Smile! No, I Mean Really Smile! Thoughts for Parashat Pinehas

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Angel for Shabbat, Parashat Pinehas

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A while ago, I needed some dental work. As I was sitting in the dentist's waiting room, I noticed a rack of brochures dealing with various dental procedures. Having a little time on my hands, I decided to look more closely at these brochures.

One of them was ominously entitled: Root Canal. On the cover was a picture of an attractive, smiling woman with perfectly straight, white teeth. Hmm! I have never met anyone who broke out into a wide smile upon learning she/he needed root canal work. Another brochure featured: Gum Disease. The cover of that brochure included four happily smiling people, all with perfect white teeth. Hmm again! I have never come across anyone who smiled upon learning she/he had gum disease and would need lots of unpleasant and expensive dental care. And so it was with all the other brochures, each describing dental procedures, and each featuring a smiling face on the cover.

I suppose the creators of these brochures wanted to give a "positive spin" to dental work, and to make patients feel cheerful and relaxed by seeing happy people on the brochure covers. I'm not sure of the success of this strategy on others but it did not relieve my own anxieties in the least.

I know that the brochure makers would not want to show pictures of patients groaning in agony. But perhaps they could have chosen some other illustrations for their brochure covers. To show pictures of smiling people is surely misleading if not just plain false.

We realize that the people in the pictures are paid models. They aren't really having root canal work or dreading their own gum disease. They are not

portraying reality, but are participating in the creation of a positive image for p.r. purposes. But instead of convincing us to be happy, these smiling models strike us as being participants in a con job. They are not genuine. They cannot be trusted. Anyone who smiles brightly while contemplating root canal work is not someone who can be relied upon for good judgment.

This brings us to this week's Torah portion.

Moses knows he will not be leading the Israelites into the Promised Land. He pleads with the Almighty to appoint his successor, a leader "who will go out before them and come before them, who will lead them out and bring them in, so that the congregation of the Lord will not be like sheep without a shepherd" (Bemidbar 27:17). Rashi explains that Moses is asking for a leader who will take responsibility, who will be in the front lines of battle and not sit back at home while others do the fighting. Seforno adds that the leader should not only be involved in war, but should also be personally and actively engaged in the day to day management of the people. Other commentators note that Moses is calling for a shepherd, a person who tends the flock with great care and who is held responsible for any losses.

Moses is seeking a leader who will be genuine, reliable and trustworthy. He asks for a leader who takes personal responsibility for each member of the community. He wants a real leader, not a false image of a leader. He wants a leader with an honest countenance, not one with a fake smile. He wants someone who actually believes in his mission, not someone who pretends to be a leader and goes through the charades of leadership for p.r. purposes.

Many contemporary social critics have lamented the shortage of honest, sincere, authentic leaders. Politicians are widely perceived as being self-serving egotists. Leaders in religious life, academia, the business world etc. have all fallen in esteem in the eyes of the public; they are often viewed as petty, power hungry or manipulative. Instead of being shepherds who genuinely care about their flocks, the worst among them tend to care more about their own honors and emoluments.

Happily, though, there are genuine, fine leaders in the world. We are blessed with examples of authentically sincere, hard-working and selfless individuals who put the community's interests above their own, who are genuine shepherds rather than con artists.

God informed Moses that He would appoint Joshua as his successor. Joshua is described as a man “in whom the spirit resides.” Joshua had demonstrated the qualities of courage, the ability to stand up against the crowd, loyalty to Moses and to the entire public. He was endowed with “the spirit” i.e. integrity, authenticity, selflessness. Joshua could be trusted; he was genuine.

We often come across people who are as untrustworthy and unconvincing as the smiling faces on the cover of the root canal brochure. Less often do we meet people of the caliber of Joshua.

But it is the Joshuas of the world who we admire, respect and trust. It is they—and only they—who are worthy to be our friends and our leaders.

Angel for Shabbat