A Model of Genuine Religious Leadership:Thoughts for Parashat Shelah Lekha

View PDF

By
Rabbi Marc D. Angel

Angel for Shabbat, Parashat Shelah Lekha

by Rabbi Marc D. Angel

"And the Lord said to Moses: How long will this people despise Me? And how long will they not believe in Me, for all the signs which I have wrought among them? I will smite them with the pestilence and destroy them, and will make of you a nation greater and mightier than they" (Bemidbar 14:11-12).

What a great offer! God tells Moses that He will destroy all the Israelites and create a new nation, a greater nation, from Moses himself.

Moses had many reasons to be tempted by this offer. He had been bitterly betrayed by leaders of ten out of twelve tribes, who came back with a demoralizing report after they had spied out the Promised Land. The people murmured against Moses, saying they would rather return to slavery in Egypt than go forward under Moses' leadership. With all the dissatisfaction, backbiting and betrayals among the Israelites, how could Moses have resisted God's phenomenal offer? Here was an ideal opportunity to be rid of the betrayers and complainers in one fell swoop. Here was a chance to eliminate a faithless and unreliable nation and be done with all their nasty complaining and rebelling.

And yet, amazingly, Moses rejected God's offer. "Forgive, I pray You, the iniquity of this people according unto the greatness of Your loving-kindness and according as You have forgiven this people from Egypt until now" (14:19). Just as he had done after the sin of the golden calf, Moses pleaded with God to have mercy, to spare the people, to forgive them.

How are we to understand this remarkable behavior of Moses?

The Torah describes Moses as the humblest of all people. He did not relish being a leader; he did not seek the limelight; he did not want power or wealth; he did not seek self-aggrandizement. If left alone, he would have preferred being a shepherd in Midian. But God chose him to lead the Israelites out of bondage and into freedom. When he undertook this responsibility, Moses considered himself a faithful servant of God. He gave himself totally to the wellbeing of the people. Even if they sometimes spurned him and betrayed him and rebelled against him, Moses rose above feelings of personal egotism. He was chosen to lead his people, and he was going to fulfill his mission with every ounce of energy in his power. Even if God gave him a way out of this responsibility, Moses was unwilling to betray the people even if they had betrayed him.

Moses demonstrated leadership qualities that set a standard for Jewish religious and lay leadership. Leaders need to emulate Moses' incredible humility and devotion. They need the wisdom and patience to stay loyal to the people, even when the people demonstrate very negative behavior. Leaders need to understand that they are serving God, not their own personal egos. True religious leadership is not manifested in seeking power or control, nor in seeking honor or public accolades. Just the opposite! A genuine religious leader, like Moses, must exemplify humility and self-sacrifice.

Rabbi Yitzchak Breitowitz wrote a powerful article, "When Leaders Fail," (Jewish Action Magazine, summer 2015). He describes the grievous consequences of religious leadership that falls short of the Torah ideals. Rabbi Breitowitz notes the destructive nature of pride and overconfidence and the dangers of charisma and the personality cult. When religious leaders—whether rabbinic or lay—become smug, they may come to feel invulnerable. They lose sight of proper moral boundaries, thinking that they are not accountable to anyone. They seek power and prestige; they seek to control; they do not

function as humble servants of God or as loyal servants of the public.

Rabbi Breitowitz writes: “Erudition, scholarship and personal magnetism are no guarantee of spirituality and inner goodness….If one is imbued with compassion, kindness and humility, then Torah study will make him more so. If one is competitive, arrogant and self-aggrandizing, Torah scholarship will simply create another battlefield in which those qualities can be expressed….. All of this suggests that communities must pay much closer attention to the moral qualities and personality traits of the leaders and role models that they choose. That certain flashy qualities might be overvalued in the selection process while other qualities—gentleness, modesty—are undervalued or even disparaged will only hurt the community in the long run.”

Rabbi Shemuel de Medina, a leading sage of 16th century Salonika, wrote a responsum in which he dealt with a certain rabbi who quit his position out of despair. This rabbi was so disgusted with his community that he made an oath never again to serve as a religious leader. Rabbi de Medina gently chastised this rabbi, and told him that his oath was to be rescinded. Rabbi de Medina pointed to the example of Moses, the ultimate leader, the man of genuine humility and loyalty. Moses demonstrated that a religious leader’s duty was to God and to the people; that a religious leader was to view himself as a humble servant of God and the people; and that the true religious leader is one who braces his shoulders to carry the burdens of the public, patiently and lovingly…in spite of any and all frustrations that religious leadership entails.

It may not be possible for religious leaders to achieve the greatness of Moses. But at least they and the community at large should know the ideal to which all should aspire.
“And the man Moses was very humble, more than all the men that were upon the face of the earth” (Bemidbar 12:3).

Angel for Shabbat