

Spiritual Abuse: Leadership Authority and Accountability Patterns

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A leader in any organization is often called upon to make quick and important decisions. In a Messianic fellowship/community, we have the added responsibility to discern between matters of our own flesh and the leading of the Ruach in making those decisions.

In our life in mainstream churches, the leadership was in place when we arrived, and was validated by some kind of ordination process and affirmation by the group. There was an accountability structure set in place both locally and in larger regional, state, national or international levels for many. This is not to say that accountability was or is always well-maintained. In many of our Messianic fellowship groups, the leadership was established in a more informal way and may have less of an obvious accountability structure.

As we look for a body of believers with whom to worship, study and have fellowship how can we tell if the leadership is maintaining a YHWH-pleasing standard in their actions? It is important to get to know the leadership both in and outside of the worship setting. Know their beliefs and their actions, in order to watch for who is consistent and who is not. We believe that spiritual abuse can and will occur wherever there is inadequate understanding of relationships, authority and a lack of accountability.

If you haven't done so already, take a look at the [Understanding Self-Worth handout](#). I developed this several years ago when sitting in session with an individual who needed encouragement in all areas that she "mattered" and was worth being respected. All too often our experiences, called the "sark" in Life Model terms, have convinced us that we do not deserve to be well-treated and even at worst, to expect poor treatment. If one thinks too highly of oneself, the result might be behavior and attitudes as reflected on the right side of the continuum: loving others less than yourself. If one has an unduly poor sense of self-worth, they may fall on the side of loving others more than self. Our Master's instructions were to love YHWH with all of our heart, mind, soul and strength and to love our neighbor AS ourselves: the list down the middle of this chart. This is our standard and sound base for our self-worth.

The [second handout](#) presented today deals with relationship dynamics and how we can be responsible *for* and *to* others, or *irresponsible*. It was originally developed through Hazeldon, an alcohol and drug abuse treatment resources company as a two-part comparison. The original form showed the two aspects of relationship, *for* and *to*. I added the third column, *irresponsible*, for use with my clients. Again, the balanced mature response is represented by the middle column. This style of relating to others confirms that both the individual and the "other" have worth and dignity, as well as confirming that they are seen as capable to deal with whatever concerns arise.

For those who have erred on the side of being responsible *for* other adults, as a parent is responsible for their young children, the concept of moving to the middle column often looks and feels like they are abandoning the other. Thus, the addition of this third column which shows what real abandonment would look like.

So what does all of this have to do with leadership and spiritual abuse?

When an individual comes into a leadership position it is important for them to recognize ways in which their authority can be used for good and for harm. The famous observation that “power corrupts,” followed with “absolute power corrupts absolutely,” is unfortunately true here as well. A leader needs to be able to function in the middle of both of these charts as a general rule, although of course, everyone may get tired at times and fall short. The key is to watch for the fruit, or pattern, of their actions, just as we are advised to do with all believers; not to watch for one slip and judge them on that basis alone. The same person who was previously kind and considerate of others, when given a position of authority may find it hard to remember that other people’s time and needs are just as important as their own, especially in larger organizations where the time demands may be much greater than expected, yet this does not justify the leader now devaluing others, or loving them less than themselves

A quick evaluation might include observing whether or not the leader considers themselves subject to the same Scriptural directives as the members of a group. If in any way they interpret themselves to be above the members this is an abuse of authority. Practically speaking, if the leader enforces expectations on others but considers themselves an exception this would be an abuse of authority.

Consider a leader who says they are accountable to others yet wants no practical accountability for their actions, saying instead that they know they don’t do everything they should do but just expect others to consider how much good came out of their actions and forget whatever harm may have been caused. This leader might recognize that people are offended and harmed by their actions but unfortunately does not give this fact any importance, excusing the behavior by virtue of their busy-ness, power and position. They may no longer care whether the person remained or left, seeming to care only that they don’t have to deal with them one way or the other. A leader acting in this manner may well be able to convince those within their organization that this kind of disrespectful behavior is the norm or standard, which is probably an indication of their own personal power or charisma.

In such a situation as just described, anyone who objects to being treated disrespectfully is considered to be “too much trouble.” As a result, this leader’s use of power provides the rationale to see themselves as a victim of other people who have unrealistic expectations. Not only do they see themselves as a victim but other members of the organization collude with this view. Others within and outside of this group may be convinced that this is normal and cooperate with it, even urging others to accept it.

It is an effective method to eliminate conflict, but also is harmful to relationships and the group's stability and health. I say this because most people who have a strong self-worth will not continue for very long in a relationship in which they are not respected and not heard. Those who, by contrast, don't see themselves as having value may continue because it is what they expect in life anyway. Over time, the group could very well end up with a large number of people who are intimidated by the leader but who do not feel able to say or do anything about it—what we have called a fear bond in Life Model terms. They will have accepted the leader's definition of what is good and right, excusing any behavior that doesn't make sense to them in deference to that leader, devaluing their own perceptions.

In my opinion, it is not a leadership strategy that is based in Torah observance and servant leadership.

To carry this example on a bit further, if the excuse for rudeness is busy-ness, authority or power and position, then moving it into the spiritual abuse realm would involve using Scripture references to justify actions: for instance, claiming that Matthew 18 principles are followed but then refusing to abide by them. We at Set Apart Ministries have given a great deal of thought to this issue over the past few years. It has become clear to us that in this process, the individual bringing the concern to another has the judgment call as to when it is necessary to bring in another witness, not the one being confronted. Would you believe that a leader might refuse to allow that second witness to be brought? It has happened. If the leader being confronted still refuses to hear the concern even with a witness, or worse yet, stands in the way of pursuing this avenue, what remains to be done?

There is no actual accountability process in place, only the illusion.

In our opinion, such an organization is in grave danger. We would not advise anyone to remain in an organization in which there is no real accountability. Since we have seen it through the centuries we can recognize when power has brought in corruption, and yes, this does happen in faith-based communities as well as families, and even governments.

Another example of use of Scripture to avoid accountability might be that of using the "shake the dust off your sandals" verse to refuse to continue resolution efforts, making an accusation that the person bringing the concern is being too unreasonable. Without knowledge of actual events, it is easy to see how such Scriptural-sounding responses could convince others of the leader's good character and efforts, again presenting the leader as a victim. If this continues over time without being addressed, there would potentially be a long line of people who carry grief, anger, sadness or confusion as to why they were treated that way. Those with strong self-worth may have left the organization but those with lower self-worth may remain, as described above. How will the Kingdom of YHWH be built up in such a fashion?

Here in Green Bay, one must know a little something about football. This situation sounds to us like the adage "the best defense is a good offense." In other words, when I

can't—or don't want to—deal with an issue myself, if I can make the other look at fault and can convince others likewise, I am off the hook!

What does it look like when a leader is being held accountable for an action, and how does a board or accountability partner know what is really happening? We believe it is important to look, listen, and ask questions of all involved. If an issue cannot be settled between a leader and a member, we involve our leadership team. Generally, if we see that concerns are developing, we may even include our leadership team in email copies of what is being said. If a series of emails seem to be escalating, we will stop emailing and ask for personal meetings to resolve concerns. We do not want any thing that may be of concern to even appear to be done in secrecy. On the other hand, we do not involve every single person in our community in every issue, attempting to be respectful of personal confidentiality as well. This process does take time, and sometimes it is exhausting. But, along the way, issues that really are a leader's actions or those that are just people being unreasonable will be prayerfully sorted out and it will become apparent to all involved.

We do grieve when these resolution efforts get short-circuited, usually due to someone's fear of or in the process. **None of the situations we have lived through in the past six years involving someone walking away were due to our refusal to talk it through. We do know what it is like to have people who refuse to resolve issues and instead carry around stories about us: stories that are not based in fact, but in emotion.** It can be painful and we can feel like victims at times. Yet, our model is Yeshua. He never did explain Himself but left people to prayerfully watch and determine what was true.

Our belief at Set Apart Ministries is that the Kingdom of Elohim is relational—an organism, not an organization. We believe that building solid mutually respectful mature relationships with other Believers *is* the work of the Kingdom; not something that just accidentally happens along the way while doing projects together. As we see it, the projects we do together grow out of the shared relationship in Maschiach. Anything less than that will not last in the final judgment anyway.