

THE HIGHER MORALITY

by Rabbi David Algaze

We are blessed with the capacity to reason and the freedom to have our own ideas. Yet these precious gifts become a challenge in a person who recognizes with humility that he may not possess all the knowledge or all the reason. This conflict becomes even more marked for a religious person who believes that there is a higher Reason. The tension becomes even more pointed for a person who accepts the concept of Revelation or the manifestation of the Voice of G-d in our midst. There may be times when our concepts or values may find it difficult to accept a ruling of the Torah or a story from the Bible or the Talmud. In those occasions we need to ask ourselves, “Whose values do I uphold?” and decide which is the higher morality and the path he should take.

In the story of Saul and Amalek recounted in the haphtarah read on Shabbat Zachor (I Samuel 15) we find a perfect example of this conflict and the fatal mistake by King Saul. When G-d told Saul, through His prophet Samuel, “Go and strike down Amalek...kill man and woman alike, infant and suckling alive, ox and sheep alike...” Saul argued in response, “What sin did the children commit; how did the animals sin?” A Heavenly Voice emanated and said to him, “ Do not be overly righteous” (Ecclesiastes 7:16) (Yoma 22b).

Saul found it difficult to slay the children, because in his view they were innocent. He placed his own values and his own sensitivity above G-d’s commandment as if his own feelings were higher than G-d’s. It is to this attitude that G-d rebukes Saul by saying “Do not be overly righteous.” When we spare an evil person who deserves to die, that mercy will result in cruelty for other people. In the few hours of his remaining alive, the Amalekite king Agag—who had been spared by Saul--managed to father a child from whom Haman was descended. This Haman and many others descended from this family have sought to exterminate the Jewish people many times.

The tendency to substitute our own morality for the morality of the Torah is ubiquitous. We find it hard sometimes to reconcile our own views of what is right and wrong with some commandments of the Torah or some historical necessities, such as actions that need to be taken in times of war and self defense. On those occasions we struggle with our own conscience and some people, like Saul, commit the tragic mistake of believing that their morality is higher than the Creator’s. “To be overly righteous”—as King Solomon puts it, is wrong. A morality is like any other organism or device: it has many parts and sometimes we may not understand why a particular piece is where it is, but the builder of that device understands why and that is the reason he put it there. It would be foolish to alter the design or change the placement of a piece thinking that the device would work better. Similarly, G-d’s values and morality-- even when it runs counter to our own sensibilities, still contains basic truths as to how the device--or the universe in this case--would work properly. To attempt to tamper with this system thinking that we would do better is both foolish and dangerous.

I once heard a rabbi speak about a certain law in the Torah that included a severe punishment for some behavior and the rabbi commented that “today we do not hold that view any longer.” What he meant to say was that in his opinion the values of our society have superseded the values of the Torah and that they should be favored over the Torah values. Imagine the Nazis saying that their values supersede the values of the Judeo Christian tradition! Or how would react if a nurse with a misplaced sense of mercy announced that he had precipitated the death of our ailing relative because illness is too hard!

In similar fashion we should resist the temptation to replace G-d’s values with our own. Acknowledging that the mechanism of the universe is far more complicated than we imagine, we should accept with humility that there will be times when our sensibilities will be challenged, when our sense of right and wrong may be stretched but ultimately accept that the higher morality of G-d should prevail.

The more we study and the more respect we give our teachers, the easier it will be to understand the wisdom of the Torah even if some rulings seem to our limited mind to be “not righteous enough.” We need to resist the desire to improve on the Torah and recognize that when there is a conflict or tension between our values and the Torah’s design, we should yield to the Torah and the higher morality. Just as we cannot improve on the beauty of nature or the intelligent design of our bodies, we should respect the wisdom of the Torah values even when they appear to be “too cruel” or too harsh to our simple limited minds.

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