Seeing the "Hen" of Others: Thoughts for Parashat Vayeshev

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Angel for Shabbat, Parashat Vayeshev

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The Talmud (Yoma 9b) suggests that the Temple in Jerusalem was destroyed due to the sin of *sinat hinam*, baseless hatred. Yet, “baseless” hatred seems to be rare, if not impossible. Whenever people hate, they don’t think their hatred is baseless. They hate others because of their race or religion, because they fear them or were hurt by them. The reasons for their hatred may be entirely false and unfounded—yet, in their minds it is not baseless. Indeed, it would be quite amazing to come across someone who states that he/she hates you for absolutely no reason…just for the sake of hatred!

I believe the phrase *sinat hinam* should be interpreted differently. It does not mean baseless hatred. Rather, the word hinam derives from the word *hen* —graciousness, loveable-ness. The Temple was destroyed because people hated to see the *hen* in others. They dehumanized their opponents, treating them as though they lacked human charm and worth.

In this week’s Parasha, the Torah reports that God helped Joseph when he had been imprisoned at the demand of Potifar. *Vayiten hino be-einei sar beit hasohar* (Bereishith 39:21), and He endowed his *hen* in the eyes of the prison warden. We thus see that the root word *hen* can be presented in a possessive form…including *hinam.*

At the time preceding the destruction of the Second Temple, Jews were divided into hostile factions. There were zealots and pacifists, war-mongers and peaceniks, religious extremists and moderates. The groups were so antagonistic to each other, that they could not see the *hen* in their opponents. They

stereotyped and demonized each other. This led to the fragmentation of society and to the inability to work together in a unified fashion.

When we look into each other's eyes and see a fellow human being, it is quite difficult to hate. We realize that all of us—regardless of nationality and ideology—are human beings. We love, we fear, we care for our families, we can be kind and compassionate. When we see the hen in others, our emotions steer away from hatred and toward sympathy.

Too often, people do not seriously look for the *hen* in others who are not part of their own inner circle. They dehumanize, create stereotypes…and hate to see the *hen* in those who differ from them. They do not see the individual human being with a heart and soul and feelings; instead, they see Settlers and Peace Now; ultra-Orthodox and secular; Jews and Arabs; Sephardim and Ashkenazim. Instead of talking to each other as fellow human beings, we tend to shout at each other as enemies. It is easy to hate a stereotype; it is difficult to hate a fellow human being who has *hen*.

Don't we deeply lament the fact that our enemies constantly engage in dehumanizing us, in presenting us as hateful objects rather than as fellow human beings? Don't we profoundly wish that our enemies would take the time to look into our eyes and see our *hen*, realizing that we all are created by the same God and all are endowed with grace and loving-kindness?

And if we are profoundly disappointed by the hatred aimed against us, shouldn't we strive our mightiest to avoid falling into that same vicious trap of hating others? Shouldn't we try to elevate our own humanity by seeing the *hen* in our fellow Jews and in all our fellow human beings?

Angel for Shabbat