

EREV YOM KIPPUR 5778 – ON DEVELOPING OURSELVES

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I mentioned the book, 'Every Time they Find the Meaning of Life, they change it' by Daniel Klein, on Rosh Hashanah. I was struck by the lack of Jewish wisdom, in a book by a Jewish writer working in such a Jewish field. But as I arrived at the centre and core of the book, on the chapter on Machiavelli of all places, with his 'might is right' and 'the end justifies the means' principles, I came across this analysis from Klein:

The church, of course, did not approve of Machiavelli's thesis... One does not do the right thing for personal gain; one does it simply to be a good person. Well, that and to please God, but ultimately, comments Klein, these two are pretty much the same.

Finally, he continues: Long before the Church weighed in on levels of goodness, this hierarchy had already been established by the Hebrews – I notice he doesn't use the J word in the whole section – this hierarchy had already been established in the ancient text of rules and laws, the Talmud. He then goes on to something that you will know well, and indeed the translation is so familiar also that I suspect he has his Progressive American Mishkan T'shuvah prayer book open on page 207 of the Shabbat Morning service:

The medieval scholar Maimonides, he writes, laid out the levels of Tzedaka from lowest to highest:

The lowest level is to give (a minimal amount, and to give) grudgingly.

Better is to give less than you should but to give it cheerfully.

Then to give (a proper amount) after being asked

And the next rung above that is to give before being asked.

Then to give when you do not know the recipient, but they know your identity

Better than this is to give when *you* know the recipient, but they do *not* know your identity

Better still is to give when neither party knows the other's identity

And best of all, the top rung of the ladder, is to enable the recipient to become self-reliant.

Klein comments that the last one always surprises him – but that it is the moral rationale behind state-sponsored welfare in modern civilisation. No-one wants people to be long-term dependent - the idea is to get everyone working and independent who possibly can be.

To the question of why we should participate in giving to others in the first place, says Klein, Maimonides points to the root of Tzedakah – righteousness, justice and fairness, so rather than being an act of *generosity*, providing for the needy is an act of *duty*. But then he asks 'Why should we do our duty?' and slides off into what I think are inaccurate apologetics – back into the Machiavellian realms of self-interest – In the Talmudic tradition, he says, doing the right thing is usually a way to encourage God to forgive a sin or even to grant a special favour, as in 'I gave a mule to that destitute farmer Itzik – now would You please find a husband for my oldest daughter already?!

By writing this, Klein seems to me to show himself as self-deprecating – he seems to have a problem being proud of his Jewish – sorry Hebrew – heritage! Actually I suspect that he feels guilty that, in all the studies and readings he has done, he has not delved further into his own traditions. Further, I think he is wrong. Torah puts much emphasis on reward and punishment. If you follow God’s law, your harvests will be large, your life will be long. But Talmud is NOT Torah. It is a big step forward – it is the rabbinic endeavour. Talmud marks the progress from the Israelite cult, with centralised priests, sacrifices and rituals, to the portable religion that became known as Rabbinic Judaism. The Rabbis were well aware of the problem posed by reward and punishment in almost all the books of the tradition that they had inherited. Indeed it was they who selected which to include in the canon of the T’nach, and which to exclude. And they included one – the book of Job – precisely because it said, very strongly and clearly, the reverse. Job couldn’t have been a more caring, devout and generous person. Job is described as a model citizen – the best of his generation. Yet his family dies, his business collapses, and he is left scratching his boils in the dust. When he questions God, the answer the Rabbis chose was very clear: God thunders ‘what do you know? Were you there when I created the earth? In other words, humans are not God – we do not know God’s ways or plans for us, or for the universe. Reward and punishment does not always happen in ways we can understand.

In our new machzor set, we have included many creative readings, but one of the most powerful alludes to this question that God asks Job. At this time of year it is traditional to remind ourselves that we are lowly as the dust. In kaddish, the distance between us and God is emphasised by adding an extra word, u’leilah – normally we say God is above us mere mortals, but at this time we say ‘God is far above us’. But in this powerful contemporary version, written by our own Michael Polack, we do not cower, but stand up to God, as it were, asking God ‘Were were You? Let me read part of it:

On this day, where were You?

When the world began, was it like this, or was it never like this?

When the first voice was raised, whose voice was it or was there no voice?

Were words spoken or were there no words? Was there weeping? Was there song?

On this day, who sang Halleluyah, or did no one sing?...

When first the old year ended, who remembered, and who forgot?

When the fishes first swam, when the first web was woven,

when the first tears were shed, when the first laughter sounded, where were You?

Where were You when the first blood was spilt?

Who was stained and who was pure when Abel fell?

When he cried out, who cared, or did no one care?

On this day, who shall answer?

On this day, You, or me?

The Rabbis could also have asked where God was when the Temple was destroyed and the people exiled, but instead, they blamed themselves and the sectarian infighting and hatred. In this case, punishment was for the sins of the nation, this was God's judgment on Israel, delivered by the Romans in the here and now! The Rabbis were seeking to console and comfort, talking not only to individuals, but, of course, to the remnant of the nation, which had seen the Temple again destroyed and Judah exiled by the might of Rome, and now dispersed in all directions. Earlier in the year, Sue and I came face to face with this part of our history, when we stood before the Arch of Titus in Rome, and saw our ancestors depicted, in chains, carrying the Menorah and Temple implements to the Roman victors, 1947 years before.

From our perspective, we might go a big step further than the Rabbis, and boldly state that 'Reward and punishment does not always happen – perhaps it is a fallacy that God gets involved at all – perhaps that there even is a God, or at least an interventionist one.'

But the Rabbis worked within the framework of absolute belief in God. So they came up with a creative, progressive solution for their time and needs. Though the Torah believed that you died at the end of life and that was that, the Rabbis borrowed the idea from the Egyptians and Babylonians that there was another chance, a life after death. Conveniently, you couldn't see into it from this world. So they could confidently assert that, though the wicked may seem to thrive and the righteous might often struggle and suffer in this world, this would all be resolved in the world to come, where the wicked, if they ever got there, would have a perpetual struggle, whereas the righteous would thrive for ever in a life of luxury and plenty.

Whether the Rabbis believed this or not is open to conjecture. I have my doubts, though of course there will have been a variety of beliefs and understandings over the hundreds of years and many characters that the two Talmuds were being developed, in Israel and Babylon. Yet I feel there is an undercurrent of 'honestly – do we really have to feed you these stories?'

Similarly, I think it is clear that, though there are lots of stories and traditions, and magic and superstition, the thrust is not what Klein says, that the reason for doing the right thing, for giving Tzedakah, is to get forgiveness from God or special favours. Doing the right thing is for its own sake, which the Rabbis called 'L'shem Shamayim', for the sake of heaven', for God. It is to make ourselves better, and to make a better world. For example, they said the highest mitzvah is attending the dead – precisely because there can be no material reward.

It was clear that saying prayers to annul all vows was not a step in that direction! The non-Jewish neighbours, those looking for a reason to distrust or despise the Jews, jumped on it to show that the Jews were not to be trusted. The rabbis, led by the medieval authority Rabenu Tam, Rashi's grandson, insisted that Kol Nidrei was ONLY about vows made between a person and God – *bein adam l'makom*. They said it should be dropped from the liturgy. But to no avail. Rabbis don't always get their way! The Jew in the pew wanted to keep it. Especially after it got such a powerful and unique tune written for it by Bruch!

Here then is an example of the *Rabbis* of the generations pulling forward, trying to make progress, trying to start Yom Kippur without the Kol Nidre, and the *people* pulling back and denying movement is possible. And here is an area that we, the Progressive movement,

have expertise in, and can lead the way. We recognised the power of the title and the tune. But we also realised that few Jews understood or were committed to the words, especially as they are not in Hebrew but Aramaic. So, in Britain, we rewrote the prayer, making it more acceptable to our modern understanding, more fitting with 'what God wants of us'.

In similar fashion, our movements long ago removed from R'tzeih the traditional wish to offer daily fire offerings and sacrifices to God, still repeated three times a day by our orthodox communities; we have also removed the references to a rebuilt temple, and we have added the matriarchs. By adding acknowledgment of the sun as an essential of the agricultural cycle, we have adjusted the meaning of the second prayer of the T'filah from believing God makes the weather, to acknowledging our human responsibility for changing the climate, and the need to adjust our behaviour to restore the natural cycles. We have made similar careful adjustments to the High Holy Day liturgy, such as the new, creative and meaningful Seven Steps to Holiness Avodah service that we'll be trialling tomorrow between the Morning and Afternoon services, and which we hope next year we'll be able to immerse ourselves in, in our beautiful new Machzor set. So as we return home this evening, in sombre and reflective mood, we should also realise that these words, these prayers and these tunes, still touch our hearts in powerful ways. Keeping prayers and services relevant and meaningful is something else we Progressive Jews are good at, and we should all be very proud of the new liturgy that we produce to keep Judaism relevant and meaningful.