Racial/Ethnic Discrimination? Thoughts on Parashat Shofetim, August 22, 2009

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"...lest his heart become haughty against his brethren..." Devarim 17:20

The Torah teaches emphatically that all people--even the king--must not become haughty, must not look down on others. All human beings are created in God's image, and all are entitled to fair treatment. This concept is underscored in the Mishnah (Sanhedrin 4:5) that describes how witnesses were examined before giving testimony in capital cases. They were reminded that God began humanity by creating only one man: this is to teach that each human being is unique and irreplaceable, and that each life is like a universe. It also teaches us that all human beings ultimately descend from the same ancestors, Adam and Eve, so that no one should say "my pedigree is better than yours". The Mishnah echoes the Torah's insistence that no one should puff himself up with self-importance, but should rather realize--humbly and honestly--that all human beings are equal in the eyes of God. To discriminate against others based on race or ethnic origin is to violate basic teachings of Judaism.

All Jews who have received even a modicum of religious education know this to be true. Yet, there sometimes seems to be a gap between what we know and what we do.

The Supreme Court in Israel recently ruled against a Beit Yaacov school in the Israeli town of Immanuel. That school, purporting to be a right-wing religious establishment, had blatantly discriminated against its Sephardic students, making them enter the school through a different door, requiring them to wear different uniforms, and actually building a wall to separate them from the Ashkenazic students. Those who ran the school and enforced these heinous policies did not seem to think they were doing anything wrong. In their (warped) minds, it is fine to discriminate against children based on their ethnic origins. Fortunately, a group of Israeli activists sued the school and has won the case. The school will now be forced to create a fair and equal environment for all its students. It remains to be seen, though, if the school officials and teachers will change their hateful attitudes. Let us pray that they decide to observe Torah properly by demonstrating respect and kindness to all.

A recent article in the Israeli newspaper, Ha-Arets, reports that between 100 and 200 children of Ethiopian Jewish background have not been accepted into religiously-run schools in Petah Tikvah. The reason: the schools don't want Ethiopian children. This is the ugly face of racial hatred--and it shows itself in schools that present themselves as being "religious". It needs to be pointed out clearly and forcefully: any school that enforces discriminatory policies and attitudes is NOT RELIGIOUS. It pretends to foster Jewish law and tradition, but in fact makes a mockery of Torah and rabbinic tradition. No parent should allow his/her children to attend such schools. No one should contribute financially to such schools. Efforts must be made to replace administrators and teachers who foster these repulsive and anti-Torah policies.

The problem of racial/ethnic discrimination is not confined to these few schools in Israel. It is evident in many communities. People of one Jewish background somehow take it for granted that they are the normative group, and those Jews of other backgrounds are "ethnic" or "exotic" and just not quite equal to them. They puff themselves up and are disdainful of those who come from different backgrounds. Their smug mindset leads them to look down on, speak rudely of, and act disrespectfully to those who are different. The discriminatory pattern is so ingrained, that they don't even realize they are committing horrible sins against their fellow Jews and fellow human beings. They live in the haughty self-assurance that they--and they alone--are God's true Jewish children. Such individuals--even if they observe so many mitzvoth--cannot rightly be described as being religious. They are charlatans who disgrace the Torah's true message.

Those who have felt the sting of racial/ethnic discrimination can never quite overcome the deep pain. It is ever so difficult to forgive those who have treated them with disdain, who have spoken to them meanly, who have negated their self-worth and the worth of their family traditions. Yet, they must learn to grow and to forgive. But they must also learn to fight--with every grain of their moral fervor--against those individuals and institutions which foster injustice, hatred, disrespect, discrimination. They must lead the way to creating a Jewish people that lives up to the ideals of Torah--the equality of all in the presence of God. Let all truly religious Jews join in this effort.

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