When Silence is not Golden--Thoughts on Parashat Vayikra

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By
Rabbi Marc D. Angel

Angel for Shabbat, Parashat Vayikra

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Over the years, I've attended many dinners and events in support of worthy causes. I well remember attending dinners on behalf of Yeshiva University, Yeshivot Bnei Akiva, Manhattan Day School etc.--and I was impressed by the fact that I would meet a particular man at each of these dinners. He was always very gracious to me, and would come to greet me at the smorgasbord as though we were old friends. I assumed he was a great philanthropist, who was a generous supporter of all these worthy institutions who were sponsoring the fundraising dinners. But I did not even know his name!

At one of these dinners, I saw this gentleman speaking with a friend of mine. When their conversation ended, I went over to my friend and asked the name of the person with whom he was speaking. I indicated that I marvelled at this man's generosity and loyalty to so many institutions. My friend responded: that man is no philanthropist; he never contributes a cent to any of these institutions. He simply keeps track of when and where charity dinners take place, and then he shows up for the smorgasbord for a free meal. He not only doesn't contribute; he eats his meals at the expense of the charities! So instead of being a righteous philanthropist, this man was a freeloader.

We may all agree that this man had a miserable character. But were his actions in the category of sins? He ate food to which he was not entitled, so perhaps that can be construed as theft. But the sponsoring organizations didn't keep track of everyone who ate at the smorgasbord, so they may not have "pressed charges" against him.

In this week's Torah reading, we find a passage (Vayikra 5:1) that lists a person as a sinner, although he committed no positive sinful act. What was the sin? He/she was a witness who had vital information--but withheld it. He/she did not come forward even after the court issued an order for all those with evidence to appear in court. This person didn't lie or cheat or steal: this person simply remained silent. The Torah tells us that staying silent when you have evidence is a sin--a sin of omission if not of commission. One must atone for the sin of remaining silent. It is a moral outrage; it is a desecration of the teachings of Torah.

Even if a person commits no overt sin, he/she may be guilty of sin simply by remaining silent, by looking the other way, by sidestepping responsibility. When we support worthy institutions, we express our vote in favor of their work; when we abstain from supporting them, we express our vote of apathy, or neglect, or the feeling that we'd rather let others take responsibility. When we raise our voices against injustice, anti-Semitism, anti-Israel propaganda, we demonstrate our loyalty and commitment to righteousness; when we remain silent, we are de facto voting for injustice and for the forces of hatred of Jews and Israel.

In the sphere of morality, there is no free smorgasbord. We either are supporters of righteousness, or we are passive accomplices to unrighteousness. If we believe in something, then we must step forward and play our positive role to advance the cause. If we withhold our commitment, loyalty and resources, we are voting against the very causes we claim to espouse. Those who benefit from these institutions without having given them support are much like my "friend" who ate at the smorgasbords without contributing a cent. There is moral culpability.

When one's voice must be raised on behalf of justice and righteousness, silence is not golden.

Angel for Shabbat