Being True to Oneself and To Others:Thoughts on Parashat Behar

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By

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Some years ago, I attended a conference that attracted a number of rabbis and academics. At lunch, I found myself sitting next to a gentleman whose name tag indicated that he was a "Professor". Given his title, I assumed he taught in a university and I asked him what was his field.

He replied that he taught remedial English in a local Junior High School. While this is certainly a worthy position, I had never heard of a Junior High School teacher claiming the title "Professor". This struck me as an example of occupational inflation--an attempt to puff up one's credentials and self-importance. It was what Matthew Arnold would have called "the grand gesture, without the grand thing."

When people assume inflated titles and when they trump up their credentials, this indicates their own feelings of inadequacy. They assume that no one will respect them if they were truthful about themselves--so they fabricate fancy titles and honors in the hope of impressing the public with their worth.

In fact, such behavior does just the opposite. While some people may fall for the false titles and credentials, most people can see right through the ruse. Instead of gaining respect for the pretenders, they lose respect. What thinking person would want to honor someone who needs to stoop to title inflation, who tries to create a false and fraudulent self-image in the hope of impressing others?

No one is so worthy as the one who does not need to pretend about his/her worthiness. No one is more believable than someone who is honest, truthful, and realistic about him/herself.

In this week's Torah portion, we read: "and you shall not wrong one another" (Vayikra 25:17). A Hassidic Rebbe, Reb Bunim, offered an insightful interpretation of this verse by changing the first letter of the Hebrew word "amito" from an "ayin" to an "aleph". According to his reading, the verse means: "and you shall not do injustice to your own truthfulness." A person needs to have an honest self-evaluation, and should not compromise his/her integrity by compromising his/her

truthfulness and trustworthiness.

In a society driven by competition, and desire for prestige and power, it happens often enough that people lose sight of this basic teaching. They want to advance; they want to be respected. In the process, they forget who they are. They inflate themselves into something untruthful; they insist that others accept their false self-evaluation; they do injustice to their own truthfulness and trustworthiness. They fool some of the people some of the time. In the long run, though, they do not fool anyone--least of all their own selves. How immensely sad!

We each are who we are; we each strive to be better, to grow, to become wiser. We need to take the time to understand who we are--our strengths and our weaknesses. We need to stay true to ourselves, and to others. If we lack honesty and truthfulness, we lack vital ingredients of a good, happy life.

To grow as truthful human beings, we must avoid trying to pass ourselves off for something we are not. Occupation "inflation" does not make us greater, but lesser. Puffed up egos do not make us more important, but less worthy.

"It has been told to you, O human being, what is good, and what the Lord does require of you: only to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God" (Micah 6:8).

Angel for Shabbat