Would You Buy A Used Car From...? A blog by Rabbi Marc D. Angel

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We all know the famous question asked about someone’s trustworthiness: would you buy a used car from him/her? If we suspect that a person is dishonest or manipulative, we could not trust that person to give us a fair deal. We would be worried about buying an inferior product, a car with hidden flaws that the salesperson keeps secret from us.

If we wouldn’t buy a used car from someone, would we elect that person to public office? Would we want that person to have power over our society, our economy, and our very lives?

Yet, when it comes to actual voting, Americans apparently set aside their concerns about trustworthiness in favor of other concerns. They will vote for a candidate from whom they would not buy a used car, because they think that the candidate has the best chance to win in November; or because they believe that the less trusted candidate will better be able to get things done working with congress. After all, congress also has a very low rating for honesty and trustworthiness. The thought is that a manipulative, conniving president will be more successful than someone who is “merely” honest and trustworthy.

Americans wonder why they have so little confidence in the political system, and yet it is the American voters who consistently elect people they feel they cannot trust!

American voters seem to be much like voters in other democratic societies. They vote on the basis of popularity, p.r. images, and emotionalism. They elect people whom they do not trust, and from whom they would not want to buy a used car.

Some years ago, I wrote an Angel for Shabbat column about our forefather Abraham, and his un-electability. I referred to the Midrash that tells of Abraham’s smashing the idols in the idol shop of his father Terah. I believe the Midrash was teaching us something important about leadership.

Abraham was a powerful, courageous individual who was not afraid to dissent from the majority. He had integrity; he was willing to risk his own comfort by defying the perverse ideas and values of his father and of the entire idolatrous society. He did not just speak out against idolatry: he had the gumption to smash idols, to bring matters to a head. He was not "diplomatic" in espousing belief in one God and in rejecting idolatry.

Thus, when God saw that Abraham was absolutely not "electable" by his community, God decided that Abraham was His man. God "elected" Abraham--a man of incredible personal strength and vision--to set out on the journey to establish a new nation, with a new vision, a new idealism, a new ethical system, a new way of relating to God.
A person in the mold of Abraham could hardly expect to be elected to high office in the United States or most other countries of the world. He was not a “politician” or a “diplomat.” Most people would buy a used car from an Abraham-type individual; but they wouldn’t necessarily vote for him.

Yet, I long to be able to vote for a political figure who I can trust, from whom I would buy a used car. I would like to vote for a candidate who I believe is genuinely honest and idealistic.

I believe that elected officials are a reflection of the values of the electorate. If the electorate votes for people who are not viewed as being trustworthy, then this is apparently what the public wants. If the electorate will not vote for the Abraham-type candidates, then the public does not merit to have such political leaders.

Personally, I will not vote for someone from whom I would not buy a used car. Would you?

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