

Shabbat Shalom with a Side of Torah – Vayikra

Next month I will be traveling to Oxford, Ohio to teach at Miami University. The subject matter for the day revolves around diversity and our successes and failures in recognizing each other's dignity. We really live in two worlds. First, there is the world that we claim to live in, in light of our daily experiences. We work our jobs, run our homes and live our lives almost on auto-pilot. Most of the things we do during a day do not require deep thought and choice making. It is all good ... and even where not necessarily good, it is all familiar. The second world is the one that really exists; too often, the world we cannot see or do not want to admit knowing. If you walk into a room of strangers and ask every racist to raise his/her hand, you will not find many who will count themselves amongst the dreaded "hate mongers" of society. Genuinely, many do not realize that they participate in racism. Few white people understand "White Privilege." Few devoutly religious people believe they oppress others by professing their faith during a sectarian invocation on behalf of a gathering of even diverse people. I had a friend in high school who confessed to me, only a year or two ago, how angry he had been at me for all these years for oppressing him religiously. I did not remember oppressing him, but evidently when I demanded that my high school graduation not be dedicated exclusively to a Christian take on God, as he insisted on doing in his invocation, I oppressed him. Then of course, there are those who know what they are doing and hide behind masks to do it. There is no greater act of cowardice than a Klan cross burning or any other act of terrorism where the perpetrator hides behind a mask or face covering to avoid being identified as the offender.

With the exception of those who know what they are doing and hide from being caught, most of the world really believes that it is behaving appropriately. "Appropriate" is not an argument about right or left, it is a statement about integrity and belief. It is fine when people disagree, so long as human dignity is maintained in the disagreement. This weekend, we may actually see a vote on health care reform. Win or lose, with great sadness I say that our dignity and integrity has been tainted. Certainly there are arguments on both sides of the argument that make a lot of sense to people. What has tainted the whole process is the name calling, the vitriol, and the "politics as usual" tactics applied by both Republicans and Democrats in the process. It is most appropriate that this vote comes to a head as we read this week's Torah portion.

As the Book of Leviticus begins, we read about the sacrifices brought to the altar. They are not mandated, but they are strongly urged in a great many circumstances. Most notably, when one commits a transgression of speech the proper atonement for having committed the offense is a burned sacrifice on the altar. Unique to this offering is that the entire animal is consumed in the flame, not just the fat or certain organs. Cooking the animal on the altar and having the priests or the poor eat the meat (even while the rest is turned to smoke) is nothing more than a primitive form of "Grace" before a meal. Burning the whole animal denotes the real tragedy of one's offense. The Rabbis teach us that the real value of the sacrifice is its symbolic cost. In some sense, we are the offering that we bring. If it is a thanks offering, it is as if we are sharing our very blessing with God and the people who will benefit from the offering. This sin offering deprives everyone of any benefit, including God. God does not need the food. God needs us to be fed. As we bring this offering, we are admitting to having destroyed a piece of the community with the words we have spoken. Whether it is the accusation that "Social Justice is a

code word for Communism,” the accusations that all Republicans are only pandering to the health care industry that lines its pockets, or the portrayal of our president as a Batman villain, none of these horrific statements serve to do anything other than divide America. It actually makes me more sure of the prophecy on one of my bumper stickers, “Politicians and underwear need to be changed often, and often for the same reason.”

I do honestly believe that we need reform to our healthcare system. I think that there are abuses at so many levels that cause the average American to have to make horrible choices between seeking competent health care and paying rent or mortgages. In terms of the two worlds in which we live, I do not believe that this is a matter of the first world, where people live benignly. I also do not believe that people are ignorant of this reality. I do not believe that there is a person on either side of the political isle that does not see what is happening in this country, but I have to wonder how they think the rhetoric of this debate will solve any of the problems. We need meaningful conversation not “slam dunking.” Quite often I am asked to define the relevancy of the Leviticus sacrifices in the modern world. I can usually point to the thanks and apologies we offer with gifts, or the prayers we offer in place of the altar offering. These all evolved from the sacrificial system. Still alive and well, though, are the sacrifices of destruction where we do not symbolically take a resource of value from the whole world, but actually destroy part of the world with the way we behave. It is time for us to change the way in which we engage, even over difficult matters ... especially over the difficult matters. When we restore dignity to the way in which we converse, engage, and govern we will only then begin to see the real problems that keep this world from healing. Shabbat Shalom.