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Bereishit 5775

Islamic Terrorism & the “Shabbos App”

A biology course that I took in college taught me something important about religion.

Steven J. Gould, the great evolutionary biologist, taught a survey course at Harvard which he ambitiously called “A History of Life.” Professor Gould was a devoted educator, with a strong sense of commitment to his students - even those students who were not future scientists - which was everyone enrolled in “History of Life.” A few years after I was in that course, Professor Gould, confronting end-stage cancer, doubled-up on his lecture schedule so that he would be able to complete the syllabus before he died. That brave and stoic confrontation with his own mortality, a story one might expect from a hagiographic biography of a great Lithuanian rosh-yeshiva, has remained with me as a powerful lesson in what it means to be an educator and what it means to be committed to one’s students and to the subject one is teaching. Professor Gould dedicated his life to the field of Biology, and he arranged his final weeks of life to teach one more cohort of students what he considered to be the most fundamental knowledge of the History of Life.

But one lesson in particular that stands out in my memory is Professor Gould’s dismissal of the trope that can be found in the writing of some popular evolutionary anthropologists who explain how rape, murder, pillage, and genocide are the result of our DNA, which evolved to promote behaviors that were advantageous to our cavemen ancestors, and which continue to lead us astray. Gould responded that those evolutionary anthropologists misunderstand the role and function of our DNA. Of course rape, murder, pillage, and genocide are coded in our DNA because our DNA contains the potential for every human behavior and, regrettably, we know that human beings are capable of committing great atrocities. But, we also know that human beings have the capacity for acts of altruism, kindness, courage, and moral fortitude. Those capacities too are encoded in our DNA. Everything that humans do has a genetic source. That doesn’t absolve us for wrong behavior, nor does it condemn us to an identity which is defined by our worst characteristics.

The relationship between a traditional, text-based religion and its sacred texts is comparable to the relationship between the human genome and our behavior. All of the manifestations and varieties of a traditional text-based religion can be traced back to sincere interpretations of the sacred text, just as every human behavior, and every human potential, is encoded in our genome.

This basic fact, which I think should be obvious to anyone who has a regular practice of religious observance, has been mostly absent in some of the current media conversation about Islamic terrorism and its connection to violent passages in Islamic scriptures.

As the so-called Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant, or ISIL, has consolidated its power and extended its murderous tentacles, spreading fear and death by means of a horrific blend of medieval barbarism and modern information technology, it is only natural for the world to stand bewildered that such a phenomenon could exist and flourish in modern times. But instead of a learned and intelligent conversation about the etiology and history of this modern political and religious movement, sensationalist media personalities have stoked a debate about the question of whether or not “Islam is the problem.” Their method of accusation is predictable and flawed. Pathologies in Muslim majority countries are portrayed as though they are the most authentic expressions of the religion and then violent or hateful passages in Islamic scripture are presented as leading inevitably to violent and hateful outcomes.

It should come as no surprise that two of the loudest critics of Islam, Bill Maher and Sam Harris are famous for anti-religious skepticism and for strident atheism. Anyone who cultivates the practice of a traditional, text-based, religion, would understand the flawed nature of their arguments. Each expression of a traditional religion, practiced with integrity can be traced back to an authentic reading of scripture. There are

frightening, hateful, dangerous, and possibly ascendant expressions of Islam and they are nourished by an authentic interpretation of Islamic scripture.

But there are also expressions of Islam that are fully compatible with multi-cultural Democracy and which are a force for peace and justice in the world. These expressions too, the form of Islam practiced by the overwhelming majority of Muslims worldwide, is also nourished by authentic interpretations of Islamic scripture.

Asking “is Islam the problem” is as foolish as asking “is our genome the problem.”

And, of course, Judaism is no different. There are versions of Judaism which promote hatred and violence and which nonetheless are authentic products of our sacred texts. But there are also expressions of Judaism, filled with spiritual vitality and fervor and religious passion, which are fully consistent with multicultural democracy, which promote peace and justice, and which are also authentic products of faithful devotion to our sacred texts. Every expression of a traditional text-based religion, can be traced back to the texts themselves. This means that the texts themselves, no matter how authoritative, are never “the problem” and they are never “the solution.” Readers and interpreters of texts are the source for violent religious extremism, and readers and interpreters of texts are responsible for peaceful coexistence.

Several weeks ago, a kick-starter campaign startled the Jewish world. A group of software developers, based in Colorado, had claimed to have found a way to write a series of software guidelines that would enable, those Orthodox Jews who do not use most electronic devices on Shabbat to use their SmartPhone on Shabbat.

The Shabbos App, as they have named this technology, will organize the entire operation of the smartphone in such a way as to avoid any of the technical halakhic violations of Shabbat. I first thought the Shabbos App was some sort of satire. Then I thought it was secretly invented by rabbis searching for sermon topics. But, from all that I can tell, the Shabbos App is real, and its developers hope to begin selling it next spring.

How does it work?

A random delay in texting turns the typing into *gramma*. - an act of indirect causation which has a less stringent status in the Laws of Shabbat. The app causes a constant, low level, drain on the phone battery which means that interactions with the phone’s interface do not cause the battery to become hot, and in this way the prohibition of heating on Shabbat is avoided. And so on and so forth. I love this stuff - I’m happy to talk during the week or at kiddush to go into the weeds regarding the halakhic details.

I did notice that the forthcoming list of rabbinic endorsements remains forthcoming...

Is the Shabbos App, a clever trick to enable Jews who wouldn’t otherwise use electricity to be able to text on Shabbat...all that different from the *mechirat hametz* - selling our hametz to a gentile before Pesach to avoid the prohibition of owning hametz and to prevent monetary loss? How is the Shabbos App different from the eruv which, through clever halakhic scholarship, allows us to avoid the prohibition of carrying on Shabbat?

Once you understand that the foundational texts of our tradition, Tanakh, Midrash, Talmud, Poskim, are like the DNA, or the genome of Judaism, then you understand that there is no a-priori limit to what could emerge from creative, yet sincere and authentic, readings of our sacred texts. Our sacred texts can generate an infinite variety of ways to remain faithful to God, and remain faithful to the Torah, in new and unpredictable circumstances.

The question that should be asked, when considering something like the Shabbos App, is not whether or not it’s technically proficient and the question that should be asked is not whether it accommodates the opinions of enough authoritative rabbis. Those are important questions to ask, but the most important question we should ask is, “will this enhance Shabbat?”

For the most part, the Jewish community “got it.” In reaction to the Shabbos App, I mostly saw people say, “I wouldn’t want this.” Indeed, according to Rambam, Maimonides, the rabbis created additional prohibitions for Shabbat, like the rabbinic decree against buying or selling things on Shabbat, because they had noticed that, as Jews left the farm and moved to the city, Shabbat was less distinctive from the other days of the week. Those of us who rarely, if ever, plow, or plant, or reap, or thresh, are left with fewer Shabbat restrictions with which to sanctify the day. For this reason the Talmudic rabbis added restrictions on commerce so that Shabbat would be distinctive even for urban Jews.

Today, for those Jews who do not use electronic devices on Shabbat, that alone, sets Shabbat apart from the other days of the week perhaps more than any of the essential Biblical prohibitions. Whether or not a technical violation can be overcome, eliminating our weekly escape from email and texts and the internet would eliminate a treasured component of Shabbat.

But not for everyone.

I came across a few comments that, if they didn’t go so far as to ask for a Shabbos App, they expressed strong dissatisfaction with the status-quo on Shabbat. One woman wrote: “Traditional Shabbos works for traditional families. I am a single parent whose divorce has made me something of a pariah. Shabbos is spent with my kids watching the clock because we have little else to do and we're alone.” Another wrote, “I think smartphones and electronics are more tempting when alone, which I often am for most of Shabbat...Shabbat is pretty terrible without a partner or family, especially when you reach the age when all your friends are partnered.”

Those voices, and the countless other individuals they represent, do not need a technological solution or better software. They don’t need halakhic creativity or rabbinic innovation. They need more empathy, more friendship, and more love. People who are tempted to install a Shabbos App on their smartphones are an indictment to the entire community that failed to provide them with a warm and enjoyable Shabbat experience.

Our genome contains all the potential for human evil and human good. The solution to our problems, are already there within us. And our sacred texts contain all that we need for repairing and improving our community. We cannot evade responsibility for the religious tenor of our community by hiding behind technical allegiance to halakhot. If Shabbat is a lonely and miserable day for some Jews, that’s a problem that we need to fix ourselves.