Faith with Reason, not Blind Faith

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(Thoughts on Parashat Metsora, for Shabbat April 12, 2008)

by Rabbi Marc D. Angel

This week's Torah portion, Metsora, begins with a verse that is repeated many times in the Torah: "And God spoke to Moses, saying." The verse simply could have said: And God spoke to Moses. Why does it add the word "saying" (leimor)?

Rabbi Hayyim Hirschensohn, an important rabbinic figure of the early 20th century, offered a fascinating interpretation. The Torah added the word "saying" to indicate that God did not want the words of Torah to be given in an absolute fixed form, but rather to be subject to discussion and explanation. The word "leimor" is, in a sense, an invitation to us to participate in the analysis of the text. Indeed, the Talmud notes that Moses had asked God for a clearcut halakha, but God responded by telling him that halakha is to be determined by the majority opinion of the sages in the Great Court, and that there are 49 ways to declare something pure and 49 ways to declare that same thing to be impure (Jerusalem Talmud, Sanhedrin 4:2, 22A). Instead of demanding blind obedience, God demanded that the sages--and all students of Torah--use their rational faculties to try to determine truth. (For more on Rabbi Hirschensohn, see Dr. David Zohar's article in the Responsa section of our website.)

A great proponent of reason-based faith was Moses Maimonides. In his Guide for the Perplexed, he offered explanations of the Torah's commandments based on the premise that God had a reason for giving us these commandments. The mitzvoth are not arbitrary orders to force us into compliance, but are expressions of Divine wisdom. Our task is to use our intellectual faculties to try to understand the mitzvoth as best as we can. Maimonides wrote: "There is a group of human beings who consider it a grievous thing that causes should be given for any law; what would please them most is that the intellect would not find a meaning for the commandments and prohibitions." (Guide 3:31) He was displeased with those who thought that the Torah's teachings should be accepted blindly and unthinkingly. This tendency of mind leads inexorably to a superficial view of religion, even to superstition. A mind that is trained to accept information without

analyzing and questioning it, is a mind that can be controlled by demagogues and shamans.

The rise of authoritarianism and absolutism in religion is a very negative development.

Some years ago, my daughter Ronda was studying in a yeshiva for girls in Israel. One of her teachers made a statement, and Ronda asked for an explanation. The teacher replied: this is what our sages taught. Ronda asked: but what was their reasoning? The teacher replied: if our sages said something, it must be accepted as true. We don't need to worry about explanations. This reply distressed Ronda, and helped her to decide to leave that school. A teacher who demands blind obedience is not the kind of teacher she wanted--nor that anyone should want. Students have a right and responsibility to ask for reasons; and teachers have an obligation to help their students develop their intellects, not stifle questions and free inquiry.

A member of my congregation recently called me after attending his father's funeral in Israel. He was told by the burial society there that he should pay a fee so that they would recite kaddish each day in memory of his father. The representative of the burial society told my congregant that having the kaddish said each day would get his father into heaven. Without the daily kaddish, the father's soul was in danger.

Certainly it is praiseworthy for a child to recite kaddish in memory of a deceased parent. And certainly it is praiseworthy to give charity in memory of a parent. Yet, the burial society representative was saying more than this: he was saying that the recitation of kaddish was a sine qua non of getting into heaven! If he were asked how he knows this to be true, he would be unable to give any rational explanation. He would say: that's what our holy teachers have taught, and that is what we accept as true.

The kaddish became a "mourner's prayer" only in the Middle Ages. Before that, all the pious men and women who died did not have kaddish recited over them on a daily basis. Does that mean they did not "get into heaven"? Even after the kaddish became a "mourner's prayer", does entry into heaven really depend absolutely on kaddish being recited each day for one's soul? How can this be known with any certainty? What kind of God would not let a righteous person into heaven just because someone did not say kaddish for his/her soul?

The problem here isn't with the importance and value of saying kaddish: the problem is with the theological position that is offered without explanation and without reasonable argumentation or proof. While the burial society surely thinks it is espousing a proper belief and practice, it is doing so in a manner akin to magic and superstition i.e. if a certain formula is recited, then the soul will enter heaven.

Judaism is a repository of great spiritual and intellectual treasures. We must use our intelligence and our intellectual curiosity in order to find greater meaning in Jewish ideas and traditions. The Torah invites us to think and to understand to the best of our ability; it does not demand unthinking, blind obedience. And God spoke to Moses "saying"--"saying" is an invitation to each of us to join the conversation, to share our views, to seek truth.