

Ethics and Ritual

*Rosh Hashana 2008
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I am of the generation that remembers the shock of the assassination of President John F. Kennedy 45 years ago. I still recall the initial shock, horror, and tremendous sadness felt by the entire nation. That Friday night I went to synagogue with my father. The shul was packed, as we came to mourn the death of our President, and all the dreams and hopes that died with him.

The Jewish community had an interesting reaction. In addition to our sense of mourning and loss, we also held our breath, anxiously waiting to hear the news and learn who had done this terrible thing. Looking back on it, I must admit, it was really kind of strange. I am not sure how we would react today, but for some reason, we kept saying among ourselves, "I just hope the assassin isn't Jewish." We breathed a collective sigh of relief when we found out he wasn't.

The concern can probably be attributed to our own insecurity and feeling tenuous and tentative, as if we are guests in this country. An underlying feeling existed that if we misbehave; we might get kicked out or be asked to leave the country. But I think there was another factor involved in our reaction as well. We expect Jews, and we know that others expect Jews to act morally and ethically. And when one does not, it reflects poorly on all of us. This probably comes from our sense of peoplehood and shared fate, but there is another subtle factor at work as well: the assumption that there is a correlation between religion and behavior.

I am sure this is a notion we would all subscribe to. As I discussed yesterday, the purpose of religion is to give us a sense of purpose, as well as values, morals and ethics. They are all interrelated, integrated and each dimension leads to the next.

The tension in the story of the Akedat Yitzhak, the binding of Isaac, our Torah reading for this second day of Rosh Hashana raises precisely this issue. An ethical God asks Abraham to do the unthinkable, to take the life of his son. What is he to do? Our commentaries are replete with many accounts in which Abraham, unlike his Biblical counterpart challenges God and contests in various ways the problematic choice placed before him.

Rabbi David Hartman says that the story shows that the world is not always intelligible, even and especially when our covenantal partner is God. There are moments when we come face to face with the tragic dimension of life. The challenge is to maintain our faith in our fellow human beings so that we may retain and sustain our faith even when confronting the incomprehensible. Our religion helps us to learn to live with transcendent times of uncertainty as well as with rationality and predictability.

Yet despite the beauty and sophistication of religious philosophy, and all the ways that it helps us get through difficult times and cope with personal crises, it is increasingly

popular, especially in certain intellectual circles to speak disparagingly of the role religion plays in the world, and to lay at its feet many of the ills and conflicts of the world. A number of recent books chastising religion point to international conflagrations and blame religious strife and differences for many of the tensions and wars across the globe.

There is truth in what the critics say. All too often the root cause of too many conflicts is religion. But this explanation is insufficient, and falls short for it is superficial. Many of the conflicts have other, multiple dimensions and layers of complexity to them. What may appear to be a struggle between religions is sometimes a struggle between ethnic groups, over economic factors, over natural resources, or competing ideologies. There are times when religious differences are exploited and used by other forces to advance their own cynical agenda.

The other problem with this approach is that it overlooks all of the good done throughout history in the name of religion. Many of the great liberation movements have been inspired by the paradigm of Moses having the courage to stand up to a cruel oppressor, knowing that he was not alone, for God was on his side. The abolitionist movement against slavery took its inspiration from religious leaders, as did the movement that led to the fall of communism. The quest for workers' rights in the early twentieth century, as well as for civil rights for blacks and other efforts to achieve equality all came about to a large degree, due to the efforts of religious leaders to bring the moral teachings and idealism of the Prophets and the Bible to fruition. Religious teachings have helped to give encouragement to freedom fighters, for as Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, for example, famously said, when marching for civil rights in the south in the 1960's, he was praying with his feet.

We can be proud that Judaism does not seek to impose its will on others by force, but rather leads by example. We hold that it is a perversion and distortion of God's message when fanatics attempt to forcefully impose their will on others or to kill in the name of God. This is not what is asked of us by the God of Abraham or of the torah. One of the most consistent interpretations of the Akedat Yitzhak is that God rejects human sacrifice, and instead demands that we serve Him by how we treat our fellow human beings.

Nevertheless, the underlying premise of the critique stands: there should be a connection between religion and ethical actions.

The Torah says, *acharei haShem eloheichem teilechu*, "You should go after the Lord your God." The Talmud asks how it is possible to fulfill these words, how can we walk in the way of our God? It then answers its own question by saying that we walk in the way of God when we "go after," in other words, when we follow, "the ethical qualities of God." It gives a series of examples. Just as God sewed garments for Adam and Eve, so should we clothe the naked. It depicts God as having visited Abraham when he was sick, so we should visit and care for the sick. God is described as the One who buried Moses. The rabbis portray God as performing acts of kindness and love, so that we will realize that the way to imitate and emulate God, the way to walk in His path is by acting in a similar

fashion. Treating others with kindness embodies the spirit of God and brings His presence to the world.

Although Judaism teaches that God demands that ethical behavior of us, when we think of the word “religious”, we think it refers only to someone who is ritually observant.

Let’s play a word association. If I say apples and honey, you will think Rosh Hashana. If I say milk, the image that comes to your mind is probably: cow. Tainted milk: China.

And if I say “religious”, chances are you think of a pious individual, someone who probably has a beard, wears wearing black, a long black coat, and who spends a great deal of his time praying.

So what are we to make of the fact that the largest arrest of illegal immigrants in American history took place a few months ago at the largest kosher slaughtering and meat processing house in the United States? In addition, to violating the immigration laws, the Hasidic owners of the Agriprocessors kosher plant have been charged with 9,000 violations of Iowa’s child labor laws. Children as young as 13 years old have been forced to work 18 hour days and to handle heavy equipment.

What is happening there, as well as other stories about seemingly religious Jews being arrested for flaunting and violating civil laws, may challenge our understanding of what it means to be religious, which is why the rabbis label such behavior as a hillul hashem, a desecration of God’s name.

Postville, a book by Stephen Bloom chronicles the clash between the Chasidim who set up shop in the 1990’s in the small rural Iowa town and the townspeople. The encounter was exasperated and aggravated by the arrogance among the “religious” factory owners towards the townspeople. Open contempt was displayed by them for civil authorities and towards their workers, as if they had no obligation to treat non Jews with respect.

I sat in on a meeting of the Executive Council of the Rabbinical Assembly where Rabbi Morris Allen gave a report of the efforts to improve the situation. He went with other conservative rabbis to check out conditions at the plant and meet with workers and the management to find out what was going on after a series of articles in The Jewish Forward condemned deplorable and abominable practices. Unfortunately, the rabbis found the newspaper reports about the abuse and exploitation of the workers to be true. A number of the employees said it was the first time a rabbi of any kind had related to them as people, had ever spoken with them, and shown concern or kindness to them. His attempts to try to help the owners understand the plight of the workers, and what they needed to correct fell on deaf ears, and were seen as annoying meddling and unnecessary and unwelcome intervention.

Out of this experience, the conservative movement embarked on a campaign to develop guidelines for a standard of kashrut that takes into consideration a number of important factors, including how workers are treated. Known as “heksher tzedek”, a certificate of

kashrut will be issued to companies who meet the standards of decency and fairness in their practices.

This may appear to be a radical notion to some. After all, the primary concern of kashrut, has traditionally had to do with separating milk and meat, how the animals are slaughtered and not eating forbidden foods. Kosher food must be prepared under the watchful eye of rabbinic supervision. Perhaps that is why when my daughter was in kindergarten she proudly told her teacher that her father is a rabbi, and knew how to make lobster kosher. She told her teacher, all I had to do was put a "k" on it. And that story brings to mind the one about the shul president who was eating shrimp and lobster in a trafe restaurant. The rabbi happened to be walking by, and was appalled by what he saw. Confronting his friend about his blatant violation of laws of kashrut, the man said, "But rabbi, did you see me order this meal?" "Yes, I did." The rabbi answered. He continued, "And you saw the waiter bring me the food." "Yes," "and then you saw me eat the food." Again, the rabbi answered, "Yes." "Nu, rabbi, so what then is the problem? The entire meal was clearly under rabbinical supervision!"

The other element of Kashrut consists of the laws governing what we can and cannot eat. Take for example the story about an elderly Jew who goes to a butcher's shop. Looking at the display case, he points to the sliced ham and asks, "How much is that fish?" The butcher replies, "It's not fish. It's meat." The old Jew replies, "I ask the price of the fish, and you talk to me about meat! How much is the fish?!" Now the butcher is getting irritated, and he says, "I'm telling you. It's not fish. It is called ham." The old Jew responds, "Did I ask you to tell me the name of the fish?!"

The origin of the word kashrut means fitting and proper. In regard to what is fitting and proper, the book of Deuteronomy says, "You shall not abuse a needy and destitute laborer." (24:14). The prophet Malachi later says, " **אמר ... בעושקי שכר שכיר ... אמר** - I will act as a relentless accuser against those...who cheat laborers of their hire... said the Lord of Hosts." (3:5) Sefer HaChinukh states, " **למען תלך בדרך טובים וארחות** - It is our pride and our glory that we are kind to those who work for us." (482) When we see the amount written in Jewish halachic, legal literature about the subject of ethical treatment of those in our employ, it is clear that how workers are treated is a legitimate concern of Jewish law.

Mitzvot, the commandments, are how we interpret God's will and bring God's message to life and into practice. Most religions do not have this kind of concept, but how fortunate we are that we do. Again, quoting Abraham Joshua Heschel who so eloquently said, "Man is never lonely when performing a mitzvah, for this is where man and God meet."

The sages recognized that the 613 mitzvot can be divided into two distinct categories, those between human beings and God, *bein adam laMakom*, and between human beings, *bein adam leHavero*. It is best when we recognize that there is a connection between the two types of mitzvot, for the purpose of our rituals and customs is to teach and reinforce our ideals.

Rav, the editor of the Talmud boldly said that it really does not matter to God “whether a man kills an animal by the throat or by the nape of its neck ... (because) the whole purpose of the commandments was to refine man.” He teaches that the primary purpose of Judaism is to give us the tools and means to act decently so that we treat others with respect and teach all humanity decency and *menschlichkeit* by our example.

Pious behavior is more than just outward appearance. Consequently the definition of religious should be more than just being fastidious in terms of the ritual laws between man and God. We cannot cloak ourselves in rituals and piety and expect to be covered or exempt in terms of fulfilling our obligations to God. That is not what our sages wanted Judaism to look like. They envisioned a people striving to match its actions with its teachings, its inner spirit with its outer appearance.

When imagining what human behavior by a Jew might cause God’s name to be defiled, the Talmud (Yoma 86a) lists only two things, dishonesty in business and lack of courtesy toward others. “What do people say about him? ‘This man studied the Torah: But look, how corrupt are his deeds, how ugly his ways.’” Although the case against the Rubashkin’s has not yet gone to trial, it appears that both of these Jewish concepts have been violated.

I am not singling them out to justify not keeping kosher or to give you an excuse not to be observant. I was equally upset to read this past January in the Washington Post Reliable Source column about Israeli President Shimon Peres dining on grilled shrimp in a fine restaurant downtown when here for President Ford’s funeral. Nor should we take any joy in the fall of the hypocritical, of those who appear to pious, but are guilty of committing a *shanda*. *Schaudenfreude*, taking joy or delighting in the misfortune of others is not a positive trait either.

Rather, I raise the issue this morning so that we will each realize that we must strive in our lives to be guided by both kinds of *mitzvot*, how we act towards God and how we act towards each other. It should not be an either or proposition. Some of us may already be half way there. If we are lacking in our observance of rituals, let us pledge to try to do more in that area. And if it is our ethical actions that are deficient, then, let us resolve to amend our ways. That is the message and purpose of the introspection we are called upon to do during these ten days.

For our part, we must do all we can to insure that Judaism lives up to its noblest calling. The point of *Heksher tzedek* is to remind us that Judaism asserts that our ethical as well as our ritual acts are both important aspects of what it means to be religious and that our tradition makes it amply clear that they are both of concern to God. The rabbis said that one who deals honestly in business, and his fellow men are pleased with him, is considered as if he fulfilled the entire *torah*. (*Mechilta Beshalach*)

This is how we should seek to live our lives.

A passage in the midrash says that in the next life the angels will ask a person, “What was your work on earth?” If he replies, “I fed the hungry,” they will respond, “This is

the gate of the Lord, those who fed the hungry may enter." If he says, "I gave water to the thirsty", they will respond, "those who gave water to the thirsty may enter." So also for those who raised orphans, who do charity, and perform deeds of loving kindness."

May our acts be pleasing in the eyes of God and our fellow human beings, so that we will sanctify God's name through how we live.

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