When “Winners” are the Real Losers: A blog by Rabbi Marc D. Angel

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A sad but recurring fact of life is that people do not always act nicely and compassionately. We come across unscrupulous, cruel and vindictive individuals—often who think they are “winners” in life. They have the power to hurt and oppress, to squeeze out illegal profits, to crush those who stand in their way.

But these people are not “winners” at all. They ultimately lose the respect and trust of others, even of their closest relatives and friends. If they have any degree of realism, they also ultimately lose respect for themselves. And in the long run, they will one day face the Judge of all judges, the One True Judge who cannot be fooled or bribed.

It is particularly sad when individuals who claim to be “religious” act in a vindictive and mean way. When a marriage has fallen apart and the husband refuses to grant his wife a “get” this is a classic example of anti-religious behavior. Such a man is driven by revenge, a sense of personal failure, a desire to hurt his wife. A man who creates an “Agunah” situation may feel that he is “winning,” that he is demonstrating his power. In fact, though, such a man is morally deficient. Who could ever trust such a man in the future? Who would want to associate with such a defective human being? Who would want to trust such a man in any context? The man who immorally withholds a “get” forfeits his good name in this world, and will have to answer to the Almighty in the next world.

When a marriage has ended in divorce, and one party or the other attempts to alienate the children from their mother/father, this is a serious and unhealthy situation. For the sake of the welfare of the children, divorced spouses need to find ways to create an amicable arrangement. One does not “win” by alienating children from their mother or father. One does not “win” by finding ways to punish a divorced spouse. Unless there are circumstances where the divorced spouse is a danger to the children’s lives, each spouse needs to be compassionate and respectful. Vindictiveness does the children a disservice. It also undermines the “winner’s” reputation in the eyes of others. Who would want to befriend or trust such a person?

The Mishna (Sotah 1:7) teaches that “bemidah she-adam moded kakh modedim lo,” i.e. a person will be subject to the same standard of judgment that he/she uses in judging others. The Almighty will exact retribution in consonance with one’s own standards of judgment. If a person willfully harms another, the Heavenly court will exact payment. If a person sees injustice but looks aside, the Heavenly court will look aside when passing judgment on his/her soul. If one has betrayed the trust of others, one can expect exact retribution when facing Divine justice. There are no free rides: cruelty, injustice, vindictiveness and betrayal will all be repaid, measure for measure.
On the other hand, if a person is righteous and compassionate, he/she will be repaid measure for measure. The great Hassidic master, Rabbi Levi Yitzchak of Berdichev, was famous for finding virtue and merit in everyone, even those who were unworthy of such kindness. He is said to have prayed to the Almighty: “Oh merciful Father, please have mercy on me as I have had mercy on my fellow human beings; please show me compassion as I have shown compassion to all.”

The Jerusalem Talmud (end of the tractate Peah) relates that a blind man came to town and the prominent sage, Rabbi Eliezer, sat next to him. When the community saw that Rabbi Eliezer showed such honor on the blind man, people assumed that the visitor must be a person of importance. They provided generous sustenance to him. The blind man inquired why he had merited such wonderful care. He was told that Rabbi Eliezer had sat next to him and this caused the public to hold the visitor in high esteem. The blind man then offered a blessing to Rabbi Eliezer: “You have shown compassion to one who is seen but who does not see. May the One who sees and is not seen receive your prayers and shower compassion on you.”

We are each challenged to recognize that we will be judged and treated by the same standards with which we conduct our lives. May we be worthy to offer this prayer: “May the One who sees and is not seen receive our prayers and shower compassion on us.”

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