Guilt and Redemption: Thoughts for Parashat Vayeshev

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By
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In his play, “All My Sons,” Arthur Miller portrays a family coping with a deep secret.

The head of the family, Joe Keller, was a manufacturer of engines for airplanes. During World War II, the government needed war materiel and Keller’s business boomed. In the midst of heavy production, a batch of engines came out with cracks. These cracks were covered up superficially, and the engines were sold to the government. The defective engines led to the deaths of 21 pilots. When the government investigated the matter, Keller managed to get exonerated, shifting the entire blame on to his partner—who was imprisoned. Keller and family continued to live well; Keller’s son Chris totally believed in the innocence of his father.

But the ugly truth could not stay buried forever. Chris became suspicious of his father’s claims of innocence, and finally confronted him. Keller could no longer hide from the truth. “Joe Keller: (to his son Chris) You're a boy, what could I do! I'm in business, a man is in business; a hundred and twenty cracked, you're out of business...You lay forty years into a business and they knock you out in five minutes, what could I do, let them take forty years, let them take my life away?...I never thought they'd install them. I swear to God. I thought they'd stop ‘em before anybody took off....Chris, I did it for you, it was a chance and I took it for you. I'm sixty-one years old, when would I have another chance to make something for you? Sixty-one years old you don't get another chance, do ya?”

After this admission, things spiral downward. Joe Keller commits suicide. Keller had lived a seemingly happy and successful life, while all the while he knew that he was responsible for selling defective engines, for causing the deaths of 21 pilots, for foisting the entire blame on to his partner. He maintained an illusion of

innocence; once that illusion was destroyed, so was his life.

How did he manage to maintain that illusion of innocence for so long? How did he sleep at night knowing the terrible things he had done? Like many people, Joe Keller was able to lie to himself, to block out feelings of guilt or personal responsibility. But the truth will out…and the consequences can be devastating.

In this week's Torah portion, we read several very troubling verses: "And they [Joseph's brothers] took him [Joseph] and cast him into the pit; and the pit was empty, there was no water in it. And they sat down to eat bread…" (Bereishith 37:24-25). It is difficult to imagine such hard-hearted callousness. The brothers were set to murder or sell Joseph; they threw him into a deep pit; and then they sat down to eat their lunch, as though nothing untoward had happened.

Where was their moral sense? Where were their feelings of guilt, of responsibility? This moral blindness continued for years to come. The brothers seem to have conducted their lives without losing sleep over what they had done to Joseph. They seem not to have been overly troubled by the pitiful grieving of their father Jacob. Like Joe Keller, they maintained an illusion of innocence. They somehow found ways of justifying their actions, or blocking them out of their consciousness.

Years later, the brothers appeared before Joseph in Egypt, not realizing that this harsh Egyptian ruler was in fact their own brother Joseph. Facing charges that they were spies, the brothers panicked. "And they said to one another: we are verily guilty concerning our brother in that we saw the distress of his soul when he besought us, and we would not hear; therefore is this distress come upon us" (Bereishith 42:21). The long-suppressed secret was out. Their guilt feelings finally emerged.

The story of Joseph's brothers and Joe Keller are like so many human stories. Sin, denial, guilt, remorse… How do criminals live with themselves after committing horrible crimes? How do people sleep peacefully at night after they have betrayed others in despicable ways? How do people maintain contented visages after they have sinned against God and humanity?

One of the hazardous features of human life is the ability to create illusions of innocence. People deny personal responsibility; or they justify their deeds; or they find scapegoats to blame; or they simply convince themselves of their own innocence. Moral blindness prevails. No one is perfect; everyone has said or done something wrong at some point in life.

The question is: how should one deal with moral failings? The first step is to be honest and self-critical. When one has sinned, one should face it directly. A strong moral conscience is the best preventative to moral blindness. The second step is not to let guilt feelings undermine life but to channel those feelings in a constructive direction. While the past sins cannot be undone, one can work diligently to atone for those sins and to work to create a better future. One can accept responsibility for past words and deeds, and make peace—to the extent possible—with the victims of those harmful words and deeds. The next step is to be vigilant against moral blindness in our own lives and in the lives of others.

Denying personal responsibility or deflecting blame to others are negative and self-destructive strategies. When criminals and betrayers of trust can sleep peacefully at night, this is a sign of their moral decadence. Only when they sense the gravity of their sins will they be able to free themselves from their moral turpitude. Only then can they take positive steps of atonement. Only then can they begin to redeem their lives.

Angel for Shabbat