



Boas Shamir: The person, his impact and legacy

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ABSTRACT

This article is divided into three parts. In the first part, Galit, Boas's spouse, chronologically reviews the five periods of Boas's professional life—describing what is special to each period and what connects them—while relating to the centrality of values and the secret of charisma according to Boas Shamir. In the second part, Ronit, Boas's colleague, and his first doctoral student, relates to his role as mentor and presents the unique and novel theoretical perspectives that Boas developed concerning the identities of leaders and followers, and how they interact within the charismatic relationship. In the third part, Micha, Boas's friend and colleague, analyzes the relationship between Boas's personal history, the psycho-historical background in which he grew up, and the origins and uniqueness of his oeuvre.

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The charm of charisma according to Boas Shamir

Galit Eilam-Shamir

A man of values

Two central and clear paths appear before my eyes as I consider the journey of Boas Shamir. Boas, whom I know and love. A personal life-path and a professional life-path. The two paths meet at different points along the way, where they join and blend together. I shared a life together with Boas for parts of his journey; I learned about the other parts from Boas himself and from other people. Ever since the journey of Boas concluded and a perfect quiet has ensued, I have been considering again and again his path in life as a man and as a researcher. I find that he was always accompanied by a constant and active presence—the presence of values.

It was through his values that Boas assessed, defined, and ascribed meaning to life's events and situations. Three values stand out in my eyes: responsibility to the collective (and an acceptance of the rules and hierarchies that are built-in to the framework of the specific collective); a commitment to human dignity and freedom; and an unwavering, uncompromising, rigorous quest for excellence in whatever one does. These values are inter-connected and dialectically intertwined (especially responsibility to the collective versus personal freedom), and they form the bedrock for any discussion of the life-journey of Boas Shamir.

"How I gained and lost my leadership"

The topic of charisma influenced Boas deeply; charisma engaged and fascinated him. I believe that there were strong affinities between Boas's personal and professional lives that attracted him to leadership studies in general and to charisma in particular. Indeed, Boas himself was wont to make this connection. In an unpublished manuscript entitled "Leadership Lessons" (from

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which the above title's quotation is taken) that Boas wrote in his early 60s, Boas reviews his life through the prism of his personal experiences with leadership.

Already in high school, Boas's environment labeled him a leader. Boas writes of his youth: "I was taken to be a charismatic figure throughout all of my years in high school and the Scouts Movement." Boas accepted his designation as a leader: "As a youth, I got used to being a leader. I had a natural conception of myself as a leader." He said that leadership "required me to assume a role of responsibility and seriousness. I performed this role naturally and without great effort." Whether in his high school's Student Council, in the Scouts, or on the basketball court, Boas was marked as a leader from a relatively early age, and greatness was predicted for him; he said: "People thought that I would become Prime Minister."

In the army things proceeded for Boas as one might have expected, with Boas excelling in his compulsory service and him moving on to becoming an officer. But then things suddenly ground to a halt. Boas committed what he considered to be an unforgivable error (in navigation) with his men, and from that moment on Boas concluded that he was not a leader. There is no corroborating testimony to what Boas remembers as this instance of failed leadership. Remarks from Boas's soldiers suggest that they viewed him as a good officer and that there were no leadership crises. The event was clearly not catastrophic for his soldiers, but it was for Boas. The values that animated his life had already been set in place. Boas's commitment to human dignity and freedom came with a willingness to pay the price for one's freely chosen decisions. In this case, Boas felt that he had failed to live up to the responsibility placed in him as a leader, and the price for this failure was a loss of his sense of leadership. To pay this price was to act responsibly.

Boas continued to act with full and complete responsibility as a soldier, even interrupting his studies in 1973 to fly back to Israel from London in order to serve during the Yom Kippur War, but he felt that his true test had come earlier when he had let his soldiers down during navigation exercises.

1970s–1986: early academic career: London, Jerusalem

Upon completion of his military service, Boas proceeded quite responsibly with what he perceived as the natural course of his life. Since he had always been a good student, he accepted a career in academia as the framework of his life, and he set to it with alacrity. By the time he was 28 years old he had his Ph.D. from the London School of Economics and Political Science, an exceptionally young age given his 4 years of military service and the fact that as a student he had to work full-time in order to support himself and his young family. Boas's guiding values undoubtedly helped him here. The ease with which he functioned within a framework and a commitment to excellence helped propel him through his graduate work. The only problem was that he was propelled along a path that had not been his first choice. Boas had been told as a beginning graduate student at the LSE that leadership was "an over-researched subject," and so he wrote a doctorate in a different field of studies. Boas's value of responsibility to the collective meant that it was incumbent upon him to fit into the framework of that collective; at LSE for Boas this meant getting a doctorate in Social Psychology, with a dissertation entitled: "A Study of Working Environments and Attitudes to Work of Employees in a Number of British Hotels."

One suspects, however, that all along Boas was waiting for an opportunity to enter the field of leadership studies. It took a while because, as he wrote in an unpublished essay entitled "My Way to Charismatic Leadership," he thought that "the leadership theories of the time did not address the most important question in my eyes, namely how do leaders influence other people." Boas is referring to the period of the mid-1980s, a time when he had begun what would prove to be a tenure of 38-and-a-half-years in the Department of Sociology and Anthropology of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. His initial position at the University was within the Institute for Work and Leisure Research (a joint venture of Israel's Ministry of Work and Welfare and the German Bertelsmann Foundation, under the direction of Professor Rivka Bar Yosef).

Boas's dissatisfaction with leadership paradigms was echoed in his work-motivation scholarship. He argued for theories that "can explain individual sacrifices for collective concerns and can account for the role of values and moral obligations in energizing and directing work behavior" (Shamir, 1991a, 1991b). As he was to do in charismatic leadership, Boas here develops a self-concept based theory. In the theory, work behavior is viewed as "self-expressive, self-maintaining and self-guided." Boas is particularly intrigued by how the theory "provides a basis for accounting for individual work efforts that are collectively oriented and cannot be accounted for by an individual calculative logic. This is done by positing values and identities as major components of the self-concept that the individual seeks to validate in his or her work behavior" (Shamir, 1991a, 1991b).

1987–mid-1990s: entry into the field of leadership studies

In 1987, Bob House visited the Hebrew University to give a seminar on his theory of charismatic leadership. Boas writes that he was "hooked" after House's seminar in Jerusalem and after House subsequently introduced him to Bass's work on transformational leadership and Conger and Kanungo's behavioral theory of charismatic leadership. (I cannot resist noting that the serendipity here is classic Boas: life "hooked" him and not the other way around, and he accepted this.) Boas was enthralled and delighted—because not only were these scholars and their colleagues interested in "the most important question," but he thought that he could make a powerful contribution to the literature. Boas found in "charisma" a one-word answer to the question "how do leaders influence other people?" His contribution to the literature came following his realization that "the claimed and demonstrated effects of charismatic or transformational leaders on their followers, and in particular the shift in followers' orientation from an individualistic, self-centered orientation to a more collectivistic and principled orientation, could not be explained within dominant models of motivation, which were based on calculative and instrumental assumptions about human motivation." Boas was to develop a self-concept based theory that would both cap off his decade-long concentration in the field of work studies and usher him into the field of leadership studies.

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