

Being good

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

How often do you hear people say “Well it’s important to be a good human being and the rest is unnecessary”?

And it’s true it is more important than anything else on earth to be a good human being. After all the Mishna (Avot 3) says “If someone gets on well with human beings, this is a sign that God approves too.” But that does not mean the story ends there. Most people accept the basic Ten Commandments nowadays in theory at least, Christians, Muslims and Jews. But surely what differentiates us involves a lot more laws, customs, habits and traditions.

I don’t mean to say one has to do it all or nothing. I have yet to meet any human being who is perfect however good. But I do believe that the more one does, the more immersed in a tradition one is, the greater impact it can have our lives for good (although I also know people so immersed that they have lost all sense of reality and proportion). Maimonides wrote about a “Golden Mean,” a happy medium.

But still how we get on with others is indeed a measure of we really do or do not get on with God. And this is why the Torah was given to us as a group, as a people. All other Divine revelations I can think of in other religions were private, to individuals. What was unique in our tradition was that Sinai was public, everyone was supposed to be there. I am not going to go into whether that proves anything or not. But it certainly does indicate what Judaism’s priority is, that we stand and fall by the way we relate to others.

It always struck me as strange that that part of the Torah which includes the Revelation on Mount Sinai, the source of Jewish Law and our great tradition, should be named after Jethro, Yitro, who although he was the father-in-law of Moses, was still a pagan priest of Midian. Some suggest he converted to Judaism, some that it was enough that he praised the God of Israel, and others say this just shows how important fathers-in-law are! But for me, the significance is that even at the core of Jewish life there is a recognition that good ideas, wisdom and spirituality can also come from other sources and other people outside of us.

If our role in life, our function as humans and the reason we are put on earth, is to fulfill our potential and to appreciate as much as we can of our universe, then surely it makes sense to derive wisdom and skills from wherever or whomever we can learn something good and positive. Still, we should not forget our own wisdom and heritage, but treat it as our first base, onto which we can add other things, so long, of course as they do not conflict with our fundamentals.

Think of being Jewish as building a home. If the foundations are good they can support lots of other ideas. But if they are weak, there is a danger the whole building will collapse under the strain.

And that is also why this week we also read of Moses's father in law telling him to find a better way of interacting with the people and meeting their needs. It is almost as if he is saying "Get your relationship with people right first, and only then can you go up the mountain to God." If only other political leaders took the hint.