Truth, Compassion--and the Vindication of Humanity: Thoughts for Parashat Shelah Lekha

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Angel for Shabbat, Parashat Shelah Lekha

by Rabbi Marc D. Angel

A Midrash tells that when the Almighty was about to create Adam, a debate broke out among the angels. Some advised Him not to create human beings, others urged him to create humanity. Hesed (compassion) said: let human beings be created because they will do acts of kindness. Emet (truth) said: let them not be created because they will be filled with lies. Tsedek (righteousness) said: create them because they will do acts of justice. Shalom (peace) said: don't create them because they will be filled with strife.

God then cast Emet down to earth. The angels objected: why did you treat Emet disrespectfully, since Truth is Your hallmark? God replied: The truth will blossom forth from the earth.

And then Adam was created.

At the very point of the creation of humanity, this Midrash teaches, it was clear that human beings would be a mixed blessing. They would form a society filled with lies and strife--but also filled with compassion and peace. In weighing the pluses and minuses, God opted for creating humanity. He planted Truth into the soil of the earth, with the confidence that one day Truth will blossom, and humanity will be redeemed.

In rabbinic tradition, Moses is identified with Truth and Aaron is identified with Compassion. God chose to give commandments through both of them. If Moses was often strong and demanding, Aaron was often resilient and kind. Moses and Aaron represent two essential qualities--Truth and Compassion--which together can tilt humanity in the right direction.

The Jewish people, over these past thousands of years, have sought to live according to the ideals and laws taught by Moses and Aaron. We have been impressively committed to finding a proper balance between Truth and Compassion; we have sought the redemption of humankind by seeking ultimate Truth, and by rejecting the falsehoods and idolatries that fill the human imagination. We have stressed the centrality of lovingkindness and charity.

There has long been a dissonance between our inner world of Truth and Compassion--and the external world in which we live, a world in which lies and violence abound. Throughout the ages, Jews have been subjected to one persecution after another; every sort of lie has been lodged against us; we have been maligned and murdered generation after generation. We look around at our world today, and see that repressive nations are given seats of honor at the UN--and Israel is routinely condemned! We see terrorist regimes threatening Israel, firing missiles into Israel--and the world faults Israel consistently. We see anti-Semitic lies go unchallenged, we see terrorism against Jews idealized, we see a world full of "good people" who stand by and do nothing or say nothing in defense of the Jewish people.

And yet, we persist in our inner spiritual world. We say our prayers each day. We maintain faith in God, and in the ultimate redemption of humanity. Our faith in God is remarkable; but our faith in humanity is even more remarkable. After all we have experienced, can we really believe that people will change for the better, that their hatred and lies and violence will come to an end?

The figure of Moses reminds us that we cannot compromise in our search for truth. We cannot shy away from the demand for genuine justice. The figure of Aaron reminds us that we must not forget about human frailty and fear, we cannot lose sight of compassion and peace. Jewish life--and human life in general--must be a dynamic process of thinking and growing and courageous commitment to those values which redound to the glory of humanity. When we see ugly behavior and hear ugly words around us, we realize how far humanity still is from fulfilling God's hopes for us.

God cast Emet to the earth, indicating that the day will surely come when Truth will blossom forth, when individuals and nations will admit their lies and injustices and cruelties. On that day, not only will the Jews be redeemed, but so will all the nations of the world. Truth will become so clear, that all human beings will cleanse their souls and recognize the hand of God in history.

When we strive to internalize the teachings and characteristics of Moses and Aaron, we bring more Truth and Compassion into the world. In our day to day lives, these little steps may seem trivial in the face of the many problems confronting us and humanity. Yet in the cosmic struggle for the soul of humankind, we move the world a little closer to the day when Truth will blossom forth from the earth. May this day come sooner rather than later.

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