The War Within: Thoughts for Parashat Ki Tetsei

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By

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The Torah portion opens with a discussion about going to war. Many of our rabbinic commentators have expanded the meaning of the text to refer not to wars against external enemies, but to wars against our own evil inclinations. These internal wars are battles for self-definition. Either we can win and live meaningfully and happily; or we can lose by succumbing to pressures that lead us to abandon our own values and ideals.

UBS Wealth Management Americas issued a report (April 28, 2015) based on a survey of 2,215 United States investors with more than one million dollars net worth. It found that while these wealthy individuals are pleased with their good fortune, “they feel compelled to strive for more, spurred on by their own ambition, their desire to protect their families’ lifestyle, and an ever-present fear of losing it all. As a result, many feel stuck on a treadmill, without a real sense of how much wealth would make them satisfied enough to get off.” The majority of those interviewed felt that they achieved financial success at the cost of losing precious time with family. Most felt that their children ran the risk of being spoiled, of not really knowing the value of money. And most felt the need to “keep up with the Joneses” thereby increasing their expenditures in maintaining their place in the rat race.

Rabbi Harold Kushner wrote a popular book, When All You’ve Ever Wanted Isn’t Enough. He describes how people strive to attain certain goals, but when they achieve these goals they are not necessarily happy. They have climbed the mountain and have an immediate sense of elation; but then they wonder what was gained by all that time and effort. Rabbi Kushner writes about people who have all the outward trappings of success, yet feel hollow inside. “They can never rest and enjoy their accomplishments. They need one new success after another. They need constant reassurance from the people around them to still the voice inside them that keeps saying, If other people knew you the way I know you, they would know what a phony you are.” (p. 17)

When I was a student at Yeshiva College, I was once in the 181st Street IRT subway station and noted a sentence that had been scribbled onto one of the

large advertisement posters on the wall of the subway platform. That sentence, by Alan Watts, had a profound impact on me then, and still resonates strongly with me fifty years later. “For when a man no longer confuses himself with the definition of himself that others have given him, he is at once universal and unique.” (Psychotherapy East and West, p. 9)

People are inauthentic when they strive to live according to the values and standards of others, and in the process forfeit their own values and standards. They know in themselves that they want to live happy and meaningful lives; yet they find themselves drawn into a rat race in which they fear to fall behind. They compete; they see others as antagonists; they adopt external standards of success and want to live in a big house, drive an expensive car, be important and have important friends. And when they have become “successful” they realize that the success is hollow. They’ve lost themselves in the process.

In his novel, Babbitt, Sinclair Lewis describes a highly successful businessman who seems to have everything he could have wanted. Yet, Babbitt felt a tremendous lack within himself. He had a beautiful house with appropriate furnishings. Yes, he had a house…but he felt he did not have a home. He was living someone else’s life, someone else’s dream.

If we spend our lives allowing others to define us, we will always feel a hollowness within, a sense of betrayal of our real selves. If we find that we are successful, and yet feel that our lives are vanity and striving after wind, then we know—perhaps too late—that we’ve taken the wrong path.

The war within ourselves is a war we cannot afford to lose. If we betray our ideals and our values, we end up betraying others, betraying our faith; and worst of all, we end up betraying ourselves.

Angel for Shabbat