The "Bystander Problem"--Thoughts for Parashat Yitro

View PDF

By
Rabbi Marc D. Angel

Angel for Shabbat, Parashat Yitro

by Rabbi Marc D. Angel

A Talmudic passage (Sotah 11a) offers an imaginary scenario relating to when Pharaoh was deciding to enslave the Israelites and murder their male babies. “Said Rabbi Hiyya son of Abba in the name of Rabbi Simai: Three were involved in that decision: Bilam, Job and Yitro.” Bilam, who advised in favor of these evil decrees, ultimately died a violent death. Job, who remained neutral, was later punished with horrible sufferings. Yitro, who opposed Pharaoh’s decrees, had to flee, but was ultimately rewarded so that his descendants were great teachers of Torah.

The moral lesson of this teaching is that those who promote evil—like Bilam-- are eventually punished. Those who courageously resist evil—like Yitro-- may suffer in the short run, but will ultimately be rewarded. Those—like Job--who remain neutral in the face of wickedness will endure horrible sufferings.

Bilam went along with Pharaoh’s decisions either because he actually agreed with Pharaoh, or because he thought it was in his own best interest not to resist the monarch. By being a “yes man”, Bilam would gain power and favors from Pharaoh. He had no qualms about becoming an accomplice to enslaving a whole nation and murdering their babies. Justice demands that Bilam be punished for his moral turpitude. Yitro resisted Pharaoh’s decisions, even at personal risk. Yitro would not be party to wicked decrees. He stood up on behalf of the endangered Israelites and was compelled to flee from Pharaoh’s wrath. Justice demands that Yitro be rewarded for his moral heroism.

But what about Job? What is the nature of his sin that made him deserving of terrible sufferings? After all, Job did not say that he agreed with Pharaoh; he did not validate Pharaoh’s decrees. He simply stayed silent. He was prudent. He may have thought: “Pharaoh is going to do this regardless of what I say. Why should I

endanger myself? Why should I incur his anger? Why should I stand up for the Israelites, or for righteousness, or for compassion? The safest thing for me is to remain neutral." For his neutrality, Job was punished. Abstaining from moral responsibility is also taking a stand! When evil is not resisted directly, it is thereby allowed to flourish. As the great 19th century political thinker Edmund Burke said: "All that the forces of evil need to prevail is that enough good men do nothing."

Evil flourishes in a moral vacuum. It cannot be extirpated without active resistance. Individuals and nations who "abstain" in the face of evil are accomplices of evil. Neutrality in the face of injustice and cruelty is not a morally acceptable position. Psychologists have written extensively on the "bystander problem." Why do so many stand aside when they witness violence, cruelty, injustice? Why doesn't everyone feel a moral commitment to stand up on the side of righteousness? Why are there so many Jobs and so few Yitros?

Job's neutrality—the "bystander problem"—might stem from perceived self-interest. Why should I get involved? Why should I take risks that might have negative consequences for me? Why should I antagonize those in power? A main reason for the "bystander problem", though, seems to be that people do not assume personal responsibility. They rationalize: there are others who can intercede, there are others who are better able to help, somebody else will take responsibility so it isn't necessary for me to get involved or to make personal sacrifices. It isn't that bystanders are necessarily immoral or heartless; rather, they may simply not take things personally. They think: It isn't my issue, it isn't my responsibility, it's for others to solve.

Erich Fromm observed: "Most people fail in the art of living not because they are inherently bad or so without will that they cannot live a better life; they fail because they do not wake up and see when they stand at a fork in the road and have to decide." This is the root of Job's sin: he did not wake up and realize he was at a fork in the road where he had to make a decision. That decision would define the nature of his character, his life itself. By remaining silent, he chose to be a "bystander", to let the forces of evil gain sway. He forfeited personal responsibility, not because he was a bad person but because he was a weak or self-centered person. The sufferings of others did not awaken moral indignation within him. As a result, he himself ultimately underwent horrendous sufferings.

The Talmudic lesson reminds us that we must not be part of the "bystander problem", but must take moral stands in the face of injustice, corruption and wickedness. We must accept personal responsibility, and not assume that others will solve the problems for us. The world is full of Pharaohs who promote

wickedness and injustice. The world is full of Bilams who are only too happy to go along with the powerful Pharaohs. The world is very full of Jobs who stay silent and neutral in the face of evil. The world has a shortage of Yitros who realize that they stand at a fork in the road and have to decide, and have to take personal responsibility.

Angel for Shabbat