

Religion, Love and Hatred: Thoughts on Parashat Vayetzei, December 5, 2008

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We like to think that religion brings people closer to God and closer to each other. We like to think that religion imbues virtue, morality and righteousness, along with a genuine commitment to help others with love and compassion. As in Jacob's dream recorded in this week's Torah portion, religion is a ladder linking earth to heaven. It is rooted in the needs and concerns of earthly life, but inspired by a grand and heavenly vision. The angels ascending and descending the ladder remind us that life has ups and downs--but that we must keep our feet firmly on earth, and our eyes idealistically to heaven.

That's what we like to think.

Yet, reality sometimes impinges on this comforting worldview. In the name of religion, an Inquisition inflicted horrible tortures on "heretics", confiscated property, intimidated innocent people, burnt people at the stake. In the name of religion, terrorists kill innocent civilians in Jerusalem, New York, London, Istanbul, Mumbai--and so many more places. These "religious people" perpetrate the most heinous, vicious crimes against humanity--all in the name of God. In the name of religion, untold numbers of Jews were deprived of rights, and were subjected to violence, expulsion and murder--and continue to be persecuted to this day, in the name of religion.

Within the Jewish community, we also have "religious" zealots who defy our vision of religion as a source of love and human harmony. Thankfully, our zealots have generally chosen not to engage in suicide terrorist missions nor to torture people of different faiths. Nonetheless, the rise of religious extremism fosters hatred of "the other", and de-legitimization of those of different beliefs and backgrounds. Religious extremism--of whatever religion--rests on the notion that the zealots have the full truth, and that "the others" are not to be loved, respected or even tolerated.

Many years ago, I was walking through the streets of Jerusalem on Tisha b'Av. I remembered the Talmudic statement (Yoma 9b) that the Temple was destroyed because of "sinat hinam". Ordinarily, this phrase is translated as "baseless hatred". It occurred to me, though, that there is no such thing as "baseless

hatred". Whoever hates someone, however wrong that hatred is, still does not think the hatred is baseless. One hates based on the fact that the victim is of a different religion or race, a member of another nation etc. The hater almost always thinks the hatred is justified.

What then did the Talmud mean by "sinat hinam"? I think that "hinam" in this phrase is derived from the word "hen", meaning grace or charm. One of the tragedies of society is that people tend to see others as objects, as stereotypes. It is easy to hate someone who has been dehumanized, who has been labeled with an odious title. It is far more difficult to hate someone when you look into his/her eyes and realize that this person also has "hen". This human being, like you, has feelings, loves family, has fears and hopes and aspirations. "Sinat hinam" occurs when people hate to see the "hen" in others. This type of hatred results in societal discord, in violence, in cruelty, in terrorism. It was this sin--hating the "hen" in others--that led to the destruction of the Temple in ancient Jerusalem. The Jewish factions fought among themselves, dehumanized each other. They did not focus on the challenges posed by the enemy or on ways to ameliorate their situation.

We must learn to see "the other" as a reflection of our own selves. We must be sympathetic and empathetic; we must seek to see the intrinsic humanity, the "hen", of others. This is a basic lesson of religion: to appreciate the shared humanity of all human beings, and to improve the world in the spirit of God.

Religious extremism is dangerous not merely to the immediate victims of hatred and terror. It undermines the humanity of the extremists themselves. It threatens the fabric of human civilization. It is a disgrace to religion, and a desecration of God's name.

"And he dreamt: and behold, there was a ladder standing on the earth and its top reached to the heavens; and behold, angels of the Lord ascended and descended on it." By respecting the "hen" of others, we can help humanity ascend the ladder to a closer relationship with the Almighty.

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