

ALTRUISM VS. PERSONAL INTEREST AND GAIN

by Rabbi Berel Wein

This week's parsha raises the age-old issue of human behavior - altruism over personal interest and gain. While we all pay lip service to the concept and ideal of altruism when dealing with public affairs and the general good, we all remain human beings and the Talmud long ago posited that "a human being is first and foremost closest and prejudiced to one's own self and interests."

The conflict between the general good of many and the private benefit to the few or even to one individual is the stuff of politics, government, power and influence. It is the basic motif in all human existence and history. Our sense of rectitude and conscience is constantly buffeted by self-interest and personal factors and reckonings. We are born as selfish grasping individuals and the challenges in life that follow all revolve about our ability to recognize and modify this basic human instinct.

One may say that all of the commandments and laws of the Torah come to enable us to counter this instinct that is part of us from the moment of our birth. This is what the rabbis meant when they taught us that the "evil instinct" - the innate selfishness and purely self-interested nature of humans - is with us from our first breath on this earth. The struggle to include others - family, community, fellow Jews and human beings generally - into our worldview is the story of our lives and existence.

The Torah attributes to Avraham victory in this struggle and it is he, above all others, who is seen as our father and role model, the founder of God's people.

One of the explanations offered by the commentators to the negative behavior and damning report regarding the Land of Israel is that the spies - who were the leaders of their tribes - were aware that when the Jews entered the Land of Israel, new leaders were to be chosen and they, the Jews, were in jeopardy of losing their titles and positions of power and influence. This awareness preyed upon their minds and prejudiced their view of the Land of Israel.

Their perceived personal gain and position overwhelmed the general good of the people they were supposed to serve. This has always been a plague of communal leadership, when hubris and self-service dominate the sight of the leadership so that one is unable to distinguish between public good and one's private interests.

Even worse, many times the private interest of the leader is disguised as being the public good. Dictators have always stated that "I am the state!" The great prophet Shmuel is characterized in the same category as Moshe and Aharon because of his selflessness in leading the Jewish people. The tragedy of the spies, and of the Jewish people of that generation generally, is this inability to rise

over personal interests and view the general picture of Jewish destiny and accomplishment.

Like many a leader blinded by one's own agenda of ideas and events, the spies soon descended into falsehoods and slander to make their case. The tragedy in cases such as this is that the people often follow this flawed leadership, bringing calamity upon one and all. We should always be wary of the true motives of those who profess to lead us for the alleged public good.

Shabat shalom

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