

Shabbat Shalom with a Side of Torah – Tetzvah

This week presents us with an interesting conundrum. Of all of the weekly Torah portions since we first met Moses, this will be the only one that never mentions him by name. There are veiled references to his presence in the story. God seems to speaking to Moses throughout the text, providing instructions for the building of the Mishkan (tabernacle), but we only surmise that Moses is actually there and listening, and not simply relying on God's voice mail. So the questions swirl, "Where is Moses?" Well, he is not in camp. The people are getting anxious over his absence and are beginning the process of building the Golden Calf. If he is not down there, and he is not with God ... then where is he? It turns out that a little known sage, the RAMBA"SH gives us a classic Talmudic answer. The Talmud teaches "Aen mukhdam aen m'ukhar ba-Torah -- there is no before or after in the Torah." Effectively, time is irrelevant, as we interpret the value of the text. So, given this precept, where was Moses? He was celebrating Purim, hearing the Megillah (Book of Esther) read (Purim is this weekend). After all, the blueprints for building are for the artisans, this, however was a chance to study! Moses felt his time was much better spent growing spiritually. After all, the story of Purim is timeless, while the building of the tabernacle will only be necessary for the next forty years.

Actually, the Purim story and its lessons of redemption offer a wonderful juxtaposition to the mundane building instructions found in the Torah portion. More pertinent, though, is that this juxtaposition really points out the crisis the religious world faces today. As we face the news day to day, we cannot ignore that the religious world has divided in to two huge camps. There are people who perfunctorily do or don't follow the ritual traditions of their respective faiths and there are those who find faith in the engagement with tradition. The difference sounds subtle, but it is not. Simply put, one school faces faith ritually/legalistically and the other approaches it philosophically/spiritually. One school accepts that the rules are the rules and follows or refuses to follow based on whether they believe God has made the rules or not. In short – there are people who believe God wants them to do everything, and they do it. There are those who think it is all silly and manmade ... and then walk away. The other school accepts that the value of tradition is the voice through which it speaks to each generation, and the impact of ongoing interpretation and integration into the daily lives of its faithful. From my perspective, this divide is far more telling of the problem we face with religious fanaticism in this world than the traditional way of dividing the religious world into "normal" and fundamentalist.

To start, I am not sure what the words "normal" or "fundamentalist" mean. I am having a small debate with a close friend who believes that homosexuality is God ordained wrong. His faith tradition says it is, mine does not. I am a fundamentalist in my belief that God's love is not rooted in which dogma we buy into, and that love is a matter to be celebrated. My friend is very normal within his belief that even while God may love everyone, we are only allowed to love certain people. We use the term fundamentalist in a negative light, but I do not believe it has a negative meaning outside of where we impose one.

Rather, we need to see the world in terms of those who engage as juxtaposed to those who blindly accept or reject. The trauma facing the world is not that there are narrow minded religious people all over (all or nothing). Religion has always known people who fall into this category. The problem is that there are fewer and fewer who fall into the other one. The world has maintained equilibrium because

there was always a balance between the schools of ritualism (acceptance or rejection) and philosophic/spiritual engagement. In all of our traditions, fewer and fewer people are leading the engagement. We default to accepting people in or out not based on what they think but what they do or don't do, and their choice is one we do not understand, we dismiss them or worse, denigrate them. There are so few voices calling us to grow in spiritual intellect and not just in observance. Perhaps this missing voice is precisely what is polarizing the school of absolutes into its own civil war between those who do everything, and those who, in response, do nothing. People are joining orthopraxic (God is all everything) congregations in droves, expecting and demanding to have God's engagement right now, as one walks in the doors. Other people reject that this is possible and completely run away. In the process, as if God is narrowly bound by their black and white assessment, neither of these people ever really spiritually engage beyond the dogma they accept or reject. And, in this process, they never grapple with the limitations they put on God by locking God in or out of their box.

If anything, Moses' absence from the nuts and bolts tells us that true leadership is not about jumping through hoops and measuring cubits. Moses' presence is reserved for the rest of the text that requires us to engage spiritually. My tradition understands Torah to demand conversation with the text. There are thousands of approaches to ritual, there are hundreds of thousands of approaches to truth. In this engagement is where one will meet Moses. I am not saying that ritual is bad or that those who walk away are immoral. I am saying that the value of religion cannot be found in the hoops through which we to choose to jump or not jump, rather in the process through which we make the choices. Shabbat Shalom and Chag (happy) Purim.