

Yitro 5775: Selma, the Exodus and Their Lessons for Leadership

I saw the movie “Selma” last week.

It is powerful, riveting and raw -- personalizing and visualizing a monumental 1965 slice of the civil rights movement in an unprecedented way.

It's a movie about public leadership, in so many ways. It's about national leaders seizing the fertile ground cultivated by local leaders and working together with them, strategically, to realize the right to vote. It's about national leaders approaching local leaders with the right mix of strength, conviction, sensitivity and persuasion. It's about local leaders and grassroots activists growing in their leadership – witness John Lewis – by recognizing the wisdom of the battle-tested and ceding hard-fought territory for the sake of the cause.

And it's a movie about public leaders in their private moments, balancing, sometimes more effectively than others, the demands of leadership with their ravenous desire for basic human contact and family existence. It's a movie that makes the stubborn, collegial bonds of the leadership circle seem much easier to maintain than the family circle – which is a contentious, often elusive oasis that is easier, in the short-term, to flee than to manage. Public leadership and private success in the home – for King as for so many, they were hard to integrate.

Reading parashat Yitro within the context of Selma's lessons about leadership only sharpens our sensitivity to the challenges and pitfalls of Moses and Aaron's leadership – and to those of Yitro as well -- some of which are put on display in this parasha.

The parasha exposes the harsh reality that Moses and Aaron, unlike Dr. King, have no national leadership circle and have no local leadership to build on. They rely exclusively where Dr. King relies in part, on God and their powers of persuasion, as they maneuver Pharaoh and muster the Israelite grassroots to escape. They have no humans to discuss strategy with, to share war stories with, to review their actions to date with, other than each other. Hence the intensity in this parasha of Moses' sharing of the stories of the exodus with Yitro, a zealous plunge into the kind of comforting human interaction Moses is deprived of for months. An experience of decompressing, akin, if not in tone but in spirit, to the spontaneous feast King and his cadre enjoy at what I believe, in the movie, is his or one of his colleague's sister's homes.

Yitro, moreover, a local leader par excellence, becomes an even greater leader by ceding the framework of his religious life as priest in Midian and recognizing God's supremacy. He vacates center stage in Midian's life and humbly accepts his role in the larger Biblical drama, as witness to God and mentor to Moses. He's willing to play a significant, but smaller, part on the right team – a la John Lewis -- instead of a big part on the wrong team.

Like Selma, furthermore, parashat Yitro demonstrates the drawbacks of public leadership for leaders' private sphere. In Selma, we see Dr. King, at home, politicking on the phone while his kids whoop it up in the background. They're worlds apart, and, at least in the movie, the bridge is never crossed. Furthermore, King's marriage to Coretta is scarred as much by the lack of time together as it is by infidelity.

In our parasha, the parallel weakness of Moses' private sphere is evident. Yitro and, in all likelihood, Tziphora, like Coretta Scott King, are the protectors of the household much more than Moses is. Yitro, in fact, refers to the boys, in his approach to Moses, as "her sons," not "your sons." The sons truly *are* Tziphora's at this point, Eliezer having been born, according to the rabbis, only days before the family's separation.

Chazal spend considerable time trying to reconcile an earlier passage in Shmot which indicates that Moses returns to Egypt with his family, with the reality that, here in our parasha, Moses' family has been residing with Yitro. Either Yitro, Moses or both want Tziphora out of harm's way during the Exodus. This is all well and good, but, as a consequence, Moses' family is not part of the narrative of the Exodus, this seminal story both in the life of a nation and in the career of their husband/father. They were back in Atlanta, so to speak, away from the frontlines, protected – much more, in fact, than Dr. King's family -- in a comfortable, if restless, middle-class "clergy's" family existence.

Dr. King leaves his family to attend to the campaigns of Selma and elsewhere. Moses leaves his family to attend to the campaign of the Exodus. Does that mean that we need to “leave” our families to handle the duties of public leadership that beckon us? I would hope not.

Many of us are struck by fear that communal commitment will mean absconding from the responsibilities of family. I know personally that I was frequently annoyed that my parents went to so many evening meetings instead of being home with me. I didn't like it.

Yet, as time passed, I understood the models that both of my parents set with their communal commitments, and that it was a mitzvah to fulfill them. There are concentric circles of commitment in our lives that fertilize each other. Nation, community, and family each require our attention and commitment. Each circle depends on the other for its stability and nurture.

Though remaining at home may mean more time with our kids, grandkids, spouses and others, it also deprives the community, and, ultimately, the nation, of the passion of our volunteerism, which comes back ultimately to haunt and undermine the family.

The key, of course, is setting boundaries. Moses and Dr. King did not do that so well, but, as national leaders at the highest rung, with pressures we can only imagine, it's hard to blame them for these failures. *We* have the ability to set our boundaries and

to attend to each of the circles, where we are, further down the totem pole. Let us grab the opportunity – both here in this synagogue and elsewhere.

We can't be driven by fear as we seize the opportunities for leadership that we've been called to in life. Pitfalls, surely there are many, but, with care, most can be avoided. In any case, walking in the spirit of Dr. King, Moses, Aaron, Yitro and others, we must recognize that the value of our contributions as leaders far outweighs any costs incurred.