

Rabbi's Column

Purim and Pesach are both on their way here. Please reserve Sunday morning, March 12th, for celebrating Purim with us. The morning will include, as usual, the reading of the Megillah, with a Purim Shpiel of a different sort interspersed between the chapters, along with some traditional Purim songs, mostly led by our Religious School students. [Although I make it a point to never practice anything in English with them. Once a year is enough for that.] There will also be some other Purim related parodies of English songs (with at least one new one. If I have time, I'll do more) as well as chomping on Hamantashen.

Oh, and feel free to dress in a costume of sorts. I'll be in one myself - while it will not match my Frontier Days rig for authenticity, it will at least be a little bit different than what I wear all the time.

On to a Torah thought or two.

This week we go through a lot of the laws that regulate our daily lives with each other. After two chapters of that, Moses gets to write a lot of things down, and then he gets to go back up again to God. A couple of times the people hear what Moses tells them that God is interested in having them do, and they reply, "all that God has said, we will do." Then, after Moses submits something in writing, the people say "we will do, and then we will hear/listen/understand." It seems kind of backwards. Would it not have made more sense for them to say, "We will listen and then do it."?

I have mentioned this before, and it still seems to me that the Israelites intuitively developed what the Pastoral Care community spent decades figuring out. A particularly effective way to develop as a Chaplain is to engage in an action-reflection-action chain of events. Try something that seemed helpful to you when you thought of it. Then reflect on what actually happened (did it seem like it was helpful to the patient, did it help you more than it helped them, etc.) Then tweak your behavior the next time you are in that situation. Repeat continually.

So we do the same thing within Judaism, but sometimes over a much longer time frame.

We do what it seems that God has commanded us. Then we see if that results in a benefit to the world (and there are many ways that the world might benefit from any particular Jewish action) or in an increase in suffering. Then we try to figure out how we might have misunderstood or misapplied the teaching from the text, in order that the next time suffering will be decreased and the world will be on its way to being perfected.

Some direct statements in the Torah text were determined almost from the beginning to result in an increase in suffering if they were to be implemented as written. This week's text provides one of those instances - the lex talionis - (eye for an eye). The text describes physical symptoms, and from the moment the law could be applied, it was determined to be best applied by financial compensation. Sometimes it becomes clear over time that something has changed, so things that were taken literally no longer need to be done in that fashion. At one point in time, it was assumed that when one mentioned the name of a supposed deity, that deity was strengthened, as merely mentioning the name gave it the extra reality of your belief. These days, when I discuss the Scrooge movies throughout the decades, I am not indicating that it is appropriate for Jews to add December 25th to our religious calendar. Sometimes it becomes clear almost overnight that something might have changed and what once seemed beneficial now increases suffering. Although the Rabbis were pretty modern in their understanding of the physical variations regarding sex organs, throughout much of Jewish history, the problems of negative population growth took precedence over people's individual desires. Attitudes are in the process of changing comparatively quickly. Within 200 years or so, the options within Judaism may no longer be recognizable in this area - which is not the first time in Jewish history that this has happened. Within 500 years, people will presume that anybody with any sense had always been understanding and inclusive.

There may still be a group that is less tolerant. God never wastes any group descended from Israelite/Jewish thought and behaviors. Think of Samaritans, Karaites and the various Anusim.

There is a difference between following the crowd blindly and doing so with full knowledge. Unanimity is never to be presumed among Jews, and I encourage you to do what you can to increase your level of knowledge and understanding of this universe that God is using to teach us how to live better lives. As has been said many times before, these interpretations and these interpretations (even when they completely contradict each other) are both based on what God has communicated.