

Religious Risk

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

There is no word I know of in the Bible for "risk." Modern Hebrew uses the word "Sakanah", which really means "danger." "Risk" in modern usage can also mean opportunity and a healthy ability to go beyond the boundaries in a positive way. The opposite of risk (which you might think undermines my etymological analysis) is to play it safe.

When a religion, or any legal system for that matter, plays things safe, it becomes static and inhumane. We can all agree that the humane quality is admired, in theory. At the same time, most conservative religions and legal systems alike claim that they are in no way flexible, changeable, or evolutionary. But I want to extol risk. It is in vogue in economics, social interaction, and of course military tactics. I actually think it is inherent in Torah.

The Biblical (and Hammurabi's) "an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth and a bruise for a bruise, etc." appears to be a very specific standard of retribution. Yet in the text, on either side of its first appearance in the Book of Exodus, we have laws about financial compensation, of different types of assessment of damages that do not follow the principle literally. How would a judge working under a literal interpretation take a tooth from a toothless man who had just knocked out the tooth of someone with a mouthful of teeth? Or, to give the example of the Talmud, would it be fair and just to take away the eye of a one-eyed man rendering him completely blind as fair compensation for putting out one eye of a man with two?

In other words, even a strict legal system is open to interpretation. Once there are options there are decisions, and once there are decisions there are risks and opportunities to take risks.

The Torah often links Justice (Mishpat), with what is right (Tseddek) as in Deuteronomy 1:16 and 16:18, not to mention all the references in Isaiah. What does Tseddek mean? Isn't the law enough? Clearly not. There is some meta-legal standard which relies on another sort of standard. Which is why the Torah keeps on repeating less tangible and definitive ideas, such as not to oppress the poor or the widow or the orphan or the stranger, because if they cry out to God in their suffering there will be repercussions, as in Exodus 22:20. It is why the Torah also talks about what is "good and right" over and above adhering to the law (Deuteronomy 12:28).

There are, if you like, checks and balances, different principles that need to be combined in order to reach an ideal conclusion. The moment you have conflicting principles you leave the safety of certainty. You have to decide between different positions. You enter a moral zone that contains risk. You cannot be absolutely certain you will reach the right conclusion. But the only way you avoid risk is by not embarking altogether, and when you do that you betray the religious ideal of finding the correct (or others might say

the Divine) way to act.

There is another issue, that of relativeness. You might think religious laws are absolute and immutable, but they are not necessarily. In Judaism all the ritual and ethical laws can be ignored in order to save a life, except for three. One may not "curse" God, kill an innocent person, or commit adultery even to save one's own life. Any other commandment may be violated to save a life. Here is a perfect example of relative morality. In other words, sometimes a person has to make ethical decisions he or she would not normally make because of extenuating circumstances. This too requires dealing with risk.

The Talmud scornfully dismisses the person who refuses to take a risk. The "Pious Idiot" is someone who will not rescue a drowning woman for fear of breaking the laws of modesty that forbid looking at or touching a woman (Sotah 21b). If you refuse to take a risk you are an idiot! And there are so, so many pious idiots nowadays.

Theology requires risk. How can you explore abstract ideas without asking questions, without leaving the mental ghetto of security and certainty? Even Moses asks God to explain Himself, to reveal Himself, to resolve uncertainty and cannot be entirely satisfied. The famous Danish philosopher Soren Kierkegaard said that one could not possibly reach an understanding of God without a personal leap of faith. What could be a greater risk than leaping into the unknown?

The Chasidic idea that one has to fall before one can rise is another example of both illogicality and risk. It did indeed lead in some cases to heresy. But others achieved a state of spiritual ecstasy very few normal humans achieve.

The great Kabbalist mystics were not afraid of venturing into the unknown, of experimenting with risk through meditation and mental exercises, often with no idea where their experiments and states of rapture might lead them. At least they tried. Most of us do not even try. Some of the most absurd and yet exciting ideas come from letting go of moral certainty. Any practicing rabbi worth his salt is faced with moral dilemmas all the time.

Tertullian said, "I believe in God precisely because it is absurd." By that he meant that for God to be encompassed by a limited human mind was to reduce the idea to a human level. Only by abandoning logic and the rational can one reach out beyond one's mind. Of course there's a danger—of delusion, of nonsense. But at least such a risk opens one up to greater possibilities.

We live in a world of certainties. Science aims at certainty, at proof and often succeeds. But we know how arid this can be and deceptive. Its like sex without love. Instead we talk increasingly now of "relativity," of "fuzzy math and logic". Science has opened up. Too much of religion has not. The failure of religions is when they go for certainty, conformity, and routine and thus abandon excitement, experiment, and religious ecstasy. Just think of how Chasidism, so dramatically innovate in its origins, has become so rigid and fossilized in its senility.

It's the dryness of someone who says every word of the prayers by rote but never stops to feel anything, to experience anything. If one had to choose, surely it would be to commune with God, not just to obey. That is a risk. But without risk there can be no honest, genuine religion.