Humanity and Individual Human Beings: Thoughts on Parashat Aharei Moth

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Angel for Shabbat, Parashat Aharei Moth

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A popular quip has it that "I love humanity; it's the people I don't like." It sometimes seems easier to love an abstract concept like humanity, or the Jewish people, or the community--rather than to love actual individuals. After all, individual human beings are not always pleasant or nice, courteous or considerate. Individuals can be rude, obnoxious, violent, immoral. We can more easily love the abstract concept of humanity, rather than having to deal with the negative features of particular individuals.

Dr. Robert Winters, who taught at Princeton University in the 1960s, offered a different perspective. "When I look at the human race all over the world, I think there's zero reason for humanity to survive. We're destructive, uncaring, thoughtless, greedy, power hungry. But when I look at a few individuals, there seems every reason for humanity to survive." Humanity as a whole may be rotten, but uniquely good and loving individuals make things worthwhile. Life takes on meaning not by focusing attention on "humanity", but by appreciating particular human beings, outstanding individuals.

Our task is to foster a healthy commitment to humanity; but also to appreciate the unique value of individual people. How can we achieve this balanced perspective?

We may draw insight from the Torah's discussion of the Mishkan and the service of sacrifices that took place within it. The Mishkan had two major focal points. The ark held the tablets of the law. The ark reminded the public of the experience at Mt. Sinai which involved the whole people of Israel, and which impacted on all of humanity. When we think of the Revelation, we don't think of individual faces and names, but of the collectivity--the ideal of Israel's peoplehood, the ideal of a humanity that recognizes one God.

The other focal point in the Mishkan was the altar upon which sacrifices were offered. The altar was where individuals brought their sin offerings, thanksgiving offerings etc. The altar symbolizes the prayers and emotions and sacrifices of individuals--each coming forward as a unique human being reaching out to God. The ark reminds us to think of the people of Israel and humanity; the altar reminds us to focus on the individual's distinctive qualities and feelings.

In this week's Torah portion, Aaron is told to bring an atonement offering for himself, his household, and for all the community of Israel. This provides an important pattern. First, we need to begin by purifying ourselves. Then, we reach out to include our household. Then we include the entire people of Israel. A midrash teaches that offerings were brought not only for the people of Israel but on behalf of the 70 nations of the world.

A proper religious worldview is achieved when we can balance our love of the community, Israel and humanity--with our love and concern for our fellow individual human beings. This entire process depends on our first purifying ourselves and making sure that we are the best possible people we can be. If our own spiritual life is in order, we will be able to love Israel and humanity--and love the individual people who make up Israel and humanity.

Angel for Shabbat