The Dangers of "Echo Reasoning": Thoughts for Parashat Pinehas

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Angel for Shabbat, Parashat Pinehas
by Rabbi Marc D. Angel

The Book of Judges, chapter 11, tells the horrific story of Jephthah and his daughter. Jephthah was chosen to be the leader of the Israelites in their war against Amon. Before going to battle, he vowed that, if victorious, he would offer “whatsoever comes forth of the doors of my house to meet me” as a burnt offering to the Lord. When he returned triumphantly from the war, it was his daughter—his only child—who came out of the house to greet him with song and dance.

Though sorely grieved by the rash vow he had made, Jephthah said that he could not go back on his word. It appears from the biblical story that he did indeed sacrifice his daughter. Rabbinic tradition, though, includes the view that he did not murder his daughter, but had her life devoted to God. She was doomed to live the rest of her life in isolation from society.

The Midrash raises obvious questions: why didn’t Jephthah go to Pinehas, the high priest, and plead for his vow to be annulled? Or why didn’t Pinehas take the initiative to go to Jephthah so as to annul the vow and thereby save the daughter’s life?

Jephthah thought: I am the judge of Israel, and I will not humiliate myself by going to the high priest—a man of lower rank. Pinehas thought: I am the high priest, and I will not humiliate myself by showing deference to the judge—a man of lower spiritual rank. While each of them was jealous for his own dignity, the life of Jephthah’s daughter was sacrificed. The Midrash points out that God punished both Jephthah and Pinehas for their callousness, willfulness and egocentrism.

Yet, why did these leaders allow their pride to prevent them from acting intelligently and morally? I think this Midrash is underscoring a problem endemic to powerful or charismatic leaders. These individuals are accustomed to being honored, to having a retinue of admirers who fawn over them and agree with their every word. They internalize a feeling of invincibility and infallibility; they think that they do not make mistakes, or that they are not allowed to admit that they make mistakes. Their personal honor becomes a “false god”—they worship themselves!

In her book, “The March of Folly,” Barbara Tuchman describes the immorality and corruption which characterized a group of Renaissance Popes. Rodrigo Borgia, known as Pope Alexander VI, was an egregious example of depraved and luxurious living. Late in life, he was stricken with a moment of remorse. He told a consistory of cardinals: “The most grievous danger for any Pope lies in the fact that encompassed as he is by flatterers, he never hears the truth about his own person and ends by not wishing to hear it.”

I recently learned of a phenomenon called “echo reasoning.” This refers not merely to leaders, but to everyone who speaks and listens only to those with similar views. These views are echoed from one to the other, and become louder and more entrenched. It becomes

increasingly difficult to think beyond the “truths” of the group. Members of the closed circle become more extreme, less able to reason independently.

To be morally strong and intellectually sound, we need to be open to an array of views and to be open to criticism. We need to engage in honest self-evaluation—trying to avoid the egotism and pride that paralyzed Jephthah and Pinehas, Pope Alexander VI and victims of “echo reasoning.” We need to think; to challenge and be challenged; to express our views and listen to the views of others. Unless we have this intellectual and emotional flexibility, we run the risk of becoming our own “false gods”. We surround ourselves with flatterers and sycophants—with the result that our own humanity becomes hollow and false.

When political or religious leaders succumb to the illusion of power and infallibility, they become dangerous to themselves and to others. A society or religious group that submits blindly to authoritarian leadership is dooming itself to perdition.

We can fight “echo reasoning” by insisting on independent reasoning. We can fight autocracy by insisting on freedom of expression. We can combat religious rigidity and intolerance by raising our voices for intellectual vibrancy, compassion and social responsibility.

Angel for Shabbat