

Rabbi's Column

On the opening day of the legislative session, the Catholic Church hosted an interfaith service for the second time. I arrived on time this year, taking part in the processional and recessional, and sitting on the bima equivalent with a Catholic and Islamic representative. I read a version of Psalm 136, and then I engaged in a bit of Torah study.

The major change I made in Psalm 136 was that instead of the chorus being, "for His mercy endures forever" I used "Whose kindness benefits the world". This makes use of a Rabbinic midrash translation technique which is first heavily emphasized during the week when Abram becomes the main character. God tell him, "Lech Lecha" - which can mean, "You should go!" and the Rabbis reinterpreted to mean, "Go for your own benefit." Since the letter Lamed is used in both "lecha" and in "L'olam" in the Psalm, I chose to reinforce that kindness is important. I also made sure to create a gender neutral translation, as that creates a stronger similarity between the meaning of the two languages concerning this particular text.

This is approximately the teaching I gave:

We study the Five Books of Moses, the Torah, dividing it up so that we go through it all each year. This week's portion begins the section dealing with the construction of the Tabernacle, and I wasn't sure that I would find something that resonated well. I know that construction is a big deal at the capitol, but still.

I did find a couple of verses that seem appropriate. Towards the beginning of the process, God tells Moses to take from each person that which they want to give. This helped the community feel a sense of ownership of the Tabernacle. It is difficult to feel ownership when a person tells you what you have to do. I know that when I am told something like that, my first reaction is, "Really? You actually want me to do this thing? Are you sure?" When I fulfill the command imposed by another person, I am rarely wholehearted in following through.

The other verse deals with the Ark. The box that is kept in a separate room, by itself, and nobody ever sees the inside. Yet the verse tells us to cover the box both inside and out with gold. I have put up many sets of shelves, and I can usually tell how the shelf should be put in by looking for the side with rough edges. This directive is like having a shelf that looks good on both sides. I would never know how to put one together!

What is in this box that remains unopened? The covenant between God and Israel. The contract. The gold on both the inside and the outside is a hint that promises should be kept. When officials make promises and don't deliver on them, then sometimes they don't get to keep their jobs. Other times, once you're in, we'll keep you doing it forever. Now I know that deciding what to do is very difficult, since you have people yelling at you from one side to "Do this!" and people yelling at you from the other side, "Do anything but this!" When we have

internalized the contract we are involved with, and act with integrity so that our actions match our promises, then we at least have firm ground to stand on while we do our job.

I spoke off the cuff, really, so the tenor was mostly light-hearted. A lot of the tone is lost without imagining my fist next to each ear as I said the "Do this!" lines, and other similar non-verbal cues. A number of people thanked me afterward, and indicated that they appreciated my being there in the first place, as well as the message I delivered.