

Rabbi's Column

Certainty vs. doubt

Every so often I overhear a discussion in which one proponent tries to cast doubt on the whole interfaith endeavor by stating that if there is no certainty, then there is no meaning, so if one imagines that other people's religions are valid for them, then the whole God idea is meaningless.

Naturally, I disagree, yet the conversation rarely lasts long enough for me to explain why I disagree. I will try to condense my argument here.

One of the axioms that I use to deal with this is the attitude of the Talmudic sages (about the years 200-600 of the Common Era) towards the statements of the Mishnaic era sages (from approximately the year 10 through the year 200 or so of the Common Era). Basically, if an earlier sage declared a matter to be so, it was. When two sages disagreed, they were both correct. Even when nobody acted as if either one was correct, they were both considered correct.

How is this possible, and why would anyone even think it could be?

We have a covenant to be partners with God in perfecting the world. We are less effective as partners if we only do what we are told to do, and we wait to be informed exactly how to do it. We are more effective when we take the outlined plan and figure out how best to achieve the end result, fine tuning our efforts with each effort. We started this process at Mount Sinai in the wilderness with Moses when we accepted the text in the first place - we proclaimed Na'aseh v'Nishma [we will do/make/perform and we will listen/hear/understand/pay attention]. As long as this is what we are engaged in, then the details might vary between people, and even between what a person does at one time and what that person does at a different time.

This concept works best in the world when everyone trusts that other people are equally engaged in being partners with God, even if the ways of acting are different. The Talmud mentions the schools of Hillel and Shammai who disagreed on a very large number of specific items, yet still ate at each other's homes and were willing to marry each other's children. Paradox and inconsistency are part of living as a human.

When this is combined with the concept of the 70 facets of Torah, it becomes pretty evident (at least to me) that certainty concerning God and what we are supposed to do/be is more than likely a delusion of the moment. Even that delusion might be considered correct, especially if the person holding that delusion is engaged in making the world a better place in a growth and life centered manner.

It is pretty easy for me to not be concerned about paradox, and to avoid the conceit that there is only one way to interpret sacred text. I hold that conversations we have between ourselves and God concerning the sacred texts to be our effort to try and figure out how we as Jews should act in a life affirming and growthful manner. I also hold that there are many paths to improving the world and there are many ways that God allows people to use to figure out how they are supposed to be doing that.

Interfaith dialogue for me is an exercise in 1) finding out the ways others have uncovered which help them improve the world 2) explaining how the categories in which their answers have accustomed them to think do not always work transparently with categories derived from other answers that people have uncovered 3) helping keep the focus on life affirming actions and learning.

My hope for this week is that when we examine our deeds as partners with God, we find them all to be life affirming and filled with the potential for growth.