

Leaders of Faith: Past, Present, and Future

-- Rachel Mulbry

Religion is a true ideological phenomenon, for through a common faith, individuals can bond, forming communities that have the power to affect change locally as well as globally. In our world today, the three Abrahamic faiths, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam dissolve geographical barriers, boasting of followers in every corner of the globe. Moses, Jesus, and Muhammad enacted radical changes in their respective communities, overcoming injustice and corruption in the face of great opposition. Their courage and resilience provide models for behavior even today, so many centuries later. Time, however, has not always been kind to the relations between their followers. The Crusades and Holocaust are tragic examples of what happens when the teachings of these three prophets are forgotten, or worse, ignored. Inter-religion conflicts have destroyed families, communities, and whole nations in places such as Israel, Palestine, Turkey, Armenia, Germany, and many others worldwide. The lessons taught by Moses, Jesus, and Muhammad are most valuable in times such as these, when hate and violence prevail over rational dialogue and faith.

The first of the three prophets, Moses is the most prominent historical leader of those of Jewish faith. He is recognized for guiding the newly liberated Hebrews out of Egypt, traveling with them for forty years in search of the Promised Land. During the decades of travel, Moses played a pivotal role in transforming the mindset of his followers into one of sophisticated morality. Moses was born shortly before the Pharaoh's infamous decree for all newborn Hebrew males to be killed. As an infant, Moses was placed in a basket in the river, where he was discovered by none other than the Pharaoh's own daughter, who pitying him, adopted him as her

own son [2]. The Pharaoh's daughter displayed admirable courage and compassion for the unknown infant. Moses' rescue and unusual childhood prepared him in many ways for the hardships that would face him later in life as a leader and prophet.

Throughout his life, Moses consistently sought to end injustice, regardless of the magnanimity of the conflict or identity of those involved. Three instances highlight his commitment morality and fairness. First, he restrained a cruel slave owner who was brutally beating a Hebrew slave. The following day, he interrupted a fight between two Hebrew men. Lastly, he defended the seven daughters of Reuel who were being harassed by local shepherds. In adulthood, Moses fled Egypt and lived for many years as a humble shepherd [2]. His experiences guarding and caring for sheep readied him for his role as a compassionate and just leader of the Hebrews. Moses soon returned to Egypt where he tried in vain to persuade the Pharaoh to release the Hebrews. The Pharaoh refused. Then followed the ten infamous plagues. After the tenth plague, the Hebrews, led by Moses, left Egypt for the Promised Land [2]. During their travels, hardship faces them at every turn, but Moses remained a resolutely leader. While on Mount Sinai, God revealed the Ten Commandments to Moses. Using these laws, Moses was able to enact dramatic changes in his community, prohibiting murder, infidelity, jealousy, and dishonesty [1]. He set high moral and ethical standards from which no one is exempt. Moses' leadership inspired his peers to examine their morals as well as spiritual devotion, becoming a more virtuous people in the process.

Many centuries after Moses' death, another prophet was born in a humble manger in a small stable in the town of Bethlehem. Jesus, the instrumental leader of the Christian faith, only traveled and taught for three years, but in that short time he was able to transform the lives of thousands. He was not ashamed to associate with society's outcast. Jesus befriended tax

collectors and prostitutes without hesitation, much to the amazement of his followers. He helped individuals, not by punishing them, but by loving and respecting them [7]. Through his teachings and actions, Jesus created an ideological and spiritual earthquake; traditional ideas were shaken up and in their place settled new, innovative concepts. He preached non-violence and compassion, of “loving thy enemy”[1]. Today our “enemy” might not be so clearly defined, but the core of the philosophy still applies. It might pertain to a bully or rude neighbor. Regardless of who they are or what they do, their humanity warrants them basic respect.

Jesus’ radical ideas weren’t always welcomed by traditionalists who saw him as a disruptive rabble-rouser, but he never abandoned his mission. He ignored powerful ideological opponents, focusing instead on the commoners, walking among them, eating, drinking, and talking with them. His effectiveness was born out of his humility, for he was blind to social status, wealth, education, or profession. Superficial traits such as these paled in comparison to virtues such as faithfulness, kindness and love. He maintained that sinners needed his attention most, because, as he once said, “it is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick” [1].

Jesus was passionate about his beliefs and bravely challenged the long-established power structure. He objected to the corrupt Pharisees who loved power in place of God. He even went so far as to drive the Pharisees out of a temple that they were using as a marketplace. Day in and day out, Jesus never failed to put others before himself, healing the injured, preaching to the uninformed, and subtly teaching a new way of life. When he died, he left behind an immense wealth of new ideas that have endured and continue to shape lives today, two millennia later.

The last of the three Abrahamic leaders, Muhammad, arrived on the religious scene five hundred years later. Unlike his predecessors, Muhammad didn’t attain prophet status until four decades after his birth, when God spoke to him, revealing the monotheistic alternative to

traditional idolatry. His success in converting others to Islam was most likely influenced by his established reputation in the community as a moral and respectable citizen. His radical ideas about God often led to the harassment, physical abuse and murder of many Islamic converts. In the face of this violence, however, Muhammad counseled his followers not to fight back [4].

As Muhammad gained a following, he subtly made revolutionary changes in the Muslim community. He began by introducing the concept that status was determined by loyalty to God, not by wealth or ancestry. He openly condemned racism and sexism, which had been institutionalized for centuries. Muhammad also proclaimed that women could not be forced into marriage against their will. In addition, he asserted that men and women were equal in the sight of God and therefore should be equal in the community. Under Muhammad's leadership, women became active in all areas of public life, from business to education. Muhammad reiterated the immorality of racism, saying in an early speech, "there is no superiority of a white over a black or a black over a white." His firm stance is evidenced by his close friendship with Bilal, a black former slave to whom Muhammad gave the honor of reciting the call to prayer [4].

Muhammad became such a political and spiritual threat to the idolaters in Mecca that he was forced to flee with his followers to Medina. It was in Medina that Muhammad eagerly participated in religious dialogue with leaders of Christian and Jewish faiths [4]. Although none of the parties involved were converted by the others, Muhammad's willingness to open his beliefs up to questioning reveals a great open-mindedness. The belief that faith was a personal decision and shouldn't be coerced upon others was reiterated in the Qur'an, "To you, your religion and to me, my religion" (109:6) [6]. As Moses and Jesus had done before him, Muhammad used kindness and compassion to gain trust, which then facilitated change in his society.

Though centuries have passed, and technology has transformed our way of life, these three crucial leaders still speak to us today. Their lessons on kindness and compassion are everlasting, and can offer us guidance in modern situations. As conflict occurs across the world, it is time to look back in order to move forward. We must take to heart the lessons taught by Moses, Jesus, and Muhammad, practicing love instead of hate, peace in place of violence, and patience in the face of aggravation.

The Gaza Strip, an area slightly larger than twice the size of DC, is overflowing with tension, both religious and political [5]. The recent economic blockade implemented by Israel has led to over 35 deaths from lack of medical supplies [3]. The Israeli government is afraid that bomb-making materials will travel into Gaza and out into Israel as ready-to-use bombs. While this is a valid fear, Israel's actions impact innocent citizens trying desperately to live in peace.

As of January 19, Israel stopped all humanitarian support flowing into Gaza [3]. This political move leaves the 1.48 million citizens stranded without power or basic supplies[5]. In this state of constant anxiety, it is imperative that Israeli government officials meet with representatives of Hamas. And the violence isn't contained to Israel and Gaza; despairing Palestinians are forcing their way into neighboring Egypt, causing yet another layer of conflict. While the political battle rages on, human life is at stake.

In this political stalemate, influential leaders on all sides can take an important lesson from the three Abrahamic leaders of old. Rationality and perspective are essential in order to consciously separate the members of Hamas from the Palestinians affected by the blockade. It may be a bit cliché, but it is important to ask ourselves what Moses, Jesus, and Muhammad would suggest as a solution. Would they punish many for the decisions of a few? It's unlikely.

They would use instead dialogue and compromise in place of the current violence and ultimatums. With this in mind, Israeli leaders must open discussion with their Hamas counterparts, as well as representatives from the Egyptian government. Only when all motives and expectations are laid on the figurative table will a suitable solution be reached. It is a known fact that violence breeds violence and hate breeds hate. The only way to end this vicious cycle is to introduce love and understanding.

This open dialogue won't be simple or quick, but the hardest things to achieve are often the most beneficial. The hesitation to compromise must end now. There is never a good excuse for preventable death. Both Hamas and the Israeli government have no one to hold accountable for the current conflict except themselves. More than thirty-five people will never laugh or smile again, because of continued political obstinacy. If Moses, Jesus, or Muhammad were alive today they would be disgusted. They spent their lives teaching the importance of words in the place of violence. Yet today people of faith in Israel and Palestine ignore their fundamental teachings and pursue power instead.

Jesus preached of universal love, a love so strong it brushed aside political, economic, and social conditions. Muhammad spoke of equality for all people regardless of race, education, or gender. Moses taught of steadfast love for God and others. In each faith, believers are asked simply to treat others as they would have others treat them. This, it seems, is the most quintessential lesson taught by Moses, Jesus, and Muhammad. With mutual respect in mind, compassion and love are unavoidable. This holds true no matter the location or circumstance. Our humanity binds us together; from the moment of birth until death we are called to nurture a world of peace. Each individual must do their part to move our global community closer to world peace, inch by inch, day by day. We must look beyond the seductive struggle for power,

struggling instead for peace and harmony. In the immortal words of Jimi Hendrix, “When the power of love overcomes the love of power the world will know peace” [8].

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