

Charisma and Narcissism in the Jewish Community

Naomi Mark

In the Greek myth, Echo loves Narcissus, but she has lost the ability to form her own words. Though she waits for his acknowledgement, he is unable to notice her, and both characters die tragically and alone. Had Narcissus been able to 'hear' Echo, a different ending might have unfolded. What is that mysterious and complex force at play in Narcissus?

Among psychologists who have studied charisma, psychoanalyst and scholar Heinz Kohut has noticed the strong correlation between charisma and narcissism. Describing the narcissistic personality, he noted the high energy levels, the apparent confidence and lack of self-doubt, and the strong sense of mission. (This is not to say that all narcissists are charismatic or that all charismatics are narcissistic.) As in most mental health frameworks, though, a continuum of personality traits exists, and while categorical constructs serve to create order and understanding, there is a very wide range between what is considered "healthy narcissism" and what is considered "excessive" or "pathological." As Freud noted, we are all somewhat narcissistic, and reasonable doses of narcissism can be useful and necessary in order for us to assert our needs, be productive, and achieve great things. In fact, those with this personality type (within the range of normality) are often especially suited to leadership roles, given their risk-taking tendencies, their confidence, and their ability to inspire. Narcissism becomes pathological when the grandiosity, fantasies of success, lack of empathy, excessive need for attention and approval, and inability to tolerate threats to self-esteem interfere with the individual's functioning in work and love.

Exploring the psychological aspects of charisma is complex and today urgent as well. What psychological factors contribute to the making of a charismatic leader? What is the relationship between leadership and personality type? How do we weigh the benefits of charisma as a positive phenomenon that inspires and transforms people with the propensity for abusing its power?

One of the outstanding characteristics of a charismatic is charm. People with charisma

are often exceptionally skilled socially; aware of their own need to be acknowledged, they make others feel good through compliments and admiration. To compensate for their own inability to truly empathize, narcissists often attempt to activate other talents such as social finesse, which enables them to gain more control over their world. For the followers, being a part of an important social movement offers an opportunity for transcendence and meaning. It is not hard to imagine how this dynamic feeds off itself. It is also apparent how a narcissistic need to feel special and receive public acclaim may attract certain personality types to communal leadership positions, especially the rabbinate where congregations and students can provide an ongoing supply of admiring followers. While most people in

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leadership positions use narcissism in healthy ways, the celebrity status that can accompany some leadership positions is a strong magnet for the unhealthy narcissist who craves attention and recognition.

How might we begin to distinguish between "anti-social" and "pro-social" leaders, "personalized" and "socialized" charismatic leadership? Or, as psychoanalysts may prefer, how do we distinguish between "productive" and "unproductive" narcissism? Socialized leaders and productive narcissists are capable of some degree of self-reflection, perspective, and humor in face of negative feedback or criticism. The litmus test, in a nutshell, seems to be the extent to which the leader is capable of accepting limitations, is able to empower others, invite and be responsive to feedback and advice, thereby keeping the narcissism in check. Is the charismatic leader able to recede when necessary, adhere to societal rules and a higher moral code? While many people have narcissistic traits and all of us can behave nar-

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cissistally at times, what distinguishes someone with a character disorder is the pervasive pattern, the inability to experience guilt or remorse, and the tendency to externalize responsibility for the inappropriate behavior. These distinctions usually become clear over time and in some situations can be kept in check when structures are in place to limit the leader's power preventatively.

Another way of understanding the relationship between charisma and narcissism is explained in Marie Fortune's *Clergy Misconduct: Sexual Abuse in the Ministerial Relationship Workshop Manual*. She suggests that we consider viewing clergy sexual abusers on a continuum between two extreme types: "The Wanderer" who wanders across boundaries due to self-control difficulties, and the "Predator" who seeks out victims deliberately and is lacking in conscience. Along the continuum are those with "acquired situational narcissism" who, as a

result of their charisma, become carried away by the newfound power and success. In these cases, charismatic leaders can overestimate their capabilities; they develop an overpowering sense of self-importance and a distorted sense of their own limits. At one end of the continuum is someone who cannot be helped, and this must be acknowledged. But at the other end are people who can rather easily be helped; a whole spectrum lays in between.

For many, charisma offers a release from being tethered to the attachments of conventionality. As such, the attraction to leaders with "prophetic charisma" may be part of the human condition as we naturally seek to transcend the mundane aspects of our daily lives. Echo had reason to love Narcissus. His charisma, his alluring offer of escape from the ordinary was real and, indeed, alluring. While insightful therapy tries to heal, mythology can only warn.



Disciples, Rebbes & Jewish Renewal

Chava Weissler

American society views charismatic leaders with suspicion: we picture the fictional corrupt preacher Elmer Gantry or the all-too-historical populist demagogue, Huey Long. Such leaders go against the democratic grain, the deeply held principle that all humans are created equal. We fear their power to mislead their followers, to play on their needs or their ideals for their own psychological, sexual, material, or political ends.

American Judaism has, for the most part, adopted the American democratic model, giving unprecedented power to the laity in Jewish communal institutions. Certain groups within the American Jewish community do, however, hark back to earlier, more hierarchical models of leadership. For example, most Orthodox Jews defer to recognized halakhic authorities, although for the most part these leaders have been respected more for their scholarly achievements than their personal charisma. Only in Hasidism has the charismatic figure of the rebbe maintained its power.

Until recently. With the turn toward spirituality in American Judaism has come recognition of the value and power of charismatic leadership. A spiritual journey most often be-

gins with the search for a teacher, a guide and mentor along the path. For many, finding a spiritual master is essential to the quest for deepened understanding and enhanced spiritual practice, whether it is daily meditation or daily *davvenen*. Nonetheless, putting oneself in the hands of a spiritual teacher is always a risk — as is a commitment to any intimate relationship. The master-disciple relationship, like the therapist-client relationship, has particular potential for abuse in that it almost always begins with the disciple giving up personal power to the spiritual master. Will the teacher have the maturity, discipline, and healthy boundaries to put the student's needs first?

The hasidic model of the rebbe-disciple relationship plays an important role in ALEPH — Alliance for Jewish Renewal, founded by Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi in 1968 as B'nai Or. Coming out of Lubavitch Hasidism, Reb Zalman (as he is known to his followers) has shaped ALEPH as a "neo-hasidic" movement and done much to rethink the role of rebbe. Arthur Waskow tells the story of a gathering at which Reb Zalman sat at the head of the table and "said Torah." After about fifteen minutes, he said, "Okay, now everyone move

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