

Jewish Morality

This week's reading, according to the Midrash was delivered publicly and specifically to the Children of Israel as a group, because "most of the important principles of the Torah can be found here."

When one looks at the text one can see why this is so. For example, love you neighbor as yourself. Do not hate your neighbor. Do not take revenge. Be kind to the stranger. Respect your parents. Respect the elderly. Do not lie or tell tales about others. That is all pretty impressive moral stuff. But interlinked with it all is the emphasis on what we call ritual, keeping special days different, being careful about what you eat. What has Shabbat or Festivals got to do with morality? The two are interconnected. Morality and ritual are linked. It is behavior that either confirms or negates your morality, not slogans.

That's why the full sentence reads "Love your neighbor as yourself, I am God." Being kind or loving could be a utilitarian imperative. It makes sense. It can be beneficial. Ritual on the other hand seems pointless. But if we are doing it all as an act of commitment to God, then ritual has a higher purpose.

The text starts with this general exhortation to be holy. "Be holy for this is Godly." To most of us that sounds scary. Who is holy? Only a very boring, ascetic saint surely. And none of us a saint. But in Hebrew the word for Holy is Kadosh and Kadosh literally means being different. Not necessarily perfect. A knife for example is not perfect or holy. It can be used well, say to prepare food. It can be used badly. To stab someone. It is the way it is used, how it is used that is either good or bad.

We have our bodies, including our minds, which can be used in many different ways. It is up to us to use them well, productively and ethically.