

Weekly Teaching

March 17, 2017

A story is told of a Rabbi who, after leading an early evening minyan at his Temple, went home to share a late supper with his wife.

As he began to eat his wife asked, "Did you teach any Torah today at the minyan?"

In between bites, the Rabbi answered, "I spoke briefly about sin."

Then, smiling at his wife, he said, "I came out against it."

Modern rabbis often don't like to talk about sin. We take a more "positive" approach to religion looking at the good things we can do vs. the bad things we shouldn't do.

In my career, I don't think I've even entertained the thought of offering a "fire and brimstone" sermon. It's not within my personality to do so, but also it wouldn't be an effective way to connect with our congregational family.

That noted, we need to be very wary of sin because it's always the beginning of the "slippery slope" that can lead to both individual and communal consequences.

In the Book of Exodus (Ch. 32), we are told of our spiritual ancestors' grievous sin with the Golden Calf.

Fundamentally, the ancient Israelites participated in sinful idolatrous behavior that brought about terrible results.

Participating in idol worship, so soon after being redeemed by God from their Egyptian bondage, illustrated our ancestors' inability to retain fidelity with the one and only True God who commands us to never worship graven images amongst other prohibitions.

These same Israelites would ultimately never "get it," and the eventual consequence of continued sinful behavior was that this generation was never allowed to enter the Promised Land of Israel.

Rabbinic Judaism has always asserted that God can never be found in "things." Holiness can only be secured by embracing spiritual concepts that are beyond the physical manifestations of the world; such as acts of love, kindness, compassion, etc.

Today, we too often sin as our forebears did. We fall prey to the temptations of idolatry.

Not the idols of old, but the objects that we are tempted to say have a "value" more important to us than the moral values that we need to more firmly embrace.

Money, cars, houses...All can be wonderful objects of comfort and secular joy. But, objects have no intrinsic value.

When we "sin" by placing the desire for particular object(s) before our holy priorities we set in motion consequences, we risk turning our lives into a less meaningful existence.

Judaism isn't anti-materialism. In fact, the Rabbis openly embrace free-market economic principles, hard work and the rightful desire to make a fair profit.

But, the approved goal to succeed in accumulation of wealth always came with the responsibility to keep one's own moral priorities in place, and to share from one's bounty so as to help others who have a need greater than your own.

Another story tells of a child who was showing off her new house to her friends who had come over for a play-date.

Her beautiful room was a source of special pride. It was perfectly decorated.

Her friends admired the beauty; the coordination of the colors, furniture and such.

But, on the night stand was a plain Blue tin box, which most definitely didn't fit within the décor of this beautiful room.

When they said so, the little girl smiled at her friends and said "This is actually the most precious item in my room. It is my tzedakah box. It was also my mother's tzedakah box, my grandmother's tzedakah box and even my great-grandmother's tzedakah box."

Her friends asked "What's a tzedakah box?"

And, the child told them, "It's where each day I put some coins so as to support others in need."

Her friends went home, to their beautiful rooms and houses, and each created their own special tzedakah box.

And, God looked upon the children and said a blessing: "You've made your 'house' into your 'home.' May your home always be a place of holiness and blessings for happiness, health and peace."

Each of us needs to pursue holy actions, and avoid sin.

It's the combination that lets us succeed with *menschlekeit*, to be "full human beings;" truly created in the image of God.

Let's be wary of the temptation of golden calves, and instead actively pursue the spiritual attributes that enrich our lives and the lives of others.

Golden Calves push God away from our lives. Ethical actions bring God in close proximity.

Shabbat Shalom,

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