

On Vision: Chanukah and Business Leadership

By Dr. Thomas David Zweifel and Rabbi Aaron L. Raskin

As Jewish business leaders the world over prepare for Chanukah, it's a good time to ask yourself: What does the Festival of Lights have to do with business?

The answer is: everything. We live at a time of economic meltdown, once-stalwart banks going out of business, government bailouts, and uncertain jobs. Our leaders are struggling to come up with a recipe, and quite possibly might not have the right stuff to guide us out of the mess. It's a dark time indeed.

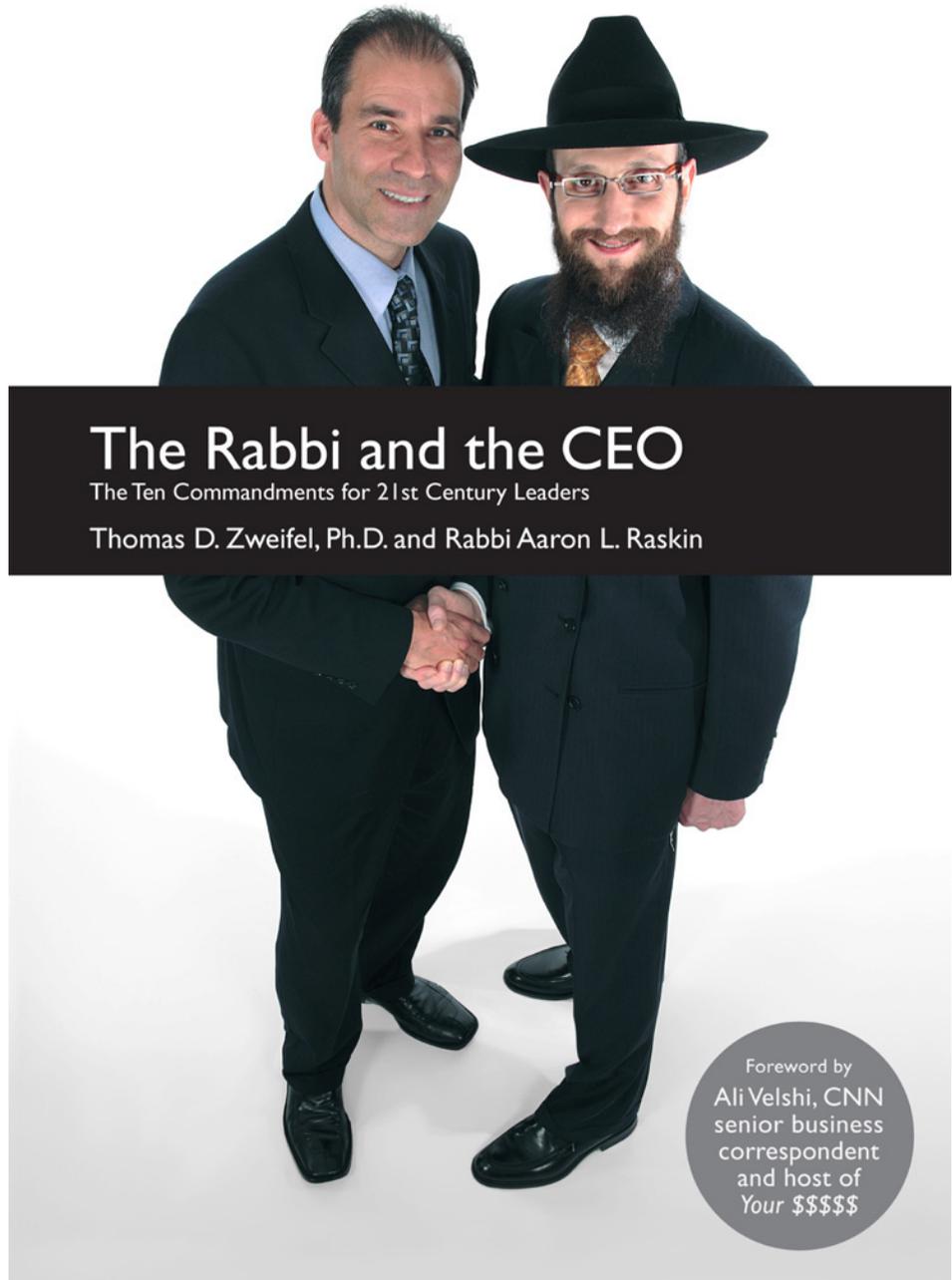
Of times like these the economist and philosopher Kenneth Boulding said, "The greatest need for leadership is in the dark." We have it in our hands to create either a dark or a dim future, or a bright or even brilliant one.

After all, what was the first thing God called for when He created the universe? "Let there be light." And why light *before* anybody was around to make use of it? The Lubavitcher Rebbe made clear that whatever the enterprise, your end goal must be vivid before you start. Everything you do in life has to be imbued with purpose, and each action must be consistent with your ultimate objective.¹⁾

The good news is that Judaism is inextricably linked to the vision of a brilliant future; the drive to reach the Promised Land — or the coming of Moshiach — is its very essence. So it is hardly surprising that Torah, Tanach and Talmud are filled with a plethora of visionaries. The second volume of the Tanach is the Book of Prophets, from Joshua to Samuel and Isaiah, who could conjure up stirring visions of peace ("They shall beat their swords

into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks; nation will not lift sword against nation, and they will no longer study warfare".²⁾

Training and development of prophets was even insti-



The Rabbi and the CEO

The Ten Commandments for 21st Century Leaders

Thomas D. Zweifel, Ph.D. and Rabbi Aaron L. Raskin

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tutionalized; already at the time of the First Temple, there were many schools of prophecy. The investment paid off: While only forty-eight male and seven female prophets are mentioned by name, there were in fact over 1.2 million prophets in Jewish history.³⁾

In fact some thought there were too many. When Joshua found out that people were prophesying in the camp, he went straight to his leader. “My master Moses,” he implored, “imprison them!” But Moses rebuffed him: “Are you jealous for my sake?” He had no desire to keep others down; on the contrary, he wanted all people to be visionaries and rise to his level, if not higher. His fervent wish was, “Would it be that all the people of God were prophets!”⁴⁾

Others have less patience for visionaries. Take former German chancellor Helmut Schmidt, who quipped that if people want a vision, they should go see an eye doctor. There is nothing wrong with realists like Schmidt; they are concerned with controlling uncertainty and making reliable predictions. There is a place for past-based projections; reducing uncertainty is a key task of management. And it is only human to want to reduce the often unbearable tension between the now and the future you want.

On the other hand, Proverbs warns unequivocally that “Where there is no vision, people perish.”⁵⁾ And at least in the West, our concerns are often far more short-term: Will the stock price go up or down this quarter? How do we get through this week’s email backlog? How do we survive the endless meetings, the office politics, the gossip at the water cooler? Most managers spend an inordinate percentage of their time running the present, not creating the future. They focus on managing the status quo — on what is, not on what could be.

Especially when managers face a crisis, they tend to get bogged down in their own past and revert to what worked last time. But whenever you graft the past onto a new situation, you may pre-program failure. The same goes for business: Take the U.S. automobile industry: For 77 years in a row, in good times and in bad, General Motors sold more cars than any other company. But in the first quarter of 2008, the unthinkable happened. Another company beat GM’s sales by 160,000 more cars: Toyota.

The Japanese multinational even embarked on a joint venture with GM designed, in part, to help the venerable firm revamp its production system. But despite the fact that over 3,000 articles have been written to analyze Toyota’s best practices, and although its principles have been widely copied by competitors, it continuously stays ahead of the pack. How does it do that?⁶⁾ And why can’t GM, Ford and other U.S. automotive companies seem to get out of the quagmire

and turn their fortunes around?

One reason lies in the Hebrew word for “sin” or “wrongdoing,” *averah*, which comes from the same root as the word for “past,” *avar*. According to the Talmud, all you have done in your past, even your proudest accomplishments, is insufficient for the future: It will not lead to success if you have lulled yourself into complacency.

True visionaries, by contrast, live in the tension between reality and vision — every day. Instead of developing the future from the circumstances, which by definition stem from the past, these leaders create the future *from the future*. When Colin Marshall became chief executive of British Airways and promised it would become “the world’s favorite airline,” realists derided his bold declaration as a frivolous pipedream: at the time, BA was so second-rate that people quipped it was short for “Bloody Awful.” Undeterred, Marshall acted consistent with his vision. His motto was “Putting people first” (customers *and* colleagues). He improved quality by paying attention to BA engineers, revamping key subcontracting and union agreements, and streamlining maintenance. And he made money by freeing engineers to service other airlines. Perhaps being the world’s favorite airline is never quite fully achieved, but British Airways came awfully close: in 1992 it was rated best transatlantic airline by *Business Traveler*.

Fifteen years later, Marshall (who had meanwhile become Lord Colin Marshall, Baron of Knightsbridge) still didn’t rest on his laurels: now he was pushing his latest vision, the ambitious Terminal 5 project at London Heathrow.

The rooster embodies Marshall’s capacity to stand in the future. It is the only animal that wakes up while it’s still night. In that sense, the rooster is a symbol for leadership: it can see the light while others still see only darkness. It is not a victim of circumstances. (The Hebrew word for “rooster” is *gever*, the same word as for “man.”⁷⁾)

Rabbi Saadia Gaon, a great Torah scholar and community leader in Babylonia more than a thousand years ago, wrote that we should “repent” every day for yesterday, no matter how good it was, for yesterday compared to today and tomorrow was limited⁸⁾. For better or worse, you can never be satisfied with what you did yesterday. The daily lighting of the candles during the Chanukah holiday symbolizes this principle. Each day Jews kindle not the same candle, but one more than the day before: one on day one, two on day two, and so forth, through the eighth day. Every day you have to bring more light to the world than before.

Tool: Restoring Vision in Five Steps

What do you do if a colleague of yours (or, God forbid, you yourself) has lost touch with the future in the midst of the day-to-day? Here is a simple 5-step method for getting vision back when it has gone out the window.

Step 1. Let the person speak and listen with compassion. Open the lines of communication and simply hear the person so they can communicate fully where they are. Don't try to persuade them or change their mind.

Step 2. Ask the person when they gave up. Find out exactly: when did the vision become "impossible," and due to what exact obstacle? It could be that they missed an interim milestone, or an important gatekeeper dismissed their project, or some problem outside of work got in the way.

Step 3. Separate what *actually* happened from their *interpretation* of what happened. What did they decide? What conclusion did they draw? Be sure that the person disentangles the facts from their perception of the facts. In 1987, when Dr. Zweifel coached teams in twenty-seven countries to end the year in the black, he called the managing director in Finland and asked how he was doing. There was a long silence on the phone (not untypical for the Finns); Dr. Zweifel thought the line had gone dead. He asked, "Are you there?" Finally the answer came in a thick and dark voice, "I think I shall kill myself." In a flash, Dr. Zweifel realized that his colleague took his goal so seriously that he would rather die than live with the shame of missing it. He had to help him see that the facts (he was behind in meeting his financial goals) were not connected to his interpretation (he did not deserve to live) at all.

Step 4. Revisit the person's original vision; why had they committed to their endeavor in the first place? What would be missing in their life, in their organization, or in the world if they stopped? They may have to step back from the current project or goal, wipe the slate clean, and create their vision again from scratch.

Step 5. Invite the person to recommit to their vision. You may have to act as a "wall" for people's commitments so they "kill the alternative," in the words of Margaret Thatcher, of missing their goal. In many ways, the job of a leader is to have team members recall their commitment to the future when they forget.

This article is based on the newly released book *The Rabbi and the CEO: The Ten Commandments for 21st Century Leaders* (SelectBooks 2008) by Dr. Thomas D. Zweifel and Rabbi Aaron L. Raskin, the Chabad shliach for Brooklyn Heights. The book is available at www.barnesandnoble.com or www.amazon.com, or for discount bulk purchase at www.swissconsultinggroup.com.

- 1 Rabbi Menachem M. Schneerson, *Likutei Sichot*, vol. 10, Bereishit.
- 2 Isaiah 3:4.
- 3 Talmud, Megillah, 14a. According to the Midrash Rabba, Song of Songs 4:11, for every prophet there was one prophetess.)
- 4 Numbers 11:29.
- 5 Proverbs 29:18.
- 6 James Surowiecki, "The Open Secret of Success," *The New Yorker*, May 12, 2008.
- 7 We are indebted for this insight to Tom Steinberg.
- 8 Yitzchak Ginsburgh, *Awakening the Spark Within: Five Dynamics of Leadership That Can Change the World*. (Jerusalem, Linda Pinsky Publications, 2001.) 138.



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