

YOM KIPPUR MORNING 9/23/15

“SHYLAHS”

From of old, a traditional role of the Rabbi has been to answer questions. Our ancestors called them “shylahs” which is a Yiddish word for the Hebrew, “sh’aylot;” and they would go to their rebbe in order to “paskin a shyla,” to pose or ask a question.

Their questions mostly had to do with daily living. All the way from, “I saw the butcher’s son riding on Shabbos, is the meat still kosher?” to “Rabbi, my machatenesta-to-be (that is, the people who will soon be my child’s in-laws) want my daughter and their son to be married between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, isn’t that prohibited?”

Thus he would answer their questions. In the first instance, the meat would still be kosher if a mashgiach were on the premises, he being the ritual supervisor to oversee the butcher’s work, and in the second instance, there is no religious impediment to marriage on the days between the High Holy Days, although folk custom usually frowns upon it.

Thus he would answer their questions, day after endless day, either in the shul or in his home, for this was part of his function in life.

Indeed, there are some Rabbis today for whom answering shylahs is almost their total occupation. They’ve answered millions of shylahs sent to them from their faithful all over the world.

Modern Rabbis, in general, and modern Reform Rabbis, in particular, get precious few shylahs.

They tell the story of a Rabbi at a wedding reception to whom a guest asked, “Rabbi, would you pass the celery?”

The Rabbi beamed, “Of course, dear friend, and thank you!” Another at the table asked the Rabbi, “Why such enthusiasm?” The Rabbi replied, “Finally someone has asked me shylah... and, one I can answer!”

The truth, of course, is that we are asked questions, and constantly so. But what are the questions all about? Rarely do they deal with Kashrut -except on Pesach (and I’ve told you this several times before) when somebody always wants to know whether or not you can eat string beans during the holiday. I don’t know what this thing is about string beans. Personally, I’ve never felt an overpowering need to eat string beans at any time, but somehow I can never get through Pesach without being asked about string beans.

As a public service to this gathering, and with the hope that next Spring there will be another question, let me answer this one publically now. The answer is a firm, uncomplicated, crystal clear, yes and no. According to traditional Judaism, Ashkenazic (Eastern European) Jews are forbidden to eat string beans, while Sephardic (Mediterranean) Jews are permitted to eat string beans.

I rarely receive dietary question but the questions I get still are ritualistic in nature. “Rabbi, if Yom Kippur is the Sabbath of Sabbaths, can I have my son’s bar mitzvah on that day?” “Rabbi, is a get (a ritual divorce) required in Reform?” “How long must I sit shivah?” “Rabbi, your sermon’s are good but can’t you make them shorter?” One fellow told me that my sermons were too short but he’s the one who naps during them.

These questions are hardly complex enough to take up all my time in composing answers and I often wish the questions would touch upon an area of Judaism that is not the area of the Rabbi’s priestly function.

We come not only from the priest, but from the prophet. The priest involved himself with ritual matters. The prophet was involved with things of conscience. We, in Reform Judaism, like to boast that we take our heritage from the prophets. But our questions give us away, because, mostly, they deal with priestly matters.

To chant or not to chant, the avot prayer in Hebrew or English, tallit or no tallit, interesting questions with answers that can be determined or decided, but hardly typical of that prophetic heritage of which we boast. It is not the priest, the Cohen or the Levi that distinguishes us as a people different, special and unique. It is not the priest. It is the prophet.

Nowhere in the history of human civilization was there anything or anyone to parallel the Hebrew Prophet. He was unique, one of a kind. A phenomenon that appeared about 750 B.C.E. and that disappeared some 300 years later, never to be seen again. But those 300 years were years that changed the course of history. Had it not been for them, our people would have died in Babylon without a sign remaining or a clue.

What happened to those lost Ten Tribes of Israel in the North, is not that they were lost at all or misplaced or mislaid. When they were captured by Assyria in 721 B.C.E. the prophet had barely arrived. Without his help or impact, their faith could not sustain them in defeat. So they followed the pattern of history, and became part of the conquering nation. Swallowed up, digested, never to be seen or heard of again.

What happened in the north would have happened in the Southern Kingdom when they, in 586 B.C.E., fell before the

might of Babylon. They would have disappeared, lost their identity, their reason, and their purpose. And nothing would have then remained.

And then there never would have been a Christianity, there never would have been an Islam. Not if we had died in Babylon, as we most surely would have done without the prophet. He was the one who changed Judaism from a cult into a religion, from something national into something universal from something composed of rituals into something composed of ethics. The prophet did this and he did it alone. He never spoke before a congregation except on two occasions -each time to call them bad names and get arrested or expelled because of it. Mostly he spoke on street corners and mostly to scorning pedestrians. Unkempt and wild-eyed, he would have been amazed to learn that he had been adopted by Reform, of all branches. Mostly he was laughed at, or feared, or scorned, but much more than that, surprisingly, he was believed. He never said "here is what I say," he always said, "thus says Adonai," for he believed himself to be speaking God's words to commoner and king, to friend and foe, to say to one and all, "thus says Adonai."

This was the God-intoxicated man with wild eyes and fierce demeanor, the kind of man from whom, today, you and I would probably retreat, or cross the street or turn away. But, somehow, he was believed, what he pleaded for, people understood. For he saw God not in the rituals or in the prayers. He saw God, only, in the way we treat each other, and so Jeremiah and Isaiah told the people:

If one champions the cause of the poor
This, indeed to know me.
I'm sick of burnt offerings.
Who required this at your hands?

Wash, make yourself clean.
Seek justice, relieve the oppressed.
Judge the fatherless, plead for the widow.

That has been the mandate of our people from the past and we must not falter. Even now. The prophet sent a message, by a very special delivery. We received that message, we inherited it. We boast of it to all the world. And then we concern ourselves with string beans.

Yes, Rabbi Roz, in her sermons and in her excellent Lunch & Learn programs, addresses topics of ethical consequence, but she's the one who chooses the subjects to remind us that these are the questions we should be asking.

We, who should be shouting from the rooftops concerning housing, education, human rights, prison reform, religious liberty. We who should be concerning ourselves about saving our environment, about reasonable arms control, the only shaylahs we paskin are of mirrors to be covered, what to eat and what to wear and where to sit and when, while all the time our questions ought to be on how to live for that disappearing time that we are here.

Not, "Rabbi, is it kosher to eat chocolate covered matza at the seder," but "Rabbi, is it kosher to own stock in a company that does business with those who boycott Israel?" Not, "Rabbi, is it kosher to light the Chanukah Menorah from left to right instead of right to left?" But, "Rabbi, when is it kosher to cross a picket line?"

Not that your rabbi knows all the answers. Only that those questions are important and we can search together to find out what this faith of ours is really about.

Not, "What does Judaism say about the correct dimensions of the sukkah?" But, "What does Judaism say about capital

punishment and birth control and abortion laws and nuclear proliferation?”

We are involved with greatness and our concern is the human condition. And our prophets taught us long ago that concern for the human condition is the prerequisite for the worship of God.

Not rituals but righteousness must be the banner that we wave for we have a message that we must show and shout and share. We share the prophet’s message with the world. Yes, prophet sharing to a world that needs to hear it.

As a Temple and as Jews we are all equally involved. And when we see the poor and frightened ones of our communities there is something personal that we ought to feel, as we hear Isaiah speaking:

Look carefully, that you may see. Here are people robbed and spoiled. They are snared in hovels and hid in slums. They have become a prey with none to rescue, a spoil with none to restore.

And when we hear of blatant incompetence and even graft in high places and by officials we selected to lead us, there is something we, as Jews, if not just as responsible citizens, ought to feel, as we hear our prophets speaking.

We take great pride in the modern emphasis that our Reform Movement has encouraged congregations to invest energies in tikun olam concerns, in efforts to engage in society to right egregious wrongs. And Ohef Sholom has taken its place among the leaders of our nation in many endeavors... but we must continue, not for bragging rights but to remember the great secret of life that, it would seem, only Jews really understand. Not with your lips but with your lives do you

worship God. Not what you pray or what you preach, but what you do. That is the prophets' message and it lives.

One of my very light quarrels with Reform Judaism actually touches on this subject. In the Birkat HaMazon, the blessing recited after we eat a meal, the modern editors have deleted a paragraph. Na-ar hayiti, I was a young man, v'gam zakanti, and now I am old, v'lo raiti, and I have never seen (it goes on) never seen the righteous forsaken nor their children beg for bread. I know why those lines were deleted by us modernists. It's not true. We have seen righteous people forsaken and their children beg for bread. My quarrel is with the translation of one phrase... v'lo raiti, and I have never seen. It could just as well be translated, and I have never given regard to, never paid proper attention to, never looked carefully at, never considered, that righteous have been forsaken and their children have begged for bread. I believe the lines should be understood as self-incrimination, as our confession that we've allowed injustices to exist around us, without raising an alarm.

So far, the Reform Jewish Press has not responded to my request to replace the deleted sentences with my translation. But look what I've done. In the tradition of our Biblical prophets, I've taken an empty and false pietistic statement and recast it into an ethical challenge.

Still it remains that where there is injustice in our midst, poverty in our neighborhoods, lost and desperate souls around us, let them find in us a listening ear, and understanding heart, and most of all a helping hand.

To follow Micah's instruction...first you do justly, and you love mercy, and then, and only then can you walk humbly with God.

Amen

