

**It Takes One to Know One – Parashat Vayigash**  
**Rabbi Hanan Schlesinger**

We've all heard the expression "it takes one to know one." Sometimes it is used to refer to what psychologists call projection. The meaning is that people who possess a certain quality - especially a really bad one, such as deceitfulness - are quick to see this quality in others. With no objective basis in reality, they project their own faults onto others. There is another although similar sense in which we use this phrase. Oftentimes we mean that it takes someone with identical character traits to recognize those traits in someone else. "It takes a thief to catch a thief." That is, someone who expresses criticism has similar faults to the person being criticized.

This second usage seems to be relevant to this week's Torah portion: Shimon (Simeon), the second son of Ya'acov (Jacob) the Patriarch is said to have had six sons, the last of whom was "Shaul (Saul) the son of the Canaanite women." This is the first – and the last – that we hear about Shimon having a Canaanite consort. This is intriguing to say the least, for Shimon is the last of the sons of Ya'acov by which we would expect to find such skeletons in the closet.

We'll explain why: It may be recalled that Ya'acov's daughter Dina had been abducted and raped by the son of the chieftain of the Hivites, one of the Canaanite tribes living in the area of Shechem. The tribe then sues for peace, claiming that the rapist wishes to marry Dina, and in return they express their willingness to give their own daughters in marriage to the sons of Ya'acov. To avenge their humiliation, as well as to get their sister back, Shimon and his brother Levi hatch a plot. They agree to the proposal, but under one condition, namely that all the men of Shechem circumcise themselves. No sooner is the circumcision completed, and Shimon and Levi descend upon the incapacitated tribesmen and slaughter them all.

So Shimon and Levi were the real zealots of the lot, especially when it comes to sexual immorality. No Canaanite is going to be caught fooling around with a Jewish girl and get

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away with it. Jews will marry only Jews, and a Canaanite that defiles a Jewish girl is going to pay a heavy price.

And then wouldn't you know it! Of all people, it's Shimon who breaks the sexual taboo and fathers a son from a Canaanite woman! It indeed takes one to know one.

So what do we make of this? In modern discourse, 'it takes one to know one' is often used as a curt rejoinder to deflect an accusation. 'You're one to talk' we say, meaning that you have no right to criticize when you are just as guilty as anyone else.

But let's think a minute. Should Shimon have kept his zealotry to himself just because of his own missteps? Must one be a perfect angel to express social criticism? Is it only the morally unblemished who can fight against evil?

The problem is that we tend to view rebuke as a right that has to be earned. Live and let live we say, don't interfere with my life unless you have earned the right to criticize. But the Torah takes the opposite point of view. To crusade for good, to fight evil, is not a right that must be earned but rather an obligation to be discharged. We all have made mistakes, but that does not exempt us from the obligation to be zealous for good. The opposite is true. The bad we have done, the mistakes we have made, the evil inclinations in our hearts, can actually make us more sensitive to the same sorts of evil in others and in society and more indignant in its presence. We may very well often harness our own faults and lusts and sins to help others become more aware of their own.

Of course there are dangers. Social crusading must never become a replacement for self criticism and self improvement. Zealotry must never be permitted to run wild; it must be balanced against so many other factors. Rebuke says the Talmud is an art that only a handful have learned. But still, let us not fall into the opposite trap. Let us not silence what could very well be constructive criticism with the insulting retort "it takes one to know one." When others would try to help us to become better people by holding a mirror to our souls, let us not deny ourselves the privilege of gazing at what it shows us. And let us learn from our forefather Shimon, who did not refrain from fighting evil while



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– and perhaps specifically because - that same evil hung as a skeleton in the closet of his own soul.



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