

A Weekly Message of Torah from Rabbi Rick Rheins

Walking the Walk before Talking the Talk

The truism that Judaism is more a religion of deed than of creed is evidenced in the fact that we do not find a systematic code of Jewish beliefs before Moses Maimonides (Rambam: 1135-1204). His *Moreh Nevuchim*, “Guide for the Perplexed,” was preceded by major works of *Halakhah* (Jewish norms and law) by more than a thousand years. The emphasis from the beginning and to this very day is more on what should be done instead of theological underpinnings and explanations. Indeed, the Rabbis of the Talmud seemed distinctly uncomfortable pondering the heavenly mysteries.

Consider the following (from the Babylonian Talmud, *Chagigah 15a*):

Rabbi Joshua was walking on the road and Ben Zoma came up beside him. Joshua greeted him but Ben Zoma did not reply. Joshua said again (a little louder): “How are you doing Ben Zoma?”

Ben Zoma replied, “I’ve been speculating on the Work of Creation; between the upper and the lower waters (of the expanse of Heaven) there is nothing but a hand’s breadth. It speaks in the Book of Genesis of ‘hovering,’ so it must be almost touching but not quite.”

Joshua eventually reported to his colleagues, “Ben Zoma is outside.”

Saying that Ben Zoma is “outside” is the rabbinic way of saying that he is in left field! The Talmudic teaching is clear: “Do not be overly concerned with the issues of creation or the mysteries of Heaven or the speculation of the world to come. Rather, focus on what is in front of you, the world you live in, with all of its demands, tests, and trials.

This week’s Torah portion, *Ki Teitzei* (Deuteronomy 21:10-25:19), clearly supports such an emphasis on deed over creed. It contains, according to the calculation of Maimonides, 72 mitzvot (commandments). Note that the traditional count for all the mitzvot in the Torah is 613. There are more mitzvot in this *parashah* (Torah portion) than in any other weekly *sedra*.

The 72 mitzvot cover a wide range of life experiences: civil and domestic life, prisoners of war, family issues, building codes, sexual offenses, and treatment of livestock and wild creatures.

The message is clear: our relationship to God is best expressed in the way we treat one another. In spite of life's hardships, our ability to love and hope inspires us to rebuild after a loss or a natural disaster. We clean up the mess, clear away the rubble, rebuild, replant and recreate our home, the village, and the community so that they are stronger than before.

On Wednesday, this nation paused and remembered the more than 3,000 people who were killed by Islamic terrorists. We remember how the skyline of New York was forever changed as the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center crumbled into a heap of dust and rubble. It collapsed on shocked and desperate office workers. It collapsed on heroic firefighters, police officers and emergency personnel, who gave their lives trying to save others. We watched in disbelief as the Pentagon was engulfed in flames. We can still imagine the horror and the courage displayed by the passengers of United Airlines 93 as they tried to overcome the terrorists only to die when the plane crashed in Somerset, County, Pennsylvania.

And we should always remember that after those attacks, we did not hide, we did not surrender. Rather, we mourned, we comforted, we nurtured, we healed, and we rebuilt. We rebuilt buildings, we rebuild lives and we rebuilt hope.

Let us continue to share the Jewish values we hold precious: our faith is best expressed through our noble acts of respect and kindness and not mere words.

Shabbat Shalom,

Rick

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