

Shabbat Shalom. There is a question that is sometimes on my mind that I'd like to share with you. How to put it into words precisely is not easy, but it would be something like this: What is the difference between being a Reform Jew and being a good person?

Let me explain: Sometimes we are taught that Judaism is all about what we do, and not what we believe. We are the rational Jews; we are the People of the Law. We strive to repair the world. There is the familiar story that when our great sage Hillel was asked by a potential convert to summarize the teaching of the Torah while standing on one foot, he replied: *"Do not do unto your neighbor what you would not have him do unto you; this is the whole Law; the rest is commentary. Now, go and study"* I think I understand why Hillel gave the answer he did back in the 1st century, but standing here in the 21st century, I find myself wondering if he could have said more, and I find myself wanting a more distinctly Jewish answer.

As I look around in our modern world, I see that many people, people of many faiths, come to similar conclusions about the core principle of ethical behavior. Buddhism teaches: Hurt not others in ways that you yourself would find hurtful. In Islamic teaching it is written: "No one of you is a believer until he desires for his brother that which he desires for himself." And in the Christian Bible we read "All things whatsoever ye would that man should do to you, do ye even so to them; for this is the law ." Perhaps even more interesting, many people who profess to no faith at all, reach similar conclusions about

how to act, about how to treat their neighbor. For example, I have been visiting the websites of those who call themselves “ethical humanists”, roughly speaking people who believe that they can use reason alone to derive the proper way to live.

At the website of the Chicago Society for Ethical humanism, I found the following:

As a community, we are committed to living a good moral life of loyalty, caring, and respect, using the Golden Rule as our guiding standard.

That sounds a lot like Hillel’s summary of the Torah. They profess a love for rationality, and so do we. They want to improve the world and so do we. So, what then, is the difference between a Reform Jew and an ethical humanist? Sounds like a joke that should have a punch line. Maybe something like... A good piece of kugel. Or some guilt.

Another way to ask the question might be to say: Why are we here tonight? If Reform Jews are the rational Jews, and there is work to be done, why not just do it? Why come here, when we could be at a Sierra Club meeting, or working for marriage equality, or organizing for more affordable health care? Are we the slackers of the ethical humanist crowd because we take a day off?

On another ethical humanist website, I found this: *We have found no convincing evidence that there is a separable "soul" or that it exists*

before birth or survives death. We must therefore conclude that the ethical life can be lived without the illusions of immortality... We believe that human beings can develop the self confidence necessary to ameliorate the human condition and to lead meaningful, productive lives.

Let me repeat that last sentence: *We believe that human beings can develop the self confidence necessary to ameliorate the human condition and lead meaningful productive lives.* It is a belief, but from where either the belief or the self confidence emerges they do not explain.

Here is where I think things get interesting, and where, at long last you are probably thinking, I come to this week's parasha.

This week, we are at the beginning of Exodus, parasha shemot. This parasha covers enormous ground. It begins with the oppression of the Israelites in Egypt, and ends with the recounting of the ten plagues, the Israelites fleeing into the wilderness, and the instructions for the observance of Passover. Indeed, much of the text we read in the Passover Haggadah is drawn from this parasha.

But at the center of the parasha is the story of Moses, and how he comes to be enlisted by God to lead the Israelites out of Egypt. Midway thru the parasha, Moses, who was raised in pharaoh's home, has fled from pharaoh to Midian, and is in the desert attending the flock of his father-in-law Jethro. He brings the flock out into the wilderness, when he reaches Mount Horeb.

We read in the parasha:

An angel of the Lord appeared to him in a blazing fire out of the bush. He gazed, and there was a bush all aflame, and yet the bush was not consumed. Moses said "I must turn aside to look at this marvelous sight; why doesn't the bush burn up?" When God saw that he had turned aside to look, God called out to him out of the bush. "Moses! Moses! " And Moses answered: Here I am! Hineni.

God continues: *"Now the cry of the Israelites has reached me. Moreover I have seen how the Egyptians oppress them. Come therefore, and I will send you to Pharaoh, and you shall free my people, the Israelites, from Egypt."* But Moses says to God, *"Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and free the Israelites from Egypt?"* And God replies, *"I will be with you."* There is a bit more back and forth negotiating between God and Moses, but ultimately, as we know, Moses takes on the assignment.

I have to say, I love this story. For one, I love the miracle it describes. There are many miracles described in the Torah, and I am not sure what I believe about most of them: the story of creation, the flood, or even the parting of the Red Sea. I tend to think of those things as part of a valuable shared mythology from which much wisdom can be gleaned. But the burning bush, this is a miracle in which I want to believe. I love the human scale of it. A simple bush, not some grand pyrotechnic display in the sky. I walk out into the garden in the back of my house: I have a bush. I'd like to believe

that if I sit and look at it long enough, intensely enough; perhaps God will help me understand what it is that I am intended to do.

And two, I love how Moses responds. Who am I? Who am I? How many of us have not asked ourselves that question? Here in my current state of semi-retirement, I grapple with the question of what it is I should do with the next part of my life. And I have some big ideas, some big dreams. And the question often reverberates in my head: Who am I to have such ideas? Why should I be the one to make important things happen?

And lastly, I love how God responds. *"I will be with you."* A rock to lean on as we struggle to move from inspiration to action.

So yes, I do believe that Judaism is principally about the doing. But if the doing were only about leading an ethical life, then perhaps the Torah would have been given to us as simply a list of mitzvot. Here are the laws. Go follow them. But surely the Torah is much more than that. In my view, Hillel's statement, "The rest is commentary," may be one of the largest understatements of all time. I have come to believe that the Torah, and Judaism, is trying to help us answer at least three kinds of questions.

The first kind of question is: What should we all do? What kind of rules do we all need so that we can live together in society and on our planet in a way that honors the dignity of each person? And it is this kind of question that the laws of the Torah answer, and that Hillel summarized many centuries ago.

Second, many of the stories of the Torah help us with an equally challenging type of question, a question perhaps as important as "What should we all do?" And that question is "What should I do?" Who am I? What is my unique role in helping to repair the world? And since there is only one Torah, but a multitude of us, there can be no precise prescriptions, there are no laws that govern the answer. Only stories that give us clues as to how to find our individual way.

Who am I?

I will be with you.

And lastly, I think the Torah and our traditions help us with a third type of question: What do we do and how do we live in a world that often appears not to be governed by reason? The mysteries of the heart, the greatest joys and the most unexpected tragedies, the human capacity for both remarkable compassion and great cruelty; we crave for a sense of understanding, yet reason and logic are often woefully inadequate to provide the full answers we seek.

The ethical humanists believe that people will find on their own both their calling and the self confidence to change the world. And that reason, logic, and philosophy, will enable people to deal with the challenges of the world. I am not so much suggesting they are wrong, since their system seems to work for them. But as someone who does not believe that the world is completely rational, and who thinks that even we Reform Jews can be a bit too rational at times, I am grateful for the system that is our inheritance. We are a people

who have been grappling with these issues for thousands of years, and we are heirs to a framework that teaches us that more than logic is required to sustain us, to enable us to lead an ethical life, to pursue justice, to repair the world, and to find our own authentic place in it. I was discussing some of this by e-mail with a very good friend of mine this week. At one point he sent me a message in which he referred to the “technology of Judaism,” and I told him I had to use that phrase tonight. For one, it suggests to me the richness of the system and the tools that are available to us, the unique combination of Torah study, prayer, mitzvot, ritual, Shabbat, faith, collective wisdom, God and community. This is what our tradition offers to us, and what has sustained our people through the best and the worst of times.

And two, for now it is as good an answer as I can offer to the question I started with. Reform Jew, good person? The distinction seems not to be in the ethical principles we hold, or the kind of world we aspire to create, but in the technology we choose to access to enable us to live according to our principles and to create a better world.

Perhaps Hillel had this technology in mind when he said “Now, go and study.” For as with any amazing piece of technology, one does need to read the manual. And in that manual, the story of Moses plays a central part.

I believe in some sense, we are all Moses. At some point in our lives, maybe more than once, faith or inspiration will help us come to

understand what it is we are intended to do. And then the question is, will we have the confidence to do it? I believe that with the understanding that our tradition provides that we are all *betzelem elohim*, made in the image of God, and that, like with Moses, God will be with us, the odds are higher that we will succeed. For me, that understanding is one of the great gifts of this “technology of Judaism,” and of what it means to be a Jew.

May we all become who we are meant to be, and do what we are meant to do.

Ken y’hi ratzon