

Devar Torah (Sermon) for ראה (Re'eh)
8/14/04

This being my first שבת (Sabbath) here at Temple Israel, I figured I should work hard to come up with a good topic for my דבר תורה (*devar Torah -Sermon*). Fortunately, after quite a bit of sole searching, I think that I have found an appropriate topic. So, today I would like to talk about . . . idol worship.

First of all . . . I discourage it. I just wanted to make that clear. What's more, the תורה (*Torah, Bible*) discourages it. We read today a warning from משה (Moses), warning the Israelites that when they entered the land of Canaan, they should not adopt the local religious practices. One might have expected God to say only that the Israelites should not pray to those gods. But what if the Israelites were to look at the Canaanites and adopt the same rituals as a way to serve the true God? Our תורה (Torah) portion rejects that possibility, and instead says that the Israelites must not take on the ritual practices of the Canaanites. In regards to the Canaanite ritual practice, the Israelites are told:

לא תַעֲשֶׂה כֹּן לַד' אֱלֹהֶיךָ כִּי כָל תּוֹעֵבֹת דֵּי אֲשֶׁר שָׁנָא עָשׂוּ לְאֱלֹהֵיהֶם כִּי גַם אֶת בְּנֵיהֶם וְאֶת בָּנֹתֵיהֶם יִשְׂרְפוּ בְּאֵשׁ לְאֱלֹהֵיהֶם :

Do not do thus to the Lord your God, for all abominations which God reviles they do to their gods - they even burn their sons and daughters to their gods.

דברים פרק יב פסוק לא (trans my own)

This verse indicates that it is not only the worship of a false God that is a problem. It is not enough simply to serve the true God. You have to serve God in the right way. Rabbi Sampson Raphael Hirsch explains further:

For the meaning of their worship is in direct opposition to that which pleases your God. For your God is a God of Life and love while dread gods of death are the gods of their illusions. The gods of their illusion gloat over the death of their victims, elevation and rejuvenation is what your God delights in.

So, as Rabbi Hirsch sees it, the abhorrent practices of the nations glorifies death. But our ritual must glorify that which God loves - life, elevation, rejuvenation. Our religious behavior must reflect God's highest ideals.

A מדרש (*Midrash, Rabbinic Homily*) on this week's פרשה reflects this idea beautifully. It talks about the idea of *imitatio dei*, the idea that we serve God best by reflecting God's behavior. The מדרש looks at the words "אֲחַרֵּי ד' אֱלֹהֶיכֶם תֵּלְכוּ", *follow the Lord your God.*" (Deut 13:5):

Rabbi Chamma son of Rabbi Chanina asked: What does it mean "follow the Lord your God? Is it possible for a person to follow the divine presence? Is it not already written "For the Lord your God is a consuming fire!" Rather, follow after the attributes of God. Just as he clothes the naked, as it says "and the Lord God made leather garments [for Adam and Eve]," so too you clothe the naked. The Holy One visited the sick, as it is written "And the Lord God appeared in Elonei Moreh [after Abraham's circumcision], you too visit the sick. The Holy

One consoled mourners, as it is written "It was after the death of Abraham, and God blessed Isaac his son," so you comfort the mourners. The Holy One buries the dead, as it is written "and God buried him [Moses] in Gay," you too bury the dead.

תלמוד בבלי מסכת סוטה דף יד עמוד א
ואמר רבי חמא ברבי חנינא, מאי דכתיב: +דברים יג+ אחרי ה' אלהיכם תלכו? וכי אפשר לו לאדם להלך אחר שכינה? והלא כבר נאמר: +דברים ד+ כי ה' אלהיך אש אוכלה הוא! אלא להלך אחר מדותיו של הקב"ה, מה הוא מלביש ערומים, דכתיב: +בראשית ג+ ויעש ה' אלהים לאדם ולאשתו כתנות עור וילבישם, אף אתה הלבש ערומים; הקב"ה ביקר חולים, דכתיב: +בראשית יח+ וירא אליו ה' באלוני ממרא, אף אתה בקר חולים; הקב"ה ניחם אבלים, דכתיב: +בראשית כה+ ויהי אחרי מות אברהם ויברך אלהים את יצחק בנו, אף אתה נחם אבלים; הקב"ה קבר מתים, דכתיב: +דברים לד+ ויקבר אותו בגיא, אף אתה קבור מתים.

Our religious behavior is a far cry from the behavior of the Canaanites. To us, it is acts of חסד, acts of charity that are our highest form of religious act. We know that when we act as partners with God, when we try to make God's world a better place - that is when we are closest to God.

In todays day and age, many people see religious fervor like the did in Canaan. There are those who think that exploding a bomb in Tel Aviv or Falujah is a great religious act. Still others see such an act as evil, and therefore disavow themselves from any sense of religious fervor. We, on the other hand, know that true spirituality is demonstrated by a love of God, and a desire to benefit the rest of humanity. Some think that the greatest sacrifice a person can make is to sacrifice their children - they train their children to blow themselves up in order to kill the infidel. We say וְשִׁנְתָם לְבָנֶיךָ (veshinantem levanecha) *teach them [the words of Torah] to your children* (Deut 6:7) - teach your children God's ways. So that they can fulfill the מצוות (mitsvot) and perform acts of kindness for others long after you and I are gone.

The Torah portion criticized the Canaanites because *all abominations which God reviles they do to their gods*. If these nations were judged on what they did in the name of their gods, I hope that our congregation can be judged well for what we do in the name of The God. As God visits the sick, let us visit the sick. As God clothes the naked, let us cloth the naked. As God comforts the mourners, let us comfort the mourners.

May we be privileged to create together a congregation dedicated to service of God. May we all grow in our learning of תורה (Torah) and our observance of הלכה (Halachah). May that growth guide us to the performance of many acts of חסד. May our conviction to God and our Torah be a blessing to the world around us.