

Early January 2012

Dear friends,

I've been spending a lot of time talking to friends about the use of faith as a proof text. With the Republican party caught up in its battle between moderates and extremists, I thought it was a good time to talk about why Judaism, as well as many other mainstream religions, seems to be struggling with a growing group of literalists. They are appearing in all the major religions and it doesn't seem to matter to the believers that their faith and behavior do not reflect their religion's core teachings. As with the political far right (and far left, to be fair) the believers are absolutely certain that only they know where truth resides.

Today in the paper I read a story about how the role of women in Israel is at serious risk because the ultra-Orthodox are limiting the place of women more and more. They will not allow women to speak alongside men, they are intolerant of modern dress and the mixing of men and women is being rejected in more and more settings. Israel drafts women as well as men to serve in the military, but the split in attitude over this and other gender neutral laws and values are growing. The Jewish fundamentalists are doing what too many other "religious" folks are doing - they are longing for the past when they believe life was more in keeping with God's commands.

Now I am certainly not a literalist when it comes to the Torah and I cringe at the out of context quotations that some use to prove a point. Some call this buffet Judaism (or any other organized religion you wish to substitute for Judaism as you read this). This means that you, as the consumer, are free to pick and choose what commandments or rules or behavior you wish without any consideration of the big picture - the whole - the package of writings from ancient times that were written for the readers and listeners of the time.

Those writings tell a story of our history. They allow us to visit our roots intellectually and morally. Those roots have given rise to the Etz Chayim - the tree of life - which is not a stagnant thing. That imagery is important to remember. It lives on today and gives us strength.

The tree has many branches - some sturdy and some weak. Some branches grow quickly, aiming for the sunlight. Others, in the shadows, are slower to reach for the sky. However, if nurtured well, the tree offers us the most important part of its teaching - growth. The Bible contains our cradle stories as well as our theoretical history. It also changes and grows - not by editing or rewriting but by those of us who bring who we are to the text. It is not a static document because we are not a static people and what we read and understand is very different today than it was 2,000 years ago. That is how the meaning of the teachings change as well. Our filters, as we read the words of our ancestors, are far different then when the great thinker, Ezra the Scribe, read the Torah aloud in Jerusalem. We are told that most Jews didn't understand Hebrew at that time. So Ezra had someone translate into the Aramaic vernacular. Understanding and owning the text seem to have been Ezra's two goals. That is as important today as it was then.

Ezra's goals still exist today. This is a book that doesn't become irrelevant just because parts of it are no longer being undertaken by its followers. Huge portions of the text lost relevance when the priesthood was ended. Medical practices allowed some of the requirements of purification to fall into disuse. Multiple wives, slavery, stoning as punishment, definitions of "the stranger", miraculous happenings such as the splitting of the Sea of Reeds or God's conversations with the prophets and judges all are no longer part of our literal religious experience. The underlying message of Torah, however, is as relevant today as when it was written.

The prophets understood the teachings in both poetic and meaningful ways. They offer us a path.

from Isaiah: *...they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spear into pruning hooks. Nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they know war anymore.*

from Amos: *But let justice well up like water, righteousness like a mighty stream.*

from Micah: *He has told you, O man, what is good, and what the Lord requires of you: only to do justice, and to love goodness and to walk humbly with your God.*

From Zechariah: *Execute true justice; deal kindly and compassionately with one another. Do not oppress the widow, the orphan, the stranger and the poor. Do not set your heart to plotting evil.*

Finally, another Isaiah writing: *Seek justice, undo oppression; defend the fatherless, plead for the widow.*

The genius of the Bible is only understood in the context of its time and the continued relevance of its underlying message for us today. I don't know where the roots truly are... but I do know that its shade calms me, its fruit feeds me and its beauty is like no other. I am able to look, not at the buffet of choices, but at the singular truth I find in it. The Book is ancient and so its punishments and rewards are ancient as well. The literalists are unable to accept the changes we have undergone over time. They seem to only subscribe to the teachings they select and yet still declare it God's entire truth. You have to take the whole package if you want to believe the text is the word of God. Who could possibly say that God meant x but not y. To teach that is to deny two thousand years of human development.

And the package has had thousands of explicators. The Talmud was written to explain intent and guide us to an understanding that differences of opinion, when done respectfully and lovingly, are part of the growth of the Tree. The later commentators also taught that lessons are often parables... not concrete, immovable law. Today, many reject the whole book because they hear it misused. Many declare as absolute laws that have been evolving for centuries because we have been evolving as well. The absolutists do not live as our ancestors did, but they want us to believe that their understanding of the values of Torah are unchanging. They believe they speak the real truth. There is no such thing.

My Torah teaches peace and justice and compassion. It teaches me to love those who are different from me and to give to those who are in need. It does not ask me to reject modern life. It asks me to carry its truth through my filters and in to my soul. I will never understand how people find hate within its pages.

So my tree will flower each year and it will be different each year. Its branches will sway and grow and become more as time passes and if I'm lucky, I will sit in its shade and feel the gratitude.

Find your tree... just look around... it's there...

Still dreaming of peace,

Barbara

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