

Because of our sins, we were exiled from our land

GERALD M. STEINBERG | JULY 25, 2012, 10:53 PM |

Political leaders and heads of government have the moral responsibility for millions of citizens – for their security, their health and welfare, and in many other areas. There is no greater challenge – particularly when dealing with Israel’s precarious environment. National leadership is a full time job, and more.

The tasks of public leadership, particularly for Israel, are all-encompassing, and the opportunities for abusing power too enticing to leave any room for compromise on this principle. Public service and politics should be off-limits to self-serving opportunists and slick real-estate manipulators.

Indeed, the ethical requirement of clean hands – in the widest sense — for public leaders is deeply engrained in Jewish tradition and principles. When Abraham led a military alliance that defeated the foreign kings threatening Canaan, his partners (including the King of Sodom) expected that the future leader of the Jewish nation would keep his share of the spoils, like other neighborhood potentates. But Abraham pointedly refused to “take a thread or a shoelace nor anything else.” Wars were fought and lives were lost when necessary to ensure survival, and not for the enrichment of leaders, their families or cronies.

The centrality of public ethics is also emphasized in the actions of Moses as the leader of the Israelites during and after the Exodus from Egypt and through forty years in the desert. Moses was raised in the opulence of the Pharaoh’s palace and could have lived a very comfortable life. But he chose to leave. and, after having acted to protect Israelite slaves, including the killing of an Egyptian task-master, he fled to live in the desert – the anti-thesis of his earlier luxurious lifestyle.

This selfless humility was the central characteristic that led to the selection of Moses, who tried to refuse the position he was offered at the burning bush. Many years later, when he was confronted by a rebellion led by Korach and his supporters who challenged his qualifications for leadership, he was able to instantly reject the accusations, declaring: “I have not taken the ass of any one of them...” Moses never acquired property or wealth and did not exploit his political and religious power for himself, his family or any cronies.

Generations later, Samuel, the selfless and last of the Judges that led Israel after they crossed the Jordan river, tried to defuse the public cry that demanded “Give us a king”, like the other nations. Samuel warned them that kings are prone to self-aggrandizement. In contrast, Samuel asks,

“whose ass have I taken”? But the masses did not listen to Samuel (even then, public opinion was prone to foreign manipulation and bad judgment), and after David, they got a series of kings who focused primarily on their own interests. The Biblical narrative of the two kingdoms of Judah (or Judea) and Israel is filled with examples of corrupt and failed leaders, presaging the destruction of the First and Second Temples, and of Jerusalem. Many of the kings, priests and the other members of the elite classes (the Biblical one percent) were too involved in their private affairs and petty power struggles to provide the necessary public leadership.

Two thousand years later, these principles of single-minded and ethical leadership were vital to the success of Zionism. It is impossible to imagine the founders of the modern Jewish nation abusing this sacred trust to enrich themselves, their families and friends. Ben Gurion, Begin, Shamir and Golda embodied the moral imperatives for public office – they lived very modestly, and devoted themselves entirely to their tasks. These founders did not enter politics in order to make money and acquire property, but rather to become public servants, in the fullest meaning of the term. Their biographies reflect undivided devotion to restoring the Jewish nation.

Many of the successor generation of leaders were and are less dedicated and more susceptible to the enticements of easy money. But the challenges facing Israel – from Iran and Syria to unacceptable economic inequality and a rigid bureaucracy – require the full attention of the heads of government, and entirely clean hands. There is no room for cash-filled envelopes from wheeler-dealers, steering contracts to cronies, or multiple billings for talks on behalf of charities.

These are not only questions of law for prosecutors, defenders and judges to examine and decide, but – more importantly – they are essential requirements for leadership of the nation. Anyone incapable of embodying these principles should not be considered for the job.