Desecration of God's Name: Sanctification of God's Name--Thoughts on Parashat Va-et-hanan, August 1, 2009

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And you shall keep and fulfill [the laws of the Torah]; for that is your wisdom and your understanding before the eyes of the nations that will hear all these statutes and will say: 'what a wise and understanding nation is this people.' (Devarim 4:6)

The great medieval Italian Jewish commentator, Rabbi Obadia Seforno, indicated that Jews are supposed to conduct their lives in such a way as to win the praise of the non-Jewish nations. As the Torah itself states, the nations of the world should look upon us and be awe-inspired by the righteousness of our Torah way of life. They should want to emulate our wisdom and our morality.

When Jews do not live up to this standard, they demean the glory of the Torah.They commit that terrible sin known as "hillul Hashem", desecration of the Name of God.

Certainly, Jews are not perfect. All of us have faults. It cannot be reasonably expected that every Jew will be a paragon of perfection. Yet, we cringe when we learn of Jewish criminals, con artists, bribe givers and bribe takers. We shudder when we see pictures of Jews--including those dressed in the garb of pious rabbis--who have been arrested for illegal practices. The light of Torah is darkened; the Name of God is shamed.

It is particularly heinous when rabbis succumb to immoral, criminal behavior. They are supposed to be exemplars for us and for the community at large. When they commit crimes, they betray the trust of their entire community. How are people supposed to regain confidence in religious leaders, if even the most trusted of them have shown themselves to be common criminals?

These past few days--and months--have been very painful for the Jewish community. We need to condemn the villains, but also the culture in which these villains flourished. We need to strengthen our own moral fiber, and reassure our children and grandchildren that we will all come together to reassert the integrity and glory of Torah in the eyes of the world. We need to live our lives remembering that our deeds reflect on ourselves--but also on the entire Jewish

people, on the Torah, and on the Master of the Universe.

The Talmud, Yebamoth 86a, provides the guidance we all need: "If someone studies Torah and Mishnah, and attends on the disciples of the wise, is honest in business, and speaks pleasantly to others, what do people then say concerning him? Happy the parent who taught him Torah, happy the teacher who taught him Torah; woe unto people who have not studied the Torah. For this man has studied the Torah--look how fine his ways are, how righteous his deeds...But if someone studies Torah and Mishnah, attends on the disciples of the wise, but is dishonest in business, and discourteous in his relations with people, what do people say about him? Woe unto him who studies the Torah, woe unto his parent who taught him Torah, woe unto his teacher who taught him Torah. This man studied the Torah, look how corrupt are his deeds, how ugly his ways.

It is the sacred privilege and responsibility of each Jew to sanctify God's name by living according to the highest standards of Torah morality. Each one of us is an ambassador of Torah. Each one of us can add light to the moral darkness that pervades our society. Let us rise to the challenge. The antidote to "hillul Hashem" is "kiddush Hashem", sanctifying God's name through living a life of honesty, compassion, sanctity.

***The Angel for Shabbat column is presented as a service of the Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals, jewishideas.org. Please forward this column to your friends and neighbors, and feel free to reprint it for circulation in your synagogues and schools.

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