

Sigi Ziering Ethics

This year, our Sigi Ziering column will focus on the ethics of leadership. Each month an esteemed guest columnist will wrestle with questions concerning communal leadership and its abuses. The column is cosponsored by Shelley and Bruce Whizin and Marilyn Ziering in honor of Marilyn's husband Sigi Ziering, of blessed memory. The series of columns, with responses, is available on www.shma.com.

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LIKE MANY OTHERS in Jewish leadership positions, I must often consider competing agendas and balance diverse factors — the practical, the visionary, the immediate, and the ethical. While these factors converge at times, often they are at cross-purposes, and I must adjudicate between a multitude of public needs. There is no pat formula for balancing such competing factors; each situation requires a discerning assessment. Over the course of many years, I've attempted to model my own leadership decisions on two great German-Jewish figures — Rabbi Leo Baeck and Rabbi Nehemiah Anton Nobel.

Rabbi Nehemiah Nobel, the Orthodox community rabbi of Frankfurt from 1910 until his death in 1922, was the teacher of Franz Rosenzweig, and it was he who instructed Rosenzweig in Talmud and conferred the rabbinic title of *Haver* upon him when Rosenzweig was confined to his home in Frankfurt as he suffered the ravages of ALS. Nobel maintained cordial relations with every element of his community, and was an outstanding scholar and teacher. When asked about the nature of his calling as a rabbi, he wrote, "The rabbi himself must have a firm and unflinching standpoint. However, I consider it my duty to examine every religious trend within Judaism, to meet it with objective arguments only, and to treat the representatives of opposition movements and viewpoints with the kind of respect we owe to ardent opponents. I want to lay greater stress in my public activities on that which unites different trends than on those causes which separate them."

Rabbi Nobel provides a model of integrity for me. Jewish leadership must be based upon the groundwork of Torah and general knowledge as well as a commitment to basic prin-

ciples, and a leader should not be hesitant to express views established upon these foundations. At the same time, the leader must always be flexible and empathic, and treat even those with whom he or she disagrees with honor and respect. Such courtesy and compassion provide an ethical ground for leadership.

Rabbi Baeck, my other model, was the last duly elected leader of the German-Jewish community during the horrific years of the Shoah. Although he was offered positions at American institutions that would have allowed him to leave Germany, Baeck refused to abandon his people during their time of distress, and he was ultimately incarcerated in Thereisenstadt. This tale of devotion to *am Yisrael* and the model Baeck established for authentic Jewish leadership — his sense of absolute connection with his people — inspires me each and every time I consider it.

The traditional blessing prescribed by Jewish tradition for the *kohanim*, when they recite the priestly benediction upon the Jewish people, requires that the priests bless the people Israel in love. Rabbi Baeck understood this instinctively, and its ethos burned in his soul. He knew that the value of love for our traditions and teachings, and for the people Israel — *areivut* in rabbinic parlance — were a prerequisite for rabbinic office.

I believe that the path to Jewish religious leadership is not an isolated individual quest. Rather, the soul of the rabbi must be bound fully and completely to the tradition that the rabbi will one day teach and champion; it must also be bound to the people the rabbi will one day serve and lead. The models of leadership that Rabbi Nobel and Rabbi Baeck provided in their lives and writings shine as commanding rays into my life. 