The "Paper Towel Syndrome":Thoughts for Parashat Vayeshev

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Angel for Shabbat, Parashat Vayeshev

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Joseph was talented, capable and God-fearing. He did so much for so many. Yet, he almost always seemed to be forgotten.

This week's Parasha reports that the imprisoned Joseph correctly interpreted the dream of Pharaoh's butler, indicating that he would be restored to his former position. In return for this, Joseph asked the butler to remember him to Pharaoh who could release him from prison where he had been unjustly placed. But the Torah states that the butler "did not remember Joseph, and he forgot him." This repetitious phrase indicates not merely normal forgetfulness, but a conscious effort to eradicate Joseph's good deed from his mind.

Later in the Torah, we learn that Joseph saved the Egyptians from famine due to his correct interpretation of Pharaoh's dreams and his practical planning to store food during the seven years of abundance. But no sooner had Joseph died, when a new Pharaoh arose "who did not know Joseph." Of course, he had to have known about Joseph's remarkable achievements on behalf of Egypt. Yet, the Pharaoh preferred to "forget," to make as though he did not know of Joseph.

Before his death, Joseph asks the Israelites to remember him when they ultimately return to their own land. He asked that they be sure to take his remains with them for reburial in Canaan. Yet, when the time of redemption is at hand, the Israelites are busy collecting gold and silver from the Egyptians; Joseph's bones are not on their minds. Only Moses remembers Joseph. Moses sees to it that Joseph's remains are brought out of Egypt during the Exodus. Joseph suffered from what I have called "the paper towel syndrome."

Paper towels are used and then tossed away without an afterthought. They are expendable. Once people have gotten what they need, they unceremoniously discard the used paper. The paper towel syndrome manifests itself when people exploit others, squeeze out whatever benefit they can derive, and then discard these people and forget them fairly quickly. In a healthy society, people are valued as human beings; they are respected and appreciated. In an unhealthy society, people are treated like paper towels—exploited, tossed away, and forgotten. The Joseph narratives in the Torah remind us that the paper towel syndrome affects even the greatest of human beings. Only Moses maintained the loyalty and decency to care for Joseph. Everyone else—Egyptians and Israelites alike—took advantage of Joseph's wisdom and beneficence….but then tossed him away once he no longer seemed to be of use to them.

When the value of human life is measured purely by one's utility, then people cease to be full human beings. Rather, they become things—tools of production. The ones who suffer from the paper towel syndrome are not just the "paper towels" but the exploiters as well. Since they treat others like paper towels, the day will surely come when they themselves will fall victim to their own philosophy of life. They will become paper towels.

In his essay, "The Community", Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik underscored that halakha demands high respect for the dignity of others. "To recognize a person is not just to identify him physically. It is more than that: it is an act of identifying him existentially…To recognize a person means to affirm that he is irreplaceable. To hurt a person means to tell him that he is expendable, that there is no need for him." In other words, to recognize a person means to affirm that he/she has human value, that he/she is appreciated, that he/she matters to us. To hurt a person means to treat him/her as a "paper towel," expendable, to be used and discarded.

Certainly, we do not act kindly because we want or expect a show of gratitude. We do what is good and what is right because it is good and because it is right. Yet, how much nicer our world would be if we and others avoided the "paper towel syndrome," if we all could develop that sensitivity and graciousness to recognize the human dignity of others. Just as others should not treat us as "paper towels," so we need to be very careful not to treat others as such. If ingratitude and callousness are signs of morally deficient human beings, gratitude and sensitivity are hallmarks of humanity at its best.

Angel for Shabbat