Leadership Styles: Thoughts on Parashat Ki Tissa

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Angel for Shabbat, Parashat Ki Tissa by Rabbi Marc D. Angel

As Moses descended from the mountain with the Tablets of the Covenant, he heard a great commotion from the Israelite camp. Joshua, Moses' faithful attendant, stated: "There is a noise of war in the camp." Moses corrected Joshua. The noise wasn't warlike, but rather was the sound of singing.

Indeed, what Moses and Joshua heard was the tumult created by the Israelites celebrating around the golden calf! Joshua had erred in his evaluation of the situation.

Rabbi Hayyim Angel, in his essay on Joshua's leadership (in his new book "Vision from the Prophet and Counsel from the Elders," (published by the Orthodox Union Press, 2013, and available through Ktav Publishing House) notes that in this first statement of Joshua recorded in the Torah, Joshua was wrong and needed to be corrected! Rabbi Angel points out that Joshua went on to make other errors in judgment in future episodes recorded in the Torah.

Yet, Joshua emerged as the successor of Moses. His tenure as leader of Israel was actually remarkably successful. The people were united; there were no rebellions among them. Except for one incident involving the sin of one man (Achan), the Israelites remained faithful.

The Talmud (Baba Batra 75a) compares Moses to the sun and Joshua to the moon. Moses was the brilliant prophet/leader who was closest to God. Moses' greatness was overwhelming, creating distance between himself and the people. By contrast, Joshua was only a pale reflection of the glory of Moses. Joshua made mistakes, Joshua was not as forceful or as confident as Moses.

Rabbi Angel quotes the “Sefat Emet” of Rabbi Yehudah Aryeh Leib Alter of Ger who contrasted the leadership styles of Moses and Joshua. Whereas Moses, like the sun, was totally dominant, Joshua was like the moon—the moon allows stars to shine! It was precisely Joshua’s “imperfections” that made him a phenomenally successful leader. He did not view himself—nor was he viewed by the people—as a one-of-a-kind leader to whom everyone had to defer. Rather, he was one of the people; he consulted them; he appointed others to take leadership roles. He was content to be a “moon” who let other “stars” shine.

The lesson: there are different types of leaders and different styles of leadership. Some leaders are brilliant, awesome, overwhelming. People have a natural tendency to defer to them, to see themselves as sheep who must follow their gifted, powerful shepherds. Yet, this kind of leadership—for all its virtues—has deep flaws. It tends toward authoritarianism. It vests too much power in the hands of one person. It diminishes the role and responsibility of the public at large. And it is a leadership that is impossible (or almost impossible) to replicate in future generations.

Some leaders, following the model of Joshua, do not concentrate all power in themselves, and do not consider themselves to be the all-dominant authority. They are hard working, focused, and dedicated public servants who strive to maintain the cohesiveness of their communities. They make room for others to shine. They encourage others to take roles of responsibility and leadership. They understand that leadership is a sacred burden to be utilized for the good of the public.

In a sense, the public prefers an all-powerful leader like Moses. This kind of leader takes responsibility off their shoulders. They can blame the leader when their needs are not satisfied. They can hide behind the greatness of their leader when confronting the challenges of life.

Yet, the leadership style of Joshua has much to commend itself for a community that wishes to foster the dignity and responsibility of each person; that wishes to encourage initiative on the part of capable individuals; that doesn’t attribute all greatness or all blame to its leader.

In summarizing the virtues of Joshua’s leadership, Rabbi Hayyim Angel writes that Joshua’s essential humanity—his weaknesses as well as his strengths—enabled him to gain the trust of the people. They could identify with him and could know

that he identified with them. “As a result, Joshua was able to transmit Moses’ teachings to the people, guiding a stiff-necked and rebellious people to unrivaled faithfulness as they entered the Promised Land.” Land.”

Angel for Shabbat