Truth and Consequences:Thoughts for Parashat Shofetim, August 25, 2012

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Rabbi Akabia ben Mahalel lived in the generation before the destruction of the Temple by the Romans in 70 CE. He was known for his piety and profound erudition. The Talmud reports (Mishnah Eduyot 5:6) that he disputed with the other rabbis on various issues of Jewish law.

Akabia's colleagues wanted him to back down from his views and to accept the majority opinions. He refused. They offered to appoint him as the Av Bet Din, head of the authoritative rabbinic court—if only he would withdraw his opinions and accept theirs. Akabia replied: "It would be better for me to be called a fool all my life rather than to be wicked in the eyes of God for even one moment." He would prefer to be disdained by his colleagues rather than betray his integrity, rather than appear false in the eyes of God.

Akabia is a model of intellectual courage and moral strength. Truth is not for sale, not to be traded in exchange for power or honor. We are answerable, after all, to Almighty God.

Akabia's attitude is reflected in the words of this week's Torah portion: "Tsedek tsedek tirdof," you shall surely pursue justice. Our commentators have understood this phrase to mean: you shall pursue justice in a just way, using just means. We are commanded to be scrupulously just, through and through.

Akabia's commitment to truth was uncompromising. He would not succumb to the blandishments and flattery of his colleagues. He would not issue a ruling that he considered wrong, even as a means of keeping peace among his colleagues.

Yet, before Akabia died, he instructed his son to accept the rulings of the rabbis, who were the majority! While he himself could not accede to the majority views since these views contradicted the teachings Akabia had received from his teachers—the son was obligated to follow the views of the majority—the leaders and teachers of the son's generation.

Akabia was willing to withstand a lifetime of suffering as a lonely “minority of one” due to his commitment to truth. Yet, he fully understood that his colleagues had other views as to what the truth was; normative Jewish law was determined by majority opinion. While Akabia was a “martyr” to his view of truth, he wanted this martyrdom to be limited only to himself, not to future generations.

Akabia is a classic example of principled commitment to one’s traditions and truths, even at high personal cost. But he is also a classic example of broad-visioned wisdom. He understood that minority opinions, however valid they may seem, ultimately must give way to the views of the majority of sages. The sages, after all, are also seekers of truth and perfect justice; they are also learned and thoughtful people who seek to be faithful to God’s word.

When mediating between our personal opinions and the differing views of the majority of our colleagues, we need to keep Akabia’s example in mind. It is right and proper to stand up for the truth as we see it. But it is also right and proper that our disputes not be passed down through the generations.

Angel for Shabbat