Leadership: From the Wilderness to the Promised Land

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A Thought on Parashat Bemidbar, Shabbat May 31, 2008

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Moses had a difficult job. He not only had to confront Pharaoh and the Egyptians, he also had to convince the Israelites themselves of the value of freedom. This latter responsibility kept him busy in Egypt--and throughout the forty years of wandering in the Wilderness.

The Israelites did not immediately recognize the importance of their freedom or the significance of their going to the Promised Land to establish themselves as a righteous nation. The spies dis-heartened the people by giving a pessimistic report on the chances of defeating the inhabitants of the Promised Land. The Israelites always seemed to find something to complain about. Korah and his followers fomented an actual rebellion against Moses. How did Moses remain so faithful and so steady in his leadership over so long a period?

President Harry S. Truman once noted: "I wonder how far Moses would have gone if he had taken a poll in Egypt? .... It isn't [polls] that count. It is right and wrong, and leadership--men with fortitude, honesty and a belief in the right that make epochs in the history of the world."

Moses was charged by the Almighty with a mission, and Moses was wise enough to keep focused on that mission. He did not take public opinion polls. He did not make campaign speeches. He did not compete in a popularity contest. He did not engage p.r. agents to "market" him with proper make-up, catch phrases, and electioneering slogans. No. Moses did not act as though he were running for president of his high school class. Rather, he was that rare and visionary leader who understood profound truths, and who believed it was his task to get the public to understand and adopt these truths on their own.

One marketing genius once said: You can fool some of the people all the time--those are the ones we're looking for!

Moses did not believe in that kind of marketing. He is a model of leadership that is not subject to corruption or bribes; that does not pander to this interest group or that; that sees itself as teaching and elevating the public rather than sinking to the lowest common denominator.

In the journey from Egypt to the Promised Land, the model of Moses' leadership is an inspiration and a challenge. It reminds us of what leadership today can be.

The public at large can play a role in fostering proper leadership. It can be more discerning and demanding. It can raise its own ideals and visions, joining the leader in the task of improving our society and our world.

It is significant that Moses is known in our tradition as Moshe Rabbeinu, Moses our Teacher (rather than as Moses our Leader, or Moses our General etc.). He not only had an inspired vision of the mission of the Israelites, but was the Israelites' teacher--seeking to share his vision and ideals with them.