

The Lessons of Isaiah: What Does it Mean to Live a Religious Life?
Rabbi Claudia Kreiman
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There is a teaching in the Jerusalem Talmud that asks the following question:
What makes a person's religious practice foolish?
The Talmud actually has more than one answer to that question, and among the answers is the following:

One who sees a child bobbing up and down in the river and says: "Once I get my *tefilin* off I will save them. By the time she removes her *tefilin*, the child will have drowned."¹

I remember the first time I encountered this teaching. My first thought was, this is obvious. Whoever doesn't know this, is missing the point of what Judaism is about.

Knowing our community and the values that bring us together, I assume that most of you also think that this teaching is obvious.

In communities like ours, where ritual observance is not necessarily the core or the only central tenet of what it means to be Jewish, the conflict between saving someone's life and ritual engagement is most likely not a major challenge. So why am I bringing this up today?

Today's Haftarah from the book of Isaiah² presents an approach that many of us will find familiar.

The Haftarah begins with a call to rebuild the road, to remove any blocks, or obstacles so that God's people can live in freedom. The prophet raises his voice, crying out, loud and clear, that God does not desire the fasting of people engaged in oppression and that religious ritual without moral action is meaningless. He then concludes by reminding us that through Shabbat we can get closer to the possibility of redemption.

¹ Sotah 21b

² Isaiah 57:14-58:14

As I said, I think and hope that this teaching is obvious to us. A fast day without showing up in the world to make the world better doesn't mean much. But in the context of Isaiah's life, this text is one of the most radical teachings our tradition offers regarding Yom Kippur. On a day focused on self-reflection by means of prayer and fast, we are told in no uncertain terms that we have a moral obligation to act in the world and that our fast is meaningless if we do not listen to this message. This is the religion Isaiah teaches: feed the hungry; clothe the naked; house the homeless; heal the wounded.

In her Ted Talk, "It's Time to Reclaim Religion"³ Rabbi Sharon Brous speaks to the urgent need to revitalize religion. At the end of her talk she says:

"Our hearts hurt from the failed religion of extremism, and we deserve more than the failed religion of routine-ism. It is time for religious leaders and religious communities to take the lead in the spiritual and cultural shift that this country and the world so desperately needs -- a shift toward love, toward justice, toward equality and toward dignity for all"

So, what does God expect from us? Or what does our religion expect from us? Or what does being a religious person mean to us?

Many of us feel uncomfortable labeling ourselves with the term religious. People often tell me in conversation - I am not really religious... I come to shul, I am part of our community, but I am not religious. Mostly, what people mean is - I don't observe everything, or most of what I was taught that Jewish tradition expects from us. How much of this discomfort is because the word "religious" especially in our country, has a connotation of extremism, or because we think that religion is only about ritual obligation?

How do we know what God wants from us or what is right? What happens when we get it wrong? When asking these questions I often go back to the story of the Golden

³ https://www.ted.com/talks/sharon_brous_it_s_time_to_reclaim_religion

Calf in Exodus⁴, the story of how the Israelite people created and worshiped an idol only forty days after they had experienced the presence and revelation of God at Sinai.

My first question about this story is, why? Why do the people, who have just a couple of months ago been liberated by God from slavery in Egypt create this golden calf? Perhaps it can be explained as a response to fear related to that redemption: Moshe, their leader, the one who took them out of Egypt and saved them from Pharaoh, has not returned from the mountain. The people, for the first time since leaving Egypt, are without Moshe's physical presence. After being on the mountain for forty days, the text tells us that Moshe, in Hebrew, *boshesh* - בָּשֵׁשׁ which is to say, he was late. So Moshe was late... seemingly, later than the people could live with, and they became impatient, and then fearful, and then hopeless. And so they created something, however misguided, to help dampen that fear and possibly ignite hope.

We often think of the sin of the golden calf as a rejection of God, but that in itself may be misguided, or rather, it is telling the story from the perspective of a hurt God and not from the perspective of the people. The people of Israel do not reject God, they miss the relationship they have with God through the mediation of Moshe, so they decide to make a god for themselves. The sin of the golden calf is not that they chose to serve *another* god, but that they attempted to serve God in a way that reflected their own anxiety and insecurities rather than reflecting on the words God had spoken to them at Sinai.

So, if the sin of the Golden calf is the paradigm of idolatry, it offers an understanding of that term that may be closer to our own contemporary experience. Idolatry is not necessarily choosing one God over another, or a stone God over an imagined one, but rather a critique of the Gods we create in our own image, and of our choices regarding what we do in the name of God.

It is in the name of God, and religion, that the person who witnessed a child drowning while adorned with tefillin might let that child die.

⁴ Exodus Chapter 32

Every day, individuals and communities act in the name of religion, of God, or of faith, without realizing that they are confusing God for the Golden Calf.

Sadly, throughout history, religion has been one of the important framings of human violence, and Judaism has not been exempt from this. Even in the past year people burnt villages and promoted hatred in the name of Judaism. That is the sin of the golden calf.

That is the power of Isaiah. Isaiah says, don't fool yourself. Don't think that because you are a righteous person, that because you fast and pray and beat your chest, everything you do is in the service of God. How do you know, asks Isaiah, that you are not creating a Golden Calf?

How do we know?

There is a wonderful teaching in Talmud⁵ regarding the words that we chant at the end of the Torah Service when we lift the Torah and point to the scroll saying:

וְזֹאת הַתּוֹרָה אֲשֶׁר שָׂם מֹשֶׁה

This is the Torah which Moses put before the children of Israel

אָמַר רַבִּי יְהוֹשֻׁעַ בֶּן לֵוִי, מֵאֵי דְכָתִיב: "וְזֹאת הַתּוֹרָה אֲשֶׁר שָׂם מֹשֶׁה",

זָכָה — נַעֲשִׂית לּוֹ סֵם חַיִּים, לֹא זָכָה — נַעֲשִׂית לּוֹ סֵם מִיתָה.

The word *sam* is written with the letter *sin* and means to put; but it sounds the same as the word *sam* which is written with the letter *samekh*, and means a drug or a medicine. The multiple possibilities of this word create an opening for the following teaching:

Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi said: What is the meaning of: "This is the Torah which Moses put [in hebrew *sam*] before the children of Israel"?

If one merits, the Torah becomes medicine (a potion [*sam*] of life).

But if one does not merit, the Torah becomes poison (a potion [*sam*] of death).

⁵ Babylonian Talmud Tractate of Yoma 72b

The radical, and self-evident point of this teaching is that Torah is dangerous. Everything depends on what we do with Torah, and if we accept it in ways that it becomes a blessing of life.

No law, not even the law of the Torah, guarantees living a good life. In commenting on the verse in Leviticus 19 “you should be holy, as I am holy” The Ramban, a 13th century Commentator, halakhist, ethicist and mystic introduced the concept *Naval birshut Ha-Torah* - a person who is depraved while still being within Torah boundaries. He explains that it is quite possible to be an indecent person without technically transgressing any of the Torah laws. The commandment to “be holy” is a response to this reality, a call to make personal choices in unregulated zones that will reflect our highest and best selves living in the presence of God.

There may be times where it is extremely difficult to discern what living in the presence of God requires. In part, this is why not everything can be regulated. But Isaiah tells us that we can be certain that if our religion does not lead us to feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, housing the homeless, and caring for the sick, we are worshiping an idol. Fasting and pounding your chest, does not mean much, without understanding that our obligation, what God wants from us, is to care for the world.

I am not calling on us to set aside the practices of Torah and mitzvot, nor did the Ramban. Held individually and in community they can create the scaffolding for a life of holiness. But we, liberal, progressive Jews, need to reclaim Isaiah’s certainty, we need to reclaim his deep conviction of the goal and purposes of religious life, we need to see that goal in our Torah, and not leave Torah and religion to others who hide their idolatrous choices behind a mask of authenticity.

My prayer and hope today is that each and every one of us can find in the path of Torah an opening for religious life. That we know and learn to emulate God’s compassion in the world. That we know to find in our religious practice a path for compassion and love, the path within which Torah opens the doors for a better world.

G’mar Chatima Tova & Shana Tova

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