

The Time of the Year

This month before the *Yamim Noraim*, Days of Awe, is the time to start thinking about our souls rather than our politics.

I have always loved words, their sounds and their meanings, in Hebrew and English. So that when I reflect on myself and ideas that I value, the first thing I do is examine what I mean by the words I use. If I say that “I love you”, it means that I care. But there are so many ways of caring—for one’s parents, children, grandchildren, partners, friends. We say it of our country, our religion, our life. There are different kinds of loving, and often we love in all them, simultaneously.

That is how I feel about my religious life. In the West we have been persuaded that religion is a system of beliefs that are supposed to determine how we live. The credo, the required belief in certain propositions, is supposedly at the root of religion. We often describe Judaism as a religion. But the word religion does not exist in the Torah. The modern Hebrew usage of *Dat* to mean religion only appears in the Book of Esther, in a Persian context.

The first actual credo in Judaism is the “Thirteen Principles of Faith” written by Maimonides a thousand years ago. Which means that for the first two thousand years of Judaism there was none. But there were most definitely ideas and propositions that were fundamental to being part of that community of Israelites. The Talmud discusses these core ideas and suggests that without them one cannot fully appreciate the spirit of our tradition. These ideas eventually became the basis of Maimonides’s principles. He formulated them the artificial way he did in response to Christian and Muslim theologians of his day who tried to undermine Judaism by claiming it was not a legitimate religion because it did not have a core systematic belief formula.

But the Torah never says anywhere, “You must believe.” It does indeed assert that God is the source of everything and that there is One, which humans can only have a limited understanding of. And the Torah is God’s way of revealing a pattern for living and reinforcing the quest to become good human beings. But apart from the ambiguous and opaque, “I am what I am,” that God uses to reassure Moses, there is no specific definition or formula we are commanded to believe about whatever we think God is. Rather it is a matter of acceptance and commitment, which is what the Hebrew word *Emunah* really means.

The Torah is a pre-philosophical document that expresses itself in very different ways than the Greek rational, systematic, scientific method that lies at the root of Western culture. The Judaism we have today has been influenced by both the earlier non-rational, mystical tradition as well as the later rational one.

This is so important to recognize, because it indicates how important ideas are and that the word “belief” has different meanings and usages. The title

of the earliest book of Jewish theology, written by Saadia Gaon in Baghdad in 933, *Sefer Emunot Ve Deyot*, is usually translated as “The Book of Beliefs and Opinions” or “Doctrines and Beliefs”. But I prefer “Convictions and Ideas”.

Ideas are much more flexible than beliefs. Beliefs have to be formulated, and human language is notoriously limited when it comes to describing feelings and emotions. This is why Daniel Dennett says that people have ideas of what they think God is, the idea of God. Greek philosophy held that the mind, the intellect was the best guide for humans. I think intellect and rationality is very important. It can clear the wood for the trees. But I also think that feelings, experience, sense, are equally valid sources for information and a guide to behavior. Emotional intelligence, it is often called. Ideas allow for such flexibility and emotional input. One can be convinced of something without either proof or belief. To doubt does not mean to deny. Moses has his doubts, after all.

This is the time of the Jewish year when we devote time specifically to the cultivation of our souls. Yes, we should do it all the time. But we humans get easily distracted. That is why we need rituals. They demand our attention and that we devote specific time to it.

But then what do we mean by soul? The very word soul is ambiguous. There are at least five different words in the Torah and Midrash that describe it. There are concepts of a physical soul and a spiritual soul. There is no single definition that everyone agrees on. I would rather use the term to describe ourselves. The self. Made up of different elements, physical and spiritual. And nourished, ideally, by such human tools as logic and feeling. To thrive, we need to engage them all.

Part of this process is self-examination. Examination of our actions, successes, and failures. And determination each year to do better, even as we usually sink back to established routines and ideas. This is why we use the metaphor of being judged during this period—of standing before God and having all our actions revealed and weighed. As the Talmud says, even the best of us is imperfect; we are neither all good nor all bad but *Beynonim*, in the middle.

It is also a time to examine our ideas. What we think. What we value. Consider the words the Torah uses to describe these days. What we now call Rosh Hashanah is called *zikaron* a day to remember. But it does not tell us if we are supposed to remember God or God is supposed to remember us. It does not specify if we are to remember the things we did badly of the things we did well.

And Yom Kipur is a day of *initem et nafshoteyhem*, afflicting your souls, as it is normally translated. But what does that mean? Is it a reference to suffering through fasting, in which case a *nefesh* is referring only to a body? Or are we suffering because we realize how badly we have failed? In which case our souls are suffering, not our bodies!

Our tradition is holistic. The distinction between body and soul is a Greek construct. Dividing the upper body from the lower with a girdle is not found

in the Torah, although modesty is. Surely we cannot think that our bodies are intrinsically bad. Adam and Eve were only covered up after they realized that one could defy godliness. Besides, our brains and our hearts can do just as much damage as the "lower" parts of our bodies.

This is the time when we try to revert to a holistic awareness of all of ourselves. It is time to be serious, to be reflective. To remember everything, for better and for worse, our successes and our failures. And to determine, to try to make it all better. Honest Milud!

(I apologize for the glitch last week that prevented this post from being mailed out. There will be no new post this week, but normal service should resume next Thursday.)