Angel for Shabbat: Aharei Mot/Kedoshim

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by Rabbi Marc D. Angel

In his book, *An Anthropologist on Mars*, Dr. Oliver Sacks discusses his meeting with a remarkable autistic teen ager. To get a sense of the boy's abilities, he spread a jigsaw puzzle on a table and asked the boy to put it together. He did so quickly and correctly. Then Dr. Sacks put down another jigsaw puzzle with all the pieces face down so the boy could not have the picture to assist him. He put this puzzle together just as quickly as the first! (p. 211).

A thought struck me: it is possible to put all the pieces together correctly and still not see the picture. Extrapolating to religious life, one can learn and observe Judaism as discreet pieces of a puzzle but miss the picture.

The "whole picture" is suggested in this week's Torah reading: "And you shall be holy for I, the Lord your God, am holy." It is further evidenced in the instruction in Exodus for the Israelites to be a "kingdom of priests and a holy nation." On both the personal and communal levels, we are to strive to maintain holy lives. This entails living in the presence of God, knowing that our lives have transcendent meaning, that we are to be models of piety and righteousness. Everything we do must be geared toward this over-arching goal.

Each piece of the puzzle—each of our deeds—is part of the picture. When we are so busy with the tasks and pressures of daily life, we may get lost in the details and lose the picture.

A rabbinic parable tells of a poor man who was struggling to support his family. He learned of a faraway land that was filled with precious jewels. A ship would soon be leaving for this land but would only return after an interval of unspecified length. His wife agreed that he should make the voyage, so as to be able to obtain valuable jewels to bring back to support his family in wealth and honor.

The man boarded the ship and was off to make his fortune. Sure enough, the ship arrived at the faraway land and indeed the earth was covered with diamonds and all types of precious stones. He hurriedly filled his pockets with jewels and was now an extraordinarily rich man. He rejoiced in the thought of how wealthy he and his family would be upon his return home.

But in the faraway land, the man soon realized that his precious stones were valueless. They were so abundant that no one paid any attention to them. None of the storekeepers would accept them as payment for merchandise. Rather, the currency of this land was wax candles. Everyone strove to accumulate as many wax candles as possible.

The man worked hard and accumulated a large number of wax candles. He emptied his pockets and bags of the diamonds, rubies and emeralds. In this new land, he became wealthy and prominent--very successful.

Time passed. It was now time for the man to return to his wife and family. He boarded the ship, laden with as many candles as he could carry.

When he arrived home, his wife eagerly greeted him. She asked to see the treasures he had brought back. Proudly, the man opened his bags and emptied his pockets. He stacked up piles of wax candles. His wife was astonished. "You spent all that time in the faraway land, a land filled with precious jewels, and you brought back only piles of worthless wax candles?"

Suddenly, the man realized he had made a terrible mistake. When he had arrived in the faraway land, he knew he was supposed to gather precious gems--but he had soon forgotten his mission. Influenced by the people in that land, he had come to value candles and ignore jewels. He had thought that by accumulating candles, he had become successful. But now that he had returned home, he realized that he had missed his opportunity to bring back real treasures.

We are placed on earth to attain transcendent treasures--wisdom, love, spiritual insight, moral courage, Torah and mitzvoth. If we can keep our lives focused on these goals, we can return to our heavenly home with genuine treasures. But in this world, people chase after "wax candles"--material wealth, glitz, hedonistic lifestyles. People are swayed by prevalent ideas and values. It is possible to lose sight of our real treasures and goals. When we finally return home--to our heavenly home beyond--we may realize that we are bringing with us "wax candles" instead of precious jewels--that we had lived our lives chasing falsehoods and vanities rather than pursuing goodness, truth and piety.

“And you shall be holy for I, the Lord your God, am holy.” “And you shall be a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.” Keep the "whole picture" in mind.