

INDIVIDUAL TRUTH

by Rabbi Daniel Travis

Shimon and Levi are a pair; instruments of violence are their wares. (Bereshith 49:5)

Yaakov criticized Shimon and Levi's violent behavior; he also condemned them for having copied Esav's behavior.¹ If we look objectively at our own behavior, we will see that much of it is mimicry of the behavior of others, and is not really our own at all. The Torah encourages a person to find his own individual path, and does not view imitation of the behavior of others in a favorable light.² In Parshath Bereshith, the Torah says, "Kayin brought some of his crops as an offering to the Almighty. Hevel also offered some of the firstborn of the flock, from the fattest ones...When they happened to be in the field, Kayin rose up against his brother Hevel and killed him."³ If mitzvot have the power to protect one from danger, why didn't Hevel's fine offering to God protect him from Kayin's jealousy? Since he had merely copied the idea from Kayin, Hevel's offering was not powerful enough of a mitzvah to protect him from death.⁴

When we hear inspiring stories about great Torah personalities, it is very commendable for us to think about their ideas and behavior, and to try to incorporate their strengths into our own lives. However, since we don't necessarily have the same strengths, rather than trying to imitate their behavior, it is preferable that we take from them whatever we can use to enhance our own individual avodah (spiritual work).

Lot, for instance, risked his life to fulfill the mitzvah of hosting guests, but he was saved from the destruction of Sodom for an altogether different reason. When Avraham said that Sarah was his sister, Lot did not reveal to the Egyptians that Sarah was Avraham's wife when they traveled to Egypt.⁵ Lot earned great merit when he kept Avraham's secret, for he did so of his own accord, whereas the idea of hosting guests had been ingrained in him while he lived in Avraham's house; performing that mitzvah was not a product of his own initiative. Thus, although he had risked his life for the mitzvah, it was not considered as great a deed as was his keeping silent in Egypt.⁶

Rav Shlomo Zalman Auerbach used to daven at the Kotel in the Old City of Jerusalem every motza'ei Shabbath. He attended a minyan that was led by a particular tzaddik. When the tzaddik passed away, Reb Shlomo Zalman stopped attending that minyan. Asked why he discontinued his motza'ei Shabbath custom, he responded that the tzaddik who had organized the minyan had a special style of prayer that had been very moving. When he passed away, the person who took over the minyan tried to imitate his style. Since his imitation was merely superficial, Reb Shlomo Zalman felt that his prayers constituted sheker. He so despised any hint of sheker that he could no longer

bring himself to attend that minyan.⁷

1. *Rashi on Bereshith 49:5.*
 2. Commentary of Reb Yerucham (from Mir Yeshivah).
 3. Bereshith 4:3-8.
 4. Maharal, Derashah, Shabbath Shuvah.
 5. Bereshith Rabbah 51:8.
 6. Netziv.
 7. Pe'er HaDor.
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