Sinai and Sinah: Thoughts for Parashat Behar-Behukotai

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Angel for Shabbat, Behar-Behukotai

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Religion has two faces. One face is that of saintliness, idealism, holiness and selflessness. But the other face is one of hatred, cruelty, selfishness and egotism. Within the world of religion, one can find the most exemplary human beings; but one can also find inquisitors and terrorists. In his play, “The Father,” August Strindberg has one of his characters state: “It is strange that as soon as you begin to talk about God and love, your voice becomes hard and your eyes full of hate.”

This week’s Torah portion begins: “And God spoke with Moses on Mount Sinai.” According to a rabbinic homily, this special mountain was chosen for God’s revelation because it is a low, humble mountain. God wanted the recipients of Torah to appreciate the value of humility and to avoid the vice of arrogance. A Talmudic passage (Shabbat 89a-b) links the word Sinai with the word Sinah—hatred. Those who emulate the ideals of Sinai are those who reflect the beautiful face of religion. Those who breach those ideals fall into the trap of Sinah, becoming hateful and jealous.

There is a fine line between Sinai and Sinah. Sinai brings out the best in us; Sinah evokes the worst in us. Sinai symbolizes positive, responsible thought and action. Sinah represents negative, destructive energy.

Whereas Sinai gives people the benefit of the doubt, Sinah accuses and finds fault. Whereas Sinai calls on us to first obtain facts before lodging complaints, Sinah prods us to complain even when we do not have the facts or when we do not know all sides of the story.

Some years ago, the New York Times published an article by Professor Adam Grant, “Raising a Moral Child.” This article sheds light on the Sinai/Sinah dichotomy.

Professor Grant notes that when disciplining a child, a parent should be careful to criticize the child's actions, not the child him/herself. For example, one should not say: you are a bad boy/girl. Rather one should say: you behaved badly. One should not say: you are foolish; but rather, one should say: you acted foolishly. What is the difference?

When a parent says that a child is bad/foolish/stubborn etc., a child internalizes that indeed he/she is in essence bad, foolish, or stubborn. When a parent says that the child's behavior was unacceptable, then the lesson is: you are good, but your actions need correction. The child's self-respect is maintained, and he/she knows that he/she can improve. The child is not stigmatized by a negative self-image of being bad, foolish or stubborn by nature.

A Sinai approach is to criticize faulty behavior, in the hope of generating better behavior from the child in the future. A Sinah approach tears down the child's ego. This lesson applies not only to children. When criticizing others—including adults—one should not call names or give negative labels. Rather, one should address the problematic action or idea without casting aspersion on the basic goodness of the person being criticized.

Here is another distinction between Sinai and Sinah. Sinai, although humble and lowly, is still a mountain. It has weight and strength. Sinah is a bodiless emotion, not rooted, not permanent. Sinai teaches humility, but also the principle of holding fast to righteousness, of standing like a mountain against the forces of negativity. Sinah is the antithesis of calm, reasonable, moral courage. Sinah seeks to stir negative energy, creating dissension and confusion.

Sinai and Sinah represent two faces of religion, two approaches to life. How much happier we would be and how much better the world would be if everyone chose Sinai and repudiated Sinah.

Angel for Shabbat