

# Taking Responsibility, From Moses To Obama

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*The Jewish Week*

As I read the Torah portion last Shabbat, I couldn't help but smile at the contrast in style between Moses, in his first appearance as the future (and greatest) leader of the Jewish people, and Barack Obama, as he becomes president of the United States and Leader of the Free World.

Could two men be more different in accepting the mantle of responsibility?

Obama's campaign slogan-turned-mantra, "Yes we can," helped catapult him to victory, a hope and pledge driven by conviction. His optimism, self-confidence and eloquence won over legions of skeptical voters during the grueling campaign. Despite a myriad of problems facing the country, Obama appears eager to step in and take bold action.

A far cry from Moses, a lonely shepherd who encounters God at the Burning Bush and is told that he above all men has been chosen to lead the Israelites out of Egypt and slavery.

His response? "No, I can't."

Moses finds as many ways as possible to decline God's request, explaining that he is unworthy, that he is slow of tongue (usually thought to mean a stutterer), and he argues that the powerful Pharaoh of Egypt will dismiss him outright.

Moses' protestations go on for so long — even after being reassured that God will be with him — that God becomes angry, telling Moses that it is He who makes these determinations, who has the power to do whatever He wishes.

That is the point of the dialogue, of course, and a consistent theme in the relationship among God, Moses and the Jewish people. God is the instrument of change, not Moses or any other human or object, according to the Torah. That is why God selected Mount Sinai, the smallest of mountains, as the place for the giving of the Torah, and why He chose Moses in the first place, a man seemingly lacking in charisma, whose brother Aaron was his mouthpiece and whose only description in the Torah is that he was the most humble of men.

Not exactly stellar qualifications for a successful politician today. But then again, Moses certainly fit the criteria for an effective modern-day chief executive. According to "Reengineering The Corporation," the book by Michael Hammer and James Campy that revolutionized the business world, a good leader is one who is able to "articulate a vision and persuade people that they want to be a part of it."

They note that “Moses was a visionary leader. He persuaded the children of Israel that they should go forward toward a land of milk and honey when all they could see around them was sand.”

Seems a lot like Obama these days, who has instilled a sense of optimism in millions of Americans even as they recognize the enormous economic and other problems the country faces.

In this season of leadership transitions — in the Book of Exodus, in the U.S., in Israel and in the American Jewish community — are there consistent patterns or models of success? We certainly know what has failed.

After eight years, the majority of Americans are happy to see George W. Bush leave Washington, concluding that his once-praised self-assurance and sense of conviction were, in the end, the attributes that undid him.

Israelis, too, have been fed up with their political leadership, especially Prime Minister Ehud Olmert, a man of intellectual and political talent brought low by a series of corruption charges against him. His government’s weak performance during the Lebanon War two summers ago further undermined his efforts, though his legacy may be bolstered by his handling of the Gaza conflict.

The fact that national elections will be held Feb. 10, so soon after the war, could have a major impact on the outcome. Kadima Leader and Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni is the “clean” candidate; Labor Leader Ehud Barak and Likud Leader Benjamin Netanyahu have experience as prime minister, but they had mixed records (especially Barak) and are known for their arrogance as much as their brilliance.

The election may well hinge on whether voters feel the Gaza campaign was a success, who they credit or blame most for it, and whether they are in the mood for security assurances or peace efforts.

Closer to home, there is a strong sense that American Jewry is experiencing a serious leadership vacuum, both on the lay and professional level. As noted here last week, United Jewish Communities (UJC), the umbrella group of North American federations, remains far from united about its goals and mission, a symptom of the difficulty in finding common purpose within a community that is increasingly divided, religiously and politically.

The Madoff scandal, coming on top of the nationwide economic meltdown, further underscores the need for a deep re-evaluation of how our voluntary community operates. Is our agenda overly driven by a few powerful mega-machers? Is there sufficient transparency in our charitable organizations? Are there enough consensus concerns to hold us together?

These and similar questions will take on greater weight at a time of increased human need and reduced financial resources. Wrenching decisions await our communal leaders, as well as those in Washington and Jerusalem, since times of crisis demand courageous choices.

More than once during his 40-year tenure Moses was frustrated, disheartened and embittered about his charges, but he persevered out of commitment to God's commands and compassion for his people.

True leaders understand that the measure of one's success is anchored in action, not ego, and determined by succeeding generations, not instant popularity polls.

And maybe the responses of Moses and Barack Obama to the challenges ahead are not as dissonant as they first seem.

“No, I can’t” do it alone, but united in purpose, “yes, we can.”