Abandoning the Ship: Thoughts for Parashat Emor, May 3, 2014

View PDF

By
Rabbi Marc D. Angel

The tragic sinking of a South Korean ship, killing so many passengers, has caught the world's attention in recent weeks. One of the most disgusting images from this debacle was the photograph of the ship's captain…who abandoned ship early in the disaster, saving his own life and leaving the passengers to fend for themselves and to die.

Captains are not supposed to abandon ship. When they assume leadership, they are expected to put the lives of their passengers ahead of their own lives.

Leadership entails responsibility of the first magnitude. If a person is not up to this responsibility, he/she should not accept it. Leadership is not a game, not a means of obtaining a fancy title and good pay. Leadership is a total commitment; it demands the highest degree of integrity and good judgment.

Just as we are deeply disappointed in the shameful behavior of the ship captain who abandoned his ship, so we are upset with "leaders" in other walks of life who also lack the gravitas and responsibility of leadership. They put their own needs and pleasures first. They seek prestigious titles and positions and compensation packages—but their first interest is themselves, not the constituents.

Polls continually show that the public is disgusted with politicians who abuse their positions to advance their own fame and fortune. The public does not feel that its elected officials put the needs of the public first; rather, many feel that the politicians are in it for their own ego gratification and wealth production.

Leaders of corporations, institutions and organizations are expected to take their responsibilities seriously. Yet, so often we learn of "leaders" of companies who take massive pay, even while their companies do poorly, even while workers are being laid off. We read of institutions—religious and secular—where the top officers are paid tremendous amounts and given many honors; and yet, these top officers will "jump ship" when a better offer turns up. For such individuals, loyalty and commitment to constituents are far less important than their own self-

promotion. Such “leaders” are not driven by a sense of mission for the greater good; they are driven by the desire to advance their own interests as best as they can. They surround themselves with a clique of powerful supporters, and conduct themselves as though the rest of the public doesn’t really matter. But when crisis or danger arise, these “leaders” slip off the ship in order to preserve themselves and their own interests.

This week’s Torah portion describes laws of purity that apply to Cohanim. In ancient times, the Cohanim were the priests who conducted the rites of the Mishkan/Temple; the Cohanim were charged with providing religious leadership to the people of Israel. While the purity laws relate to ritual matters, I think they also suggest a larger idea. The Cohanim—as religious leaders—were expected to be pure, to be devoted to God and to the people, to cleanse themselves of moral blemishes. If the Cohanim did not maintain the highest standards of integrity and commitment, this would inevitably undermine the morale and moral fiber of the community at large.

Indeed, when the priesthood became mired in power struggles and political manipulations, the spiritual health of the entire community was imperiled. During the late Hasmonean period, the office of High Priest went to the highest bidder or to the man who had the best political connections. The public lost respect not merely for the priesthood, but for what the priests were supposed to teach and represent. Fortunately, some great rabbis emerged who were able to re-channel the religious aspirations of the community so as to maintain the framework of a genuine religious life. Those rabbis were true leaders, devoting themselves selflessly to the public even at great personal sacrifice.

It has been pointed out that people view their work in different ways. For some, work is a job. The goal is to receive a pay check. For others, work is seen in the context of a career. They hold a position not merely to receive pay, but to climb a professional ladder so as to receive greater pay and higher authority. But for others, work is a mission. The goal is not merely to get paid or to advance professionally. The goal is to fulfill one’s ideals. The goal is to devote oneself to meaningful work that will benefit others.

Most people work at jobs or careers. Genuine leaders must work from a sense of mission. Without that absolute, pure commitment, their leadership is faulty, even dangerous. People need and respect leaders upon whom they can depend.

A responsible and honorable captain does not abandon ship.

Angel for Shabbat