Thoughts for Aharei Mot/Kedoshim

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Angel for Shabbat--Aharei Mot/Kedoshim

by Rabbi Marc D. Angel

The Sifra on Vayikra 19:18 records a debate between Rabbi Akiva and Ben Azzai. Rabbi Akiva states that the verse, "and you shall love your neighbor as yourself" is a great principle of the Torah. Ben Azzai, while agreeing with Rabbi Akiva's basic point, suggests that another verse contains an even greater principle of Torah: zeh sefer toledot adam, zeh kelal gadol mizeh (This is the book of the generations of man--this is an even greater principle). This verse, drawn from Parashat Bereishith, includes the words that God created human beings in His image. Thus, we are called upon to respect all human beings--regardless of their particular backgrounds. Ben Azzai, is offering a universal vision of inclusiveness and commitment to humanity in general, not just to our own friends and neighbors. This is an even greater principle than loving one's neighbor as oneself, in the sense that it enlarges our perspective, and helps us view ourselves as part of the greater human family.

But how do we balance the particular commitment to our family and faith with a recognition of the universal value of all human beings?

Some years ago, I read a parable in the writings of Dr. Pinchas Polonsky that helped me clarify my thinking. Imagine that you have carefully studied a painting day after day, year after year. You know every brush-stroke, color, shadow... you know every detail of the painting and you understand it to the extent humanly possible. And then, one day someone comes along and turns on the light. You then realize that the painting you had studied to perfection is actually part of a

much larger canvas. As you stand back, you realize that you need to re-evaluate your thinking. The segment of the canvas that you have studied all these years has not changed; you still know every detail; it is still absolutely true. Yet, you must now study your truth in context of a much larger canvas.

Each faith, at its best, has a very true understanding of its piece of the larger canvas. But when the lights go on, each faith must come to realize that it represents part of the picture but not the whole picture. A grand religious vision must necessarily entail a grand perception of God: God is great enough to create and love all human beings. God sees the whole canvas of humanity in its fullness.

One of the great challenges facing religions is to see the entire picture, not just our particular segment of it. While being fully committed to our faiths, we also need to make room for others. We need, in a sense, to see humanity from the perspective of God, to see the whole canvas not just individual segments of it.

Religious vision is faulty when it sees one, and only one, way to God. Religious vision is faulty when it promotes forced conversions, discrimination against “infidels,” violence and murder of those holding different views. How very tragic it is that much of the anti-religious persecution that takes place in our world is perpetrated by people who claim to be religious, who claim to be serving the glory of God.

While religion today should be the strongest force for a united, compassionate and tolerant humanity, it often appears in quite different garb. Religion is too often identified with terrorism, extremism, superstition, exploitation…and hypocrisy. People commit the most heinous crimes…and do so while claiming to be acting in the name of God.

The authentic religious voice should be one that fosters mutual understanding; we should remind ourselves and our fellow religionists that God loves all human beings and wants all human beings to be blessed with happy and good lives. There is room for all of us on this earth. We need to foster a religious vision that is humble, thoughtful, and appreciative of the greatness of God.