

When Ideologies Cloud our Humanity

Rosh Hashanah Morning 2018/5779, by Rabbi Lisa Hochberg-Miller

A father takes his beloved son, his longed-for son, and walks with him, a three-day journey, carrying wood to build a sacrifice. Believing this act of piety is what God wants from him to establish the greatness of God's name, the father and the son climb the mountain. The father prepares his son for sacrifice. And then- at the final moment, a voice calls out- stop, don't you dare! Is it possible that in that moment, Abraham realizes that he has *misunderstood* God's test? The test is not to see if he would be piously obedient. The test is whether he understands that when it comes to the choice between ritual behavior or ethical action, he is to choose the ethical. How can God now trust Abraham to be a caring patriarch to a people, if he had turned an indifferent heart to the fear in his own son's eyes? He had misunderstood what God really wanted from him and it was the angel who had to save his son, because Abraham had failed to stay the knife.

What happens to us, when our ideologies eclipse our humanity? In this era of growing religious and political fundamentalist ideologies, how do we know if what we are doing is the kind of belief and behavior that God wants from us? Donniel Hartman, a prominent modern Orthodox Israeli rabbi, believes that when we put religious piety over people, we are getting God's message wrong. There are two tendencies in religion, Rabbi Hartman says in his book titled "Putting God Second: How to Save Religion from Itself." The first tendency is to become God intoxicated- where our love and piety for God is so great, that there is no room to see humanity. This is the Abraham of the Akedah, so preoccupied with adhering to what he believes God has commanded, that he misses the humanitarian issue before him- that God couldn't possibly be condoning child sacrifice. Abraham's intoxication leaves no room for anyone else in his world- it is just God and him, the faithful servant. He has become indifferent to the suffering of others.

The second tendency in religion is what Rabbi Hartman calls God Manipulation. God Manipulation is believing that we really understand what God wants. We believe that everything we do is representing or protecting God's interests. The problem is that if my ideology is right-- then yours is wrong. God Manipulation is used to serve one's self-interests, to the exclusion of others. Here is a prime example of God Manipulation. Two days after the fast day of Tisha B'Av this summer, a boulder from the Kotel fell and landed on the very spot used by the Reform and Conservative communities in Israel to pray at the Wall. The deputy mayor of Jerusalem, Dov Kalmanovich, responded that Reform Jews should look at this boulder drop and examine their hearts. In other words, this boulder was a warning shot from God about liberal Judaism's misguided ways. In Kalmanovich's God Manipulation, he, a true inheritor of God's word, knows God's mind, and God obviously agrees with him about the lack of worthiness to be found in Reform Jews. And yes, we can be appalled at the indifference to fellow Jews, and what could have been a loss of life had the boulder fallen 26 hours earlier, when Reform Jews were gathered on that spot in prayer. This of course is the position of fundamentalists of all stripes- I am the true inheritor of God's word, and God has chosen me to advocate and uphold these sacred laws against any who would disrespect them. In this universe, when my focus is on

upholding God, my focus is not on my fellow human being, in any loving, respectful way. In this view, God sanctions my indifference to you.

Let me be very clear. This is not just a Jewish problem. This God Manipulation and God Intoxication is seen as much in Christianity or Islam as it is in Judaism. And this is not just a religious problem. I think the truth about being “ideologically driven” addresses our political ideologies as much it does our religious ideologies. It can be seen in liberal ideologies as much as in orthodox ideologies. We should be passionate about our beliefs, but at what point does our passion, our *certainty for how we interpret law- be they religious law or political /Constitutional law*, blind us to the humanity of others? At what point do our ideologies become idolatries that we hold so righteously, that we cannot even seek compromise with others, or acknowledge other’s truths, or see the humanity in those who believe and behave differently than us?

Lo tu’chal l’hitaleim. Do not be indifferent. To be indifferent to others-- to be uncaring, unmoved by their plight- is not a Jewishly sanctioned response. This is exactly what God warns us about in Ex. 23:5 when we are taught to help our enemy- the person we might really be indifferent to, when their animal has fallen and is struggling under the burden that it is carrying. This is the moment any one of us might say to ourselves, couldn’t happen to a more deserving guy. Ha. We must not put up our wall of self-righteousness, but we must retain our humanity and see the suffering of the animal and its owner. Do not harden your heart to others. “do not be indifferent.” Do not be unmoved.

Lo tu’chal l’hitaleim (Deut. 22:3) God says, because our God is a God of Non-Indifference. Rather, we are to act with a compassionate heart, for this makes us godly. Moses cannot be indifferent when he sees Israelite slaves being beaten- he rises up. Abraham cannot be indifferent when he learns God’s plans to destroy the people of Sodom and Gomorrah- he speaks up. We cannot let our religious differences make us indifferent to other Jews, here in the United States or in Israel, any more than we can let our political differences make us indifferent to the voices and needs of those who are politically to the right or left of us, here or in Israel, or to those who are in need, here or in Israel. Our ideologies may define what we say and do, but when we allow our beliefs to divorce us from other human beings, to act with indifference to them, then we have foresaken the ethical foundation of our faith. And that is why on these Holy Days we turn to the prophet’s voices of 2,500 years ago, reminding ourselves that it is not blind adherence to ideologies that God desires, it is ethical behavior. On Yom Kippur we read from Isaiah a rebuke- *“Is this the fast I seek? Afflicting your body and soul, covering yourself with sackcloth and ashes? Is not this the fast I desire- to break the bonds of injustice and remove the heavy yoke, to let the oppressed go free and release all those enslaved? To share your bread with the hungry and take the homeless poor into your home, and never to neglect your own flesh and blood?* “ The prophets taught us: religious devotion without moral conduct is spiritual deviance. Abraham is in fact chosen by God because God believes he will be a man of ethical behavior, a man who will hold no less than God accountable for acting righteously as he does when he implores God to consider if there are good people who still dwell in Sodom and Gomorrah: *“v’shamru derekh Adonai l’asot tzedakah u’mishpat: I*

have singled Abraham out so that he might teach his children to keep the way of the Eternal by doing what is just and right." (Gen. 18:19) Our rabbis taught, we are to go *lifnim mishurat ha din* (*rabbinic principle, Ramban. Rambam*), beyond the requirement of the law, to insure that justice is done. Because the truth is: laws do not always assure that what is ethical is done. It is incumbent on us to go above and beyond to make sure that the outcome of law is what is ethical. The ETHICAL IS the heart of Judaism.

There's a debate in the Talmud among sages – (Makkot 24b), trying to decide, if they had to pare all of Judaism's 613 mitzvot down to the one most essential verse, which would it be? Not one sage nominates a ritual behavior- not lighting Shabbat candles, not even keeping Yom Kippur. Each one nominates an ethical imperative: do justly, love mercy, walk humbly with your God. Act justly and righteously. Love your neighbor as yourself. Know that every human being is created in the Divine image. Our sages understood the ethical as the foundation for Judaism. It's no surprise that we read the Holiness Code, about our ethical obligations to each other, on Yom Kippur, our day of returning to God's highest aspirations for us as a sacred people.

But of all our ethical texts, the one most often turned to is the one spoken by Hillel the sage 2,000 years ago: "what is hateful to you, do not do to any person." But what's equally as important about this verse is the larger story, from Talmud Shabbat 31a. Hillel, as you recall the story, is approached by a person we call a convert. But the actual context of the story is that this is not a true seeker who approaches Hillel. This is a person who is confrontational, disrespectful, chiding of Judaism and its sages, which is why when he first approaches the sage Shammai, Shammai will have nothing to do with him. Knowing that Judaism is filled with laws and ritual obligations, he challenges Shammai: I'll convert if you teach me the entire torah while I stand on one foot. This is not a respectful request. This is a mocking comment. Shammai does not take the bait. But Hillel responds to the man's taunt with wisdom, parring all of Jewish rituals down to one ethical command. What is hateful to you- *hey buddy, basically the way you are treating me right now*—do not do to any person; that is the whole torah. Now, go study it, so that you might do it. Why is the context of this story so important? Shammai is confronted with someone who mocks his beliefs- and he responds in anger. Hillel is confronted the same way, but he chooses to see the person, and not be blinded by the offensiveness of the act. It is easy to be indifferent to those with whom we disagree, to those we cannot relate to because of their lifestyle, or their language, or faith, or a whole host of things that define them as "other." Hillel teaches by example not to be hateful and not to be dismissive.

This then is the formula Rabbi Hartman would prescribe when we are so sure that we are right about the ideologies we carry, that we want to act indifferently to those we disagree with, those who get our blood pressure boiling. We must put our religious or political ideologies second, in order to put our ethical behavior toward others first- to respond from a place of compassion, and brotherhood, not a place that ignores the humanity of the other.

Let's admit this is not easy for a people who are repeatedly told in Torah that we are stiff-necked, stubborn and unyielding, so sure of our rightness. Our challenge as a people has been to respond to God's invitation to circumcise our hearts, in other words, to cut away the

thick walls about our hearts, to be feeling, vulnerable and compassionate. (Deut. 10:16) Our stubborn belief that we are right, our indifference to others, is not what will move our world forward, in this time of stiffening to other people's beliefs, and ideologies, and other people's sufferings. We can only move forward when we let ourselves feel compassion for others, when we allow our hearts to be vulnerable, unprotected, i.e., circumcised- to truly hear what others say and feel, and help them hear us.

May this be a year where we practice balancing that which we are passionate sure about, with the humility to know we don't know all we think we know. May this be a year of putting ethics above ideologies- We truly put God first, when we put God's people- all people- first.

Amen.