

Rabbi's Column

Rosh Hashanah Sermon Day 1

The question, "Who is a Jew" is one that has evoked some heated discussion every so often. Trying to figure out what being a **good** Jew looks like seems to multiply the intensity of the discussion.

In the part of the book "Placing God Second" that I will not be covering during the Kol Nidrei service there is a discussion on this very topic. It is designed to enable cool and reasonable conversations about being a good Jew.

From a scholarly perspective, the word Jew was not used to describe people until a long time after all Biblical events had been completed. Within the Biblical framework, people are considered Hebrews or Israelites. For the sake of today's sermon, I will be using the words Jew and Jewish even when talking about Biblical characters.

Becoming Jewish in Genesis is quite a bit different from how a person converts to Judaism today. Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel and Leah, Reuben, Simeon, Levi, Judah, Dinah, Naftali, Issachar, Asher, Dan, Zebulon, Gad, Joseph and Benjamin as well as all their children are all considered Jewish. Only Dinah's children (whose names we are never told) could be considered as arising from a biologically Jewish mother. A few of the 12 brothers' mothers were actually handmaidens who up until recently have not really been considered part of the family.

Abraham might have needed to do something to justify being considered as the first Jew, but the next generations don't appear to have needed to do much of anything other than being born or (if you were a woman) marrying into the family. No text anywhere proclaims that one person was more Jewish than another one based upon either expressed opinion or any particular action. This would have been easy for the text to do, as later books of the TaNaKH are filled with words indicating that certain actions are not appropriate ways of expressing what God desires.

After the Revelation at Sinai, things are different. There are actions which are labelled as appropriate, and many people who act inappropriately are executed in various fashions, often by God. Being Jewish, from the Exodus perspective, involves what you do, and whether you are working on "loving" God.

Those of you who were paying attention during the book of Bamidbar might remember that when the Israelites were counted, it was by ancestral lines, and not by which group was more consistent in following the new rules. Automatic membership in the Jewish people was still by birth. The rules have been tweaked a bit over time, and the gender of the important parent in terms of communal membership changed about 2000 years ago, yet this remains the standard model. Automatic membership in the community is through the mother by birth, automatic membership in a tribe is through the father by birth; membership is open to anyone who is willing to follow the post-Revelation model of performing commanded actions and "loving" God.

Psalm 24, which we recite several times during the Holiday season, includes the following: "who can go up to God's mountain; who can rise up in God's set apart place? One whose actions are not dirty and whose integral essence is actually filled with integrity, who does not carry along the soul I gave for meaningless enterprises and is not sworn to deceit." It does not say that only people who light candles on Shabbat, or even that only people who attend services regularly are welcome in the Divine arena. It is easy to see why many people have trouble taking those words at face value. Rashi himself, when faced with the statement by Hillel that behaving well towards other people was all that Judaism required, transmuted it into a need to follow whatever God said to do.

Actually, being obedient to God is a much lower bar than the one that is stated in the Psalm. The Psalm requires us to behave ethically. When a person is simply obedient to God, then it is easy to let God handle all the problems, knowing that God can do it better than the person could. Yet if I am behaving ethically, then I cannot just leave the things I can do something about in the hands of somebody who does not appear to be doing anything. Ethics also requires that I not help, when helping would keep somebody else from a growthful, albeit painful experience.

The actual question that Rabbi Hartman asked at the beginning of the chapter I am reviewing now is "Do I have to believe in God to be a good Jew?" I think the material so far has shown that a person does not have to believe in God to be Jewish. The quick dip we just did into the Psalms shows that being a good Jew primarily involves being good. As I do not think I am at the stage of an Abraham or Maimonides, I personally will continue to make use of Jewish rituals and commandments to help me behave well.

One remaining question is whether goodness is dependent upon God, in the sense that what God does or states in religious texts is what defines good, or whether goodness is independent of God. This next segment, answering the question, also begins with Abraham. Abraham is often used as the prime example of somebody who obeyed God. One episode in his life shows something really interesting. Abraham asked, "Should not the Judge of the World act justly?" This question implies that justice is not limited to how God acts, but is something related to how interactions between people in the world should work. Justice, and therefore goodness (for goodness includes justice) are independent of God. Since this is almost counterintuitive, it bears repeating: goodness and justice are independent of God.

Isaiah lets us know that God makes peace and creates evil. God created everything, and insofar as evil is a thing, God created it. Isaiah did not say "God creates good and evil" which would have seemed appropriate. A more complete exploration of the issue of evil will have to wait for another time.

So both Abraham and Isaiah indicate that goodness is a quality that we aspire to attain, and that we keep in mind when doing our critique of God's actions.

One final thought. Knowing that no matter what, we will eventually die (and the kittel I wear is supposed to be a visual reminder for everyone) is a cue for us. What do we do with that cue? We can decide that since everything will end except God, and we cannot understand God, then nothing matters, and whatever we decide to do is perfectly acceptable. This leads to dictatorships on the one hand or very short lives on the other. It is very difficult to extend peak experiences within the bodies we have been given, so if one decides to live in a completely excited state all of the time, some parts might just wear out with overuse.

We might also decide that since God exists in time as well as outside of time, and since God has decided to make a permanent covenant with us, we might just spend our time here in becoming the most ethical partner with God that we can be. Effective partners with a permanent contract let the senior partner know when what they are doing appears wrong. Very effective partners also let the senior partner know when what they are doing is outstanding.