Images and Realities: Thoughts for Parashat Hayyei Sara

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Thoughts on "Hayyei Sarah"

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The election season is filled with slogans, sound bites, campaign posturing. Candidates employ experts who can best market them. The candidates are instructed on what to say and what not to say; the tone of voice they should use; the type of clothes and makeup they should wear. The goal is to create an electable image. News items are subject to p.r. spins; polls are used as signs of gained or lost momentum and are interpreted by candidates in a way that most favors themselves.

In the hurly-burly of the campaign season, image counts for a great deal. It influences voters, most of whom seem to make their decisions based largely on impressions—not on thorough research into the candidates' records and opinions. External glitz often eclipses internal content in determining how people will vote.

We are given grand promises and are shown grand gestures: but these are part of image-making, not necessarily reflective of the reality of the candidates' ability to deliver.

When we later learn that the grand promises and gestures were p.r. ploys, we feel betrayed and angered. We realize that we were deceived by clever publicity techniques. We are upset with ourselves for falling for the glitz, and we are upset with the candidates and their handlers for creating unrealistic images. When this same process happens time after time, we become cynical about the effectiveness and truthfulness of the "system."

Just as we are frustrated by artificial p.r. image-making for individuals, we also become frustrated when these same techniques are used to inaccurately promote institutions or products. We want genuine truthfulness—but we get manipulative

words and gestures. The image-makers assume that the public is gullible and will fall for slick language and gestures. Often, the image-makers are correct! If the public does not demand or expect anything beyond surface glitz, that is what the public will receive. But when the public realizes that it has been deceived, there is a sense of dismay and anger.

Grand promises and grand gestures need to be matched by grand commitment to fulfill the promises and live up to the gestures. A healthy society must demand an honest correlation between image and reality.

In this week's Torah reading, we learn of Abraham's desire to buy a burial place for Sarah. He wanted to purchase land from Efron the Hittite. Efron was a master of the grand gesture and grand promise. He promoted himself as a generous and upstanding person, willing to give Abraham the land for free as a token of friendship. Abraham saw through Efron's mendacity and insisted on paying for the land. Efron then asked for a princely sum, and Abraham paid in full.

Rashi notes that the Torah spells Efron's name with a missing "vav" when Abraham hands over the money. "The 'vav' is missing because he said a lot, but didn't do even a little." Efron was diminished by the transaction. He had posed as a generous benefactor but was actually a small-minded manipulator seeking to maximize his own gain. There is a chasm between Efron's words and his deeds; and he becomes a despicable figure in our eyes.

The world is full of Efrons—people who offer slick words and grandiose promises, but who do not (and have no intention to) live up to these expressions. They are image-makers and self-promoters. They think they succeed…but in fact, they are diminished! The gap between their artificial image and their actual selves belies their authenticity as upstanding human beings. People ultimately realize the sham.

A story is told of a person who owned an old building with crumbling foundations. The owner decided to upgrade the building—by painting its exterior to make it appear more attractive. Indeed, it now looked like a new building. But its foundations were still rotten and the building was doomed to collapse. The owner thought that a glitzy exterior could remake the building's image, but did not want to realize that the fanciest paint in the world cannot make up for structural flaws.

It is fine to create the best possible image; but the external image must be justified by internal integrity and strength. Image-makers—even when they seem to succeed--are diminished when their reality does not—or cannot—live up to

their projected image.

This is true of individuals, of institutions, of governments. Images must flow from strong, healthy, and truthful foundations.

Angel for Shabbat