Religious Ideals: Thoughts for Aharei Mot-Kedoshim

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By
Rabbi Marc Angel

Angel for Shabbat, Aharei Mot-Kedoshim

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This week's Torah reading instructs: do not turn to idols (Vayikra 19:4). Rabbi Yitzhak Shemuel Reggio, a 19th century Italian Torah commentator, notes that this commandment refers not only to physical idols but also to false ideas and beliefs. We need to hold correct notions, and not subscribe to foolish ideas and superstitions. True religion demands a commitment to truth. It requires us to study, to think, to use our rational faculties to the utmost. To follow after superstition is a form of idolatry.

The Torah reading also instructs: you shall love your neighbor as yourself (19:18). Rabbi Reggio comments that it is not possible to love another person as much as we love ourselves; what, then, does this Torah passage mean? He translates the verse as follows: you shall love your neighbor who is like you i.e. you must remember that all human beings are created in the image of God, all have the right to respect and dignity, all share a common humanity. If you recognize that the "other" is actually "like yourself", you will be able to love/empathize/respect him or her.

These two comments by Rabbi Reggio are at the root of a proper understanding of Torah Judaism. On the one hand, Judaism demands an unflinching desire to discover and uphold truth. It eschews the superstitious view that sees religion as a set of magic formulae intended to control God; or as a means of warding off evil supernatural spirits. God must be served through Truth, which is God's own trademark. Following superstitious beliefs or practices--even if they seem to be "religious"--is actually a form of idolatry. Rambam, in his famous code of Jewish Law, Mishneh Torah (Laws of Mezuzah, 5:4), offers an example of misguided religiosity. He condemns the practice of some individuals who write names of

angels or saintly men inside their mezuzot, and who think that the mezuzot on their doorposts are magic objects designed to keep away evil spirits. Rambam states that such people have no share in the world to come! "Those fools not only fail to fulfill the commandment, but they treat an important precept...as if it were an amulet to benefit themselves, since they foolishly suppose that the mezuzah is something advantageous for the vain pleasures of this world." In fact, the mezuzah teaches the unity of God, and our obligation to love and revere Him.

Torah Judaism demands not only a keen commitment to truth, but also a keen sense of responsibility to human beings. Rabbi Reggio's universalistic understanding of the "golden rule" teaches that all human beings--whatever their race, religion or nationality--are entitled to be treated "like ourselves". They, too, were created by God. They, too, have the human qualities with which we are endowed. If we can see "them" as being just like "us", we are more likely to develop a sense of kinship and responsibility to all of humanity.

The Torah commands clear thinking and righteous behavior. It prods us to live according to the ideals expressed in the opening passage of Kedoshim: you shall be holy for I the Lord your God am holy.

Angel for Shabbat