Sins Against Others, and Sins Against Ourselves: Thoughts for Parashat Vayikra, March 16, 2013

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By
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Ruth Calderon, a new member of the Israel Knesset, has a Sephardic father and an Ashkenazic mother. She was raised outside the Orthodox religious establishment in Israel, but has earned a doctorate in Talmudic literature from the Hebrew University. She works to bridge gaps among all segments of Israeli society.

In her inaugural speech in the Knesset, she made an impassioned plea for all Jews to draw on the wisdom of Torah. The Torah heritage does not belong to one segment of the Jewish population, but to all Jews.

In the course of her talk, she cited a Talmudic passage (Ketubot 62b) about Rabbi Rehumei who devoted his life to Torah study in the academy of Rava in Mehoza. Once a year, on the eve of Yom Kippur, he would leave the bet hamidrash to return home to his wife. One time, he was so engrossed in his studies that he forgot to return home. His wife was waiting eagerly for him. When she realized that he was not going to return, a tear rolled from her eye. At that moment, Rabbi Rehumei was at the yeshiva on the roof. The roof collapsed under him, and he died.

Ruth Calderon drew the following lessons from this story: One who forgets that he is sitting on another's shoulders will fall. Righteousness is not adherence to the Torah at the expense of sensitivity to human beings. In a dispute, both sides feel they are right and are doing the right thing. Rabbi Rehumei believed that studying Torah was the highest value. His wife thought that she was more correct, since all the work and responsibility of the household fell on her while her husband simply sat and studied. Mutual respect comes about when each side seriously understands the position of the other.

These are important lessons. Yet, I think this Talmudic story may be interpreted in a different way. The odd details of the story raise many questions.

If Rabbi Rehumei was so devoted to Torah study, why did he get married in the first place? What kind of marriage is it where a husband visits his wife once per year? Even this one visit was on Yom Kippur when marital intimacy is forbidden, and when Rabbi Rehumei would likely have spent the day in synagogue praying rather than speaking with his wife. Why didn't Rava, head of the academy, teach his student/s to be more responsible husbands? Why did Rabbi Rehumei's wife tolerate such an impossible marriage? When the tear rolled from her eye, why was her husband on a roof, rather than in the bet hamidrash proper? And why would the roof have collapsed just then? Did other students get injured, or was Rabbi Rehumei the only victim?

I think the Talmudic story is indicating a transformation within the mind of Rabbi Rehumei's wife (whose name is never given!). She had apparently been taught that it was proper for a husband to devote himself to Torah study, leaving all responsibility of the family and household to the wife. She had been "brainwashed" to think that this was the best and most pious way to serve God. She accepted these sacrifices for a number of years. If only her husband returned once a year, and even if that was only on the eve of Yom Kippur, she was willing to live within the system.

But when her husband failed her even on this one occasion, it dawned on her that her life had been a disaster. She was a victim of a "yeshiva system" that encouraged men to study Torah at the expense of the well-being of their wives. In fact, she had no real marriage to Rabbi Rehumei—he was away all year; his devotion was to Torah study, not to her. I don't think the tear from her eye was the result of her disappointed longing for her husband; rather, it was a tear of mourning for her own wasted years of life married to a man who had no real concern for her. When the Talmud reports that Rabbi Rehumei was on a roof that collapsed, this may be a figurative way of saying that in his wife's estimation, Rabbi Rehumei no longer was on a pedestal. When she understood how terrible her situation was, and how her husband had exploited her goodness for all these years, his status in her eyes plummeted. Whatever positive feelings she had toward him were now dead.

Some years ago, I heard a lecture by a prominent psychiatrist who described the following scenario. A husband and wife shared a bed and blanket; yet each morning, the husband woke up in bed with the entire blanket wrapped around him. The wife woke up on the floor, shivering, without a cover. The psychiatrist asked: who is the guilty party? The obvious answer is: the husband is at fault. He takes the bed and blanket for himself without consideration of his wife's needs.

The psychiatrist explained: yes, the husband is at fault. But equally at fault is—the wife!
Why is she at fault? She is the victim?

The answer: why didn't she speak up for herself? Why didn't she tell her husband that she had equal rights to the bed and blanket? Why did she accept an intolerable situation in silence, when she could have/should have confronted her husband to insist on an equitable arrangement? If she accepted the abuse in silence, then she shared in the responsibility for allowing the situation to persist.

I think this insight would have been helpful to Rabbi Rehumei's wife. Why did she allow years of her life to pass in such an unsatisfactory marriage arrangement? Why didn't she raise her concerns directly to her husband, or even to her husband's teachers at the yeshiva? Why didn't she speak with other such wives to see if they could work together to change a system that was so disdainful to the feelings of women? The system was allowed to persist due to the unwitting collaboration of the victims themselves!

Once Rabbi Rehumei's wife shed her tear, I think that was a great moment of clarity for her. She now realized that she could no longer tolerate the status quo. She no longer wished to be married to such a man or to live within such an oppressive system. She also had rights, she also had feelings that needed to be respected, she also had her own legitimate desires and aspirations.

This week's Torah portion describes various sin offerings that were brought as part of the Mishkan service. When we think of sins, we usually think of sins that we have committed against God's commandments or against our fellow human beings. We also need to think about sins that we commit against ourselves!

We sin against ourselves when we allow others to exploit us, when we do not stand up for our own legitimate rights and needs. We sin against ourselves when we bend our heads under the weight of a corrupt system that does not really care about our real feelings and needs.

Much human suffering could be alleviated if we avoid seeing ourselves as victims, but rather see ourselves as responsible human beings who can—and must—shape their own destiny to the extent possible.

Angel for Shabbat