

Tsav – Leviticus 3-8 –Fabrangen service 3/16/13

The Commentary portion of the service deviated from the usual practice of discussing the Torah portion and was focused on the meaning of the blessing Emet (true), one of several which lead to the standing prayer (Amidah). The commentary from the prayer book notes that “it is less a prayer than a declaration of faith” and points out that its emphasis is on redemption, a word that is repeated eight times and is filled with related terms – deliverance, rescue, help – as well as redemptive activity: pleading a cause, raising the lowly, helping the needy.” Redemption, the commentator tells us “refers also to God’s role in history: liberating slaves, rewarding the faithful, insuring justice. The act of prayer is ultimately a plea for God to intervene in our lives and the lives of our people”.

The commentary continues with a quote from Judah Halevi: “The God of the philosophers is a dimension of reality but not a personal presence, a shaper of history . . . We may meditate on such a being . . . (but) the God of redemption is encountered in events, in history, in life.”

My background is fairly typical of what was provided for Jewish girls of my generation, American born children of the pre-World War I generation of Eastern European immigrants: not too rigidly observant of the rules of kashrut , women went to shul only on the High Holidays, cleaned the house at Passover, and prepared a seder. Girls attended an after-school Talmud Torah along with the boys but only the latter went on to prepare for Bar Mitzvah and, sometimes, high school level studies. We learned Hebrew from a children’s version of the Torah, and acquired an unsophisticated version of Zionism: Palestine was to be the future home of the Jews if the brave pioneers could succeed in settling it. The existence of God who gave us the Ten Commandments was taken for granted.

For a host of reasons, I found the religious dimension of life unsatisfying. I loved grade school, the public library, secular literature and Hollywood movies. At around age 15, unable to tolerate fasting on Yom Kippur, I decided that if there was a God, my diet was not one of His major concerns and He would not bother to strike me dead if I drank milk after eating a salami sandwich. When I left home and the eagle eye of my grandmother, I was determined to behave in a way that

was consistent with my convictions and from then on led a secular life. Fast forward to the five years I lived in Israel (how and why I got there is another story) which left me with a sense that there was something more authentic about Judaism than what I had known, then led me through several affiliations, and calling myself a “born- again” Jew.

Probably the most difficult part of returning to Judaism is coming to term with religious concepts: God, the soul, redemption. The rabbi of the conservative synagogue I joined when I lived in Philadelphia said that redemption was a religious term for maturation. Having been professionally trained to think in psycho-social terms, maturation could be defined as the ability to live as a responsible adult in society but equating it with redemption does not feel right. The word has a mysterious aura. Maturation implies completion, arriving at adulthood. Redemption to me has a Christian sound; one is born with evil inclinations or the temptation to commit sins which must be resisted. Failure to do so means you must be saved through prayer and confession.

So what then is Jewish redemption? The main idea of the Shema, the commentary tells us, is deliverance and rescue, which leads me to ask: from what am I being delivered? From my evil inclinations – I’m not sure what they are; from ill health, inadequate income, unsatisfying work, strained relationships . . . ? What do I do to be redeemed? The commentary says “plead a cause,” “raise the lowly,” “redeem the meek,” “help the needy,” - raising questions of which cause?, who is lowly?, who is meek?, who is needy?

In the contemporary world, we vote in elections, sign petitions, march in demonstrations, donate money, protest injustice, etc. I do or have done as many of these tasks as I could. When am I redeemed? What connections do these tasks have with the personal problems mentioned? Furthermore, since I see God as an unknowable force in our lives, is redemption and the need for it something we define for ourselves?

So far, the only answer that comes to mind is that redemption is a process, not an end result, that you do whatever you decide is a redemptive action however

connected it may be to personal struggles. If there is a connection, only God - that unknowable force – knows.

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