

Alienation

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

There is a sad story this week in the Torah of a young man whose mother was Israelite but whose father was Egyptian. He had been welcomed into the children of Israel based on his mother's status and left Egypt with them. But when it came to which tribe he belonged to, he did not fit in anywhere. Tribes were decided by fathers and he had no Jewish father. Obviously, he felt rejected, unwanted and became bitter. He rebelled against society and ended up on the wrong side of the law.

A lot of Midrash has embellished this story. The father of the boy was the Egyptian task master that Moses had killed for his acts of oppression including raping this woman. On the other hand, the mother is named as Shlomit Bat Divri. The name seems to give her away a woman who spoke too much, fraternized with the enemy and gossiped. All taken from her name of saying Shalom and speaking, Divri, to all and sundry. Of course, this is Midrash.

But we also have to add the possibility that she was a good mother who cared for her son and tried to help him integrate into the Israelites and be a responsible, positive member of society. She either failed or the forces against her were overwhelming.

This is such a modern story. We have been seeing all these rebellious youngsters who have felt victimized and rejected by society. No doubt in part this was because they were brought up in dysfunctional homes without the stability of a nuclear family. And doubtless their sense of alienation has been exacerbated by poor education. The result has been young men and women whose only response is to turn to drugs, looting and violence.

And yet vast sums of money have been poured into these societies in welfare and entitlements and even so there seems to be no light at the end of the tunnel. I am not saying that society shares no blame. Prejudice exists, police brutality exists, money is diverted, corruption is endemic and failing schools are protected by Unions which refuse to allow for reforms. They insist in protecting their members rather than the children they should be helping.

But for all that there are countless examples of young Black men and women who do well and rise out of the ghettos and ghetto mentalities.

The reason is that whatever disadvantages one may have had in life it is still possible if one is determined to rise. One must take responsibility for one's actions. And that is the message of this story. Moses was not certain what to do. He had to go back to ask God. But why, if the Laws had already been given on Sinai? Perhaps Moses felt for this boy, was sensitive to his suffering. Perhaps he was looking for a way out of condemning him despite his undermining in public the foundation of Israelite religious life.

However, much we may understand and sympathize with the young man's predicament, he is the only person who can decide either to give in to hate or to rise above it. The Torah teaches us to take responsibility and work hard to make the most of our gifts or to suffer the consequences.