

Interfaith Symposium

There is a story in the Talmud, Judaism's most important interpretive text of the Bible from the beginning of the Common Era, that one of our most famous rabbis, Rabbi Hillel, was approached by a potential student who asked him to teach him the entire Torah (the whole Bible) while standing on one foot (Al regal ahah- as we say in Hebrew) The challenge facing Rabbi Hillel was similar to the challenge for me of our topic today at the Interfaith Symposium. How do I teach about a 3000+ year old tradition in 15 minutes? I doubt that I could stand on one foot for 15 minutes!

But Rabbi Hillel was undaunted; he was a kind and patient rabbi and he told the young man, "That which is hateful to you do not do to your fellow man; the rest is commentary, now go and learn." People often remember the first part of this citation of Rabbi Hillel but they forget the second part. How we treat human beings is central to Judaism, as I believe it is central to all faiths, but the complexity of how we go about it is what distinguishes different faith traditions, along with how we approach God. So there is a great deal more to learn than I could convey in 15 minutes but I hope to at least give you a sense of the Jewish perspective today.

In order to speak meaningfully about Judaism I have to lay some groundwork for what Judaism is, because Judaism is not strictly a belief system. This may come as a surprise! We might think of Judaism as a cross (no pun intended) between a religion and a culture; one of our renowned rabbis, Rabbi Mordecai Kaplan, characterized Judaism as an evolving civilization. This expression conveys the hereditary/cultural elements of Judaism and its changing nature.

What makes this so is that a person is Jewish according to Jewish Law, like it or not, if he or she is born of a Jewish mother. There is no system of belief required of a person to be Jewish. In this way the Jews are indeed a people. Of course, like any community of people, throughout history, the social sanctions of the community, which is to say snubbing people who don't conform, have provided a powerful way to keep the behavior of Jewish individuals in line with Jewish Law but, with very rare exceptions, they remained Jews no matter what they believed.

Conversion is possible, as it is for most faiths, and for those who may choose to convert and join the Jewish people, there is a long period of learning of Jewish History, culture, and religious practices, and a commitment to the Jewish people,

but it is behavior, and not belief, that is the criterion for acceptance into the Jewish people, even among the most Orthodox. The expectation is that when your behavior honors God, your heart and mind will follow. Consistent with this is the belief that we all have freedom of choice; we are responsible for all the choices that we make in our everyday lives, our unique inherited traits and the circumstances of our lives notwithstanding.

Judaism has evolved extensively since the time of the Bible and there are a number of denominations within Judaism with different interpretations, which is probably not a surprise and is something we share with other traditions. For example, I cited the traditional definition of a Jew as being born of a Jewish mother or converting to Judaism, however the Reform movement of Judaism considers someone born of a Jewish father alone as also Jewish. This is a modern change and not accepted by all Jews.

So, you may wonder, where does the authority come from to make changes in the interpretation of the Bible? The source of authority is our great volume of traditional texts, including, of course, the Bible itself, the writings of the rabbis of the Talmud and Midrash, at the beginning of the first millennium, and of the rabbis of the medieval period. Any later changes to Jewish practice must be consistent with the Torah and Talmud themselves but, without diverging from what the Torah and Talmud say, there is some wide latitude for interpretation.

Whose changes in interpretations are acceptable to the Jewish world? -those of the rabbis. Rabbis are linked to one another over history. Only a rabbi can ordain another rabbi so there is considered to be an unbroken chain of the handing down of the entire tradition through extensive close learning. The process of reinterpreting the Bible to reflect changes in the world is done on the basis of consensus among rabbis who are highly regarded for their knowledge and wisdom; there is no hierarchy of authority. Respect for a rabbi's opinion on a matter of Jewish Law or custom is only as great as his/her reputation for wisdom and knowledge within his/her own community.

So, the emphasis in Judaism is on behavior, the behavior that God expects from us, according to our laws. For example, it is considered more important to give generously to those in need than to give with a willing heart. Our law takes into consideration that one will not always feel generous; therefore giving must come out of an obligation, rather than to be motivated only when the mood strikes us. The person in need cannot wait until we feel the spirit move us. And we have volumes and volumes of specific laws and customs about every minute detail of

life, from what and how we eat, how to bury our dead, permitted sexual relations and prayer and other ritual. Though it may not always seem obvious, the ultimate purpose of all these laws is to establish a coherent system of behavior which guides our lives toward ethical behavior and consciousness of God's Presence.

The ways in which we are commanded by God to behave are referred to as mitzvot, commandments, singular mitzvah. The Ten Commandments are 10 of the 613 commandments that the Rabbis of the Talmud and later have extracted from the Torah as obligations incumbent upon the Jewish people, they are more than good deeds. Some are ethical and some are ritual, some are general and some are very specific, some are positive and some are negative, what to do and what not to do. Some are religious obligations that are common across religions and some are particular to Judaism. I will only be able to touch on a few of them.

First our relationship with God is one-on-one. We have no intermediary to reach God; we confess our sins directly to God, in our prayers every day, and even more frequently at this time of year. As we enter into the Days of Awe, Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur, our awareness of our failings is heightened and we make a grand effort to change our ways for the coming year.

We have a whole literature of mysticism, including Kaballah, meditative and other practices that may help enable us to feel God's Presence. Yet, following God's Commandments is the central way in which we bring God into our lives.

Similarly, the Torah speaks to each of us individually and it is appropriate for each of us to question and struggle with what the text has to say in a personal way, but also with the knowledge of what our great sages, and our rabbis throughout history, have offered as commentary on the texts in the past. There is a very strong emphasis on study, both religious and secular in the Jewish tradition. Given the emphasis on the legal system in the Talmud and the emphasis on education it is not surprising that many Jews choose to pursue higher education and a career in law or education.

Just this past Shabbat, Saturday, we read from the Torah, in Deuteronomy 16:18-18:5 which contains the expression *tzedek, tzedek, tirdof*, "Justice, justice, you shall pursue," which is to say that though it is critical that legal issues be decided in a just manner, we are required to do more than that. We are required to go out and find where injustice dwells and strive to correct it. So we have many organizations whose sole purpose is just that, not at all unlike those of other faiths, and Jews are heavily involved in secular organizations with similar missions as well. One of

these organizations is American Jewish World Service which fights poverty, hunger and disease throughout the developing world, without regard to race, religion, or nationality.

We have obligations for care and preservation of the earth and for kindness to animals. Humans may have dominion over the earth but that implies a responsibility for its care. We refine our own souls when we are ecologically minded and not wasteful, and our sensitivity is increased as we provide rest even for our work animals, along with ourselves on our Holy Shabbat.

Humility, modesty, and civility are very important values in Judaism as they are in other faiths, and I find it appalling that these values do not appear to be societal values in our generation, as we observe when we look at the entertainment industry in this country. The honor and dignity of an individual should never be violated. The Talmud is adamant that protecting the dignity of any person overrides other elements of Jewish Law. Destroying a person's good name with words is worse than harming him physically. In particular, it is especially important to honor one's father and mother.

There is not a distinct separation between the physical and the spiritual in Judaism, or between body and soul, but rather an understanding that they are intimately connected. Judaism is not an ascetic tradition, rather, bodily pleasures are gifts from God to be rejoiced in, and are not seen as weaknesses or sins unless they are engaged in in forbidden ways or to excess, and similarly there is not glorification or merit attributed to suffering. *Pekuah Nefesh*, preserving the life and health of oneself, and others is perhaps the highest value in Judaism. One can violate almost any Jewish Law in the interest of preserving life. Our bioethical tradition permits most interventions, short of euthanasia, to prevent suffering. Visiting the sick is a very important mitzvah; the rabbis of the Talmud tell us that by visiting the sick we remove part of his/her illness. The heavy emphasis on "life-saving" and an openness to what modern medicine has to offer inspires many Jews to seek out a career in medicine.

Peace is referred to as God's most precious gift and we pray many times a day to God for peace in the world, but it is also our obligation to go out and seek peace, work for peace, along with justice.

Lastly, "Remembrance" plays a very strong role in Jewish life. We have a great deal of ritual surrounding remembering the loss of beloved members of our families- we individually recite a special prayer called the Mourners Kaddish every

day for an extended period of time after the death of a family member, and again every year on the anniversary of that death to keep them in our thoughts and present in our lives. We remember and recreate many events in Jewish history including the Exodus, the destruction of the Holy Temple in Jerusalem, and the near destruction of the Jewish community in Persia, in Greek controlled Jerusalem, and in the Holocaust. By remembering, we reinforce our Jewish identity, we know where we come from, we know who our ancestors are, and we know all the trials and tribulations that they went through to preserve the treasure of the Jewish tradition that we possess.