXERCISE

Next time you are aware of "heat rising," of people getting emotional, or conflict surfacing, notice:

- Your own natural inclination of response - like Aharon, the peace-maker, do you naturally lean towards fixing things and making everyone feel good? Or - is your inclination to stay silent and not get involved?
- What might you experiment with to challenge yourself and others around you to "stay in the heat" for the sake of your purpose? What might that look like? Try something that raises the temperature and makes your heart beat a bit faster, and then reflect on it afterwards with a friend or in writing.

UNIT LESSON SUMMARY:

Change isn't immediate.
It requires work, time, patience, and, often, loss.