

On Being Nice

Here's a heretical thought. Avraham could afford to be nice to people because he didn't have to live in a typical Jewish community. Don't kill me. Jewish communities are probably no better or worse than most other communities. They all like to impose their own conventions, have their expectations and feel uncomfortable with those people who do not exactly fit in.

Being nice and considerate to people, difficult in practice as it may be, is one of the most important imperatives in the Jewish religion. So much so that according to the Talmud (Shabbat 127a) "Welcoming guests is more important than spending time with God!" And indeed even ritual obligations must be put on hold to deal with human needs.

You wouldn't know this from the way most communities function. We constantly hear about breaking Jewish Laws, faulty conversions, disobeying rabbis, but not enough about visiting the sick, being kind to people, welcoming visitors—all things that are just as much a requirement of our religion as buying specially supervised kosher mineral water on Passover or wrapping oneself up in aluminum foil as one flies over graveyards! Is it right to humiliate a thoughtless au pair who turns up to pick up her charges at a religious school because she was wearing inappropriate clothes? Sure, the rule is the rule. But where is the human sensitivity in executing it? (To give a minor current example in North West London).

The source for the laws about hospitality is Genesis 18. The text says that God appears to Avraham as he sits at the opening to his tent. He looks up and he sees three men. (No he doesn't ask for proof of identity or a genealogical pedigree.) He runs to meet them and says, "My Lord, please do not go away from Your servant. Let me get some water and wash your feet and rest under the tree."

The simple meaning of this is that God appears to Avraham in the shape of three men whom he sees and invites in. When he says, "My Lord, please do not go away," he is addressing the leader. And later it transpires they are messengers from another world. Avraham clearly saw them as humans because he offers them creature comforts. From this we might learn that angels are really humans acting in such a way as to actualize some Divine plan. We can all be agents of God in some way or another.

The great commentator, Rashi, quoting the Midrash, puts a very different spin on this narrative. God appears to Avraham and they are communicating spiritually when Avraham looks up and sees three men. He turns to God and says, "My Lord, please do not go away." And then he turns to the three men and says, "Let me get some water," etc. The idea here is that however important God is, there are certain types of human situations or obligations that are so important that one can actually tell God to wait. As important as God is, as spirituality is, in the end it must enhance our relationship with other humans.

There are general Biblical imperatives such as “Love your neighbor,” and “Take care of the widow and the orphan,” and “Open your hand to the poor.” But characteristically Judaism requires specific actions, and these go beyond charity, Tzedaka, in its various forms. There are, in fact, three laws that permeate our traditions that focus on inter-human behavior, Gemillut Chassadim, Showing Kindness, is the highest level. It is something a poor person can do for a rich person, and the greatest act of kindness is to the dead who have no way of repaying you. Bikkur Cholim, visiting the sick—that’s pretty obvious though it’s very hard too. Who actually likes going into hospitals? And then there’s Hachnassat Orchim, having visitors. What, entertainment? Parties? Can that really be a religious obligation? Well, in a way, yes. Of course there should be a religious element too, but I would argue that in this day and age of alienation, showing people the warmth of a spiritual home is indeed massively important. Besides, most of us live under such pressure that we tend towards withdrawal.

There is, as you might expect, an argument amongst the rabbis as to what takes priority. The general rule is that an opportunity to be kind that might pass takes priority over virtually all else. In our prayer books we quote the Mishna in Peah that says study is greater than everything, on the assumption that the more you study the more realize how important it is to carry out the practice not just the theory. Sadly, it often doesn’t work that way. When I was in Yeshiva the person who devoted time to the poor and the unfortunate instead of academic endeavors was regarded as being rather peculiar. “Leave it to the women,” I was once advised by a very, very long beard.

Without getting involved in legalistic gymnastics, it does appear to me that in asserting this principle that God can wait but human beings cannot, the Talmud is making an absolutely essential point. One of the consequences of tragedy or loss is the realization that it is too late. Things that could have been said or done can now no longer be. Responding to individual pain is crucial, or to put it in its Talmud phraseology, “The tears of those who have been misused, rise up to Heaven.” It is so obvious, and yet too often communities in their desire for conformity and cohesion tend to overlook it.

It’s why religions are all very good at the grand statement, the moral imperative, the “Love Your Neighbor”, in theory—but when it actually comes down to being nice to someone, it is so much harder. And that’s why most religions fail! And that’s why Avraham is such an amazing role model.

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