The “JFK” Syndrome vs. the Real JFK: Thoughts on Parashat Hayyei Sarah

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By
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I recently learned of a shorthand symbol used in online communications among Jewish singles. It is “JFK”. For example: “Don’t go out with him, he’s ‘JFK’.” “He’s not reliable, he’s ‘JFK’.”

“JFK” stands for “Just for Kiddush”. A person described as a “JFK” is one who skips synagogue services and shows up in time for Kiddush to enjoy free refreshments. Such a person lacks spiritual/religious values (skips prayer services); looks for free food (Kiddush); doesn’t make commitments (shows up for food, but likely isn’t a member of or contributor to the synagogue). A “JFK” mingles with the Kiddush crowd and tries to pass himself off as a respectable member of the community. In pre-computerese language, a “JFK” would be described as a sponge or a moocher, someone looking for a free ride at someone else’s expense.

A “JFK” can’t be relied upon. Such a person lacks a basic sense of personal responsibility, commitment, self-respect. A “JFK” looks out for self, not for others.

The Torah portion this week tells of Efron the Hittite, from whom Abraham bought a burial place for Sarah. While posing as a generous patron, Efron was in fact a self-centered man interested in gaining material advantage from others. Rashi comments about Efron: “he talked a lot, but didn’t do even a little.” He pretended to be a fine, upstanding person: but he was actually a person of deficient moral sense. He was an early version of a “JFK”.

During the coming week, we will mark the anniversary of the assassination of President John F. Kennedy. It is fitting that we remember his famous words, words that reflect the real JFK and not the computerese shorthand “JFK”: “Ask not what your country can do for you; ask what you can do for your country.” President Kennedy tapped into the idealism of the American people as few presidents before or since have done. The real JFK spoke to the best in us, calling on us to give of ourselves for the betterment of our country, our society, the world at large.

In his book, “Profiles in Courage,” John F. Kennedy described individuals who displayed great integrity, who rose above selfish interests and political pressures in order to make proper moral judgments. They were willing to take risks and make sacrifices in order to promote what was right and just. The real JFK admired those who recognized personal responsibility toward the community and nation; who made commitments; who acted courageously and selflessly. He certainly did not think highly of the “Just for Kiddush” types.

We must all strive not to be a “JFK” who only shows up for Kiddush, who wants others to do all the work and pay all the bills, whose spiritual and moral life is so eminently deficient. Rather, we must all strive to reach for the ideals advanced by President John F. Kennedy, ideals that speak to the best in us, and that inspire us to grow in our integrity, sense of responsibility, and commitment to the welfare of our society.

Angel for Shabbat