

LOYALTY TO PEOPLE; ALLEGIANCE TO LAW

by Rabbi Ephraim D. Becker, Ph.D.

In the course of our Torah discussions recently, the issue of gender differences came up. The feminine side of the personality was seen as likely to give priority to relationship issues (eg. protecting another's honor) and the male side was seen as more likely to be loyal to a mandate, sometimes thought of as the "tough choice."

In his exchange with G-d, (Bamidbar [Numbers] 12), Moshe requests staff to share his leadership responsibilities. In his plea Moshe says (ibid; 8) "and if You (feminine form) will do thus to me, please kill me indeed, lest I see my evil." This is explained by the Sforno and others as follows: If You, G-d, will act in the feminine aspect and protect my honor (and not jeopardize that honor by appointing other leaders) then please take me out of the picture so that I might not witness the harm that would befall the People by the lack of (firm) leadership which is necessary to quell their rebelliousness.

It is clear from the Sforno that the feminine side would be prone to giving higher priority to the intimate relationship between G-d and Moshe and might set aside the long-term need of firm discipline for the People in favor of protecting Moshe's honor.

I am reminded of a discussion which took place between Lawrence Kohlberg (Harvard professor and developer of a stage theory of moral development) and Carol Gilligan (also of Harvard and a feminist writer and critic of Kohlberg's) in which the former argued that the highest stage of moral development is allegiance to universal principals of law (a stage which some men but very few women reached) and that a lower stage was fidelity to persons (which many women attained). Gilligan argued that these two stages are separate "tracks" in moral development; one male and one female. Due to her lack of familiarity with her ancestral traditions, Gilligan did not cite the Sforno in support of her critique. It would have moved the 'feminist' argument up several hundred years.

A good week to all.
Ephraim

Shalom,

A friend who is a member of your list forwarded R. Becker's mail to me.

I have a difficulty which I hope you can help me to master: In the Greek myth of the war of the Seven against Thebes a girl, Antigone, chooses to transgress against the laws of the community and bury her fallen brother, a traitor. She pleads the support of divine laws. To me it looks as if the perspective cited by R. Becker makes us see Antigone as acting in a male mode, and the King (and the male-dominated polis) in a female mode.

Best greetings,
Piotr Szybek
Dep. Education, Lund University

Dear Prof. Szybek,

I hope that I am not overstepping my boundaries by commenting on a Greek myth. My ignorance of Greek mythology knows no bounds. However, based on your brief description I can provide the following:

1. The girl who violates the laws of the community and gives priority to the intimate relationship between sister and brother is acting in precisely the female mode of which the Sforzo speaks. She is not doing that which is in the overall good of the community (which would involve utterly shunning the traitor), instead, she is acting out of her loyalty to the relationship she has with her brother. I have encountered many parents who were never able to draw absolute lines, "red-lines" if you will, with their children, with an understanding that crossing those lines will sever the ties, however painfully, between parent and child. The result was that often, tragically, the child pranced right over those non-existent lines. The feminine trait we are describing places the relationships (and those closest, first) ahead of the larger good which needs to be achieved.
2. The King who denies her request is acting in male mode, that is, he is enforcing that which is in the larger good (the closest thing he has to an absolute law), over-riding the pain which this enforcement causes.
3. I specifically use the term over-ride, and not negate, in the above analysis. I do not know the mood of the king when he decides against the girl's request. Is he callous or is he compassionate? Does he negate the feminine aspect (callousness) or does he over-ride the feminine aspect (compassionate). If he does the former, then he has not achieved any of the Torah's ideal of synthesis (combining conviction with compassion).

The Torah speaks of synthesis. The same HaShem Who, in His love, took us out of Egypt (pure compassion), in His love gave us the Torah (pure conviction) and demands absolute loyalty to it.

Best wishes,
Ephraim