Retaining our Humanity:Thoughts on Parashat Shemot

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Angel for Shabbat, Parashat Shemot

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"And he turned this way and that way, and saw that there was no man."

When Moses saw an Egyptian taskmaster beating an Israelite slave, he looked around before striking the Egyptian down. This passage is usually understood to mean that he wanted to be sure that he would not be seen when he slew the Egyptian.

The passage might be understood in a different way. Moses was outraged by the entire system of slavery. He saw one group of people oppressing another group of people, treating the slaves as chattel rather than as fellow human beings. By dehumanizing the Israelites, the Egyptians felt no remorse in beating them, forcing them to do backbreaking work, condemning their children to death. The taskmasters had lost their humanity.The abusive treatment of slaves exacted a psychological as well as physical price; the slaves came to see themselves as inferiors to their masters; they lost self-respect along with their freedom.

When Moses was confronted with a specific instance of an Egyptian beating a Hebrew slave, he realized that "there was no man"--the oppressor had become a savage beast, the oppressed had become a work animal. The human element had vanished; there was no mercy, no mutual respect, no sympathy for each other. It was this recognition that was more than Moses could bear. He rashly killed the Egyptian--which did not solve the problem at all. He was then compelled to flee for his own life. He stayed for many years in the tranquility of Midian, working as a lonely shepherd. He could not deal with the injustices taking place in Egypt--a land where 'there was no man', a land where people had been reduced to animal status, to objects rather than subjects.

The Torah's story of the redemption of the Israelite slaves is ultimately a profound lesson teaching that each human being has a right to be free, to be a dignified human being, to be treated (and to treat others) as a fellow human being. Slavery is an evil both for the oppressor and the oppressed. It is a violation of the sanctity of human life.

Dehumanization of others leads not just to disdain, or even to slavery; it leads to violence and murder. Dehumanization is how terrorists justify murder: they see their victims as inferior beings, as infidels--not as fellow human beings created in the image of God. Dehumanization results in discrimination against those who are perceived to be "the other"--people of different ethnicity, religion, race, beliefs.

We know our society is in trouble when members of one group feel themselves innately superior to people of another group, and engage in stereotyping and dehumanizing them. We know that there is moral decay within the Jewish people, when Jews of one background feel themselves superior to Jews of another background, when they exhibit discriminatory behavior and language, when they dehumanize their fellow Jews and fellow human beings.

When human beings treat each other as objects, humanity suffers. When human beings see their kinship with other human beings and treat each other with respect, humanity begins its process of redemption. We can retain our own humanity only when we recognize the humanity of each of our fellow human beings.

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