Private Life and Public Exhibitionism: Thoughts on Parashat Vayeshev, December 17, 2011

View PDF

By
Rabbi Marc D. Angel

A recent scandal in our community relates to an article written by a student in an Orthodox women's college, published in a school publication. The author of the article tells of a sexual encounter—real or imagined. Defenders of the article argue for the right of freedom of expression. Critics complain that the article (published anonymously) reflects immoral behavior and should not have been included in a student publication of an Orthodox school. The media have enjoyed reporting on this incident, as they enjoy reporting on scandals in general.

Why would a student write such an article? Why would the editors of the publication agree to publish it?

Ostensibly, the student wrote the article to unburden herself of guilt. By describing her (real or imagined) experience in a public way, she must have gained some psychic relief. The editors chose to publish the article as a way of generating thought and discussion about an issue that seldom is discussed openly in an Orthodox school.

Seen in a wider context, it seems that a lot of people like to tell stories of their personal lives to large audiences. The media are filled with television shows where people tearfully confess their various sins; with salacious newspaper and magazine articles; with internet programs/facebook etc. where people reveal intimate details of their personal lives to be seen by any who choose to tune in. Exhibitionism seems to be fashionable among a large number of people. Modesty and personal discretion are not too popular in the modern media culture.

Many people do not seem to realize that there must be a boundary between private life and public life. It has been noted that not everything that is thought should be said; not everything that is said should be written; not everything that is written should be published. Modesty and personal discretion are important ingredients in life; one must be able to discern when to act/speak, and when silence is preferable. One must know and appreciate the value of privacy and personal dignity.

This week’s Torah portion offers examples of serious mistakes in interpersonal relationships. Much agony could have been spared if the people involved would have maintained a proper boundary between private thoughts and public behavior and speech.

Jacob showed favoritism to Joseph and made him a special coat of many colors. Every parent knows (or should know) that showing favoritism to a child is an egregious error. It leads to jealousies and antagonisms among the children. Even if Jacob privately had a special love for Joseph, he could have/should have kept this to himself to the extent possible. By public shows of favoritism to Joseph, Jacob undermined the peace of his own family.

Joseph must surely have sensed that his brothers were jealous of him. Yet, when he had dreams that implied his lordship over them, he went to them and related these dreams. Why didn’t he just keep these dreams to himself? Why did he feel the necessity to tell the brothers his dreams, when this could only deepen their hostility to him?

If Jacob and Joseph had acted and spoken with more discretion, if they had kept their thoughts and dreams to themselves—the family would have been much happier and healthier.

One must know when to speak and when to refrain from speaking. One must have the intellectual and moral tact to know when and where it is appropriate to reveal one’s inner thoughts, and when it is appropriate to be silent.

Maimonides discusses the issue of whether one should confess sins in public. In Hilkhot Teshuva 2:5, he notes that it is a great virtue for a penitent to confess his/her sins in public and reveal sins that had been committed against others. This is part of the process of repentance. It makes a person face up to his/her sins, and to be humbled by his/her errors. Yet, Maimonides then states that this rule applies only to sins committed against fellow human beings. “But sins between a person and God need not be publicized, and it is brazen to publicize them; rather, one should repent before God, blessed be He…”

If one has committed crimes against others, one should admit these crimes and face the public censure that comes with this confession. If one has committed religious indiscretions that are a matter between him/her and God, then it is brazen to announce these sins in public. Rather, one should confess these transgressions privately, keeping them as a private matter between him/her and God.

The media climate of “say-all/tell-all” encourages people to cross the line between the private and public aspects of their lives. It encourages people to compromise their dignity and self-respect.

When one has a “private” issue to discuss, one should discuss it privately with a trusted mentor or friend. If one feels guilty or unhappy about something, it is helpful to talk things out with someone who can help one to cope better with the situation. If one feels that a certain topic needs to be brought to the public’s attention, one can find means of doing this without engaging in personal confessions.

Blurring the boundaries between private life and public exhibitionism is not simply a religious error; it is a mistake in the way we deal with our own humanity.

Angel for Shabbat