

Religion and Charlatanism: Thoughts for Parashat Ki Tavo, August 28, 2010

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What is the difference between a genuine religious leader and a charlatan?

A genuine religious leader tries to bring people closer to God, tries to inspire people to intensify their spirituality so that they may approach God and live in the spirit of holiness. A genuine religious leader tries to foster receptivity to a religious worldview, empowering the individual to draw on his/her inner resources in the quest to come closer to God.

A charlatan dresses in "religious" garb, talks "religious" talk, but offers a very different approach. A charlatan pretends that he/she can manipulate God, can make God accede to his/her orders and prayers. A charlatan promises adherents all sorts of blessings and rewards, if only the adherents will follow instructions-- and make the appropriate donations. A charlatan attempts to magnify his/her power, and to minimize the spiritual power of others. The charlatan does not want the individual to feel independent, but to feel dependent on the mercies and interventions of the "holy man" or "holy woman".

One of the famous Hassidic masters, the Kotzker Rebbe, had an aversion to people coming to him to ask for blessings and miracles. He wanted people to pray for themselves and for their families, to have personal spiritual strivings. He did not like the Hassidic model of a Rebbe who was supposed to be a wonder worker who could do miracles and control God.

Unfortunately, the teachings of the Kotzker Rebbe (and so many other religious leaders of like mind) have not taken root among a segment of the Jewish community. People are still looking for "Rebbes" or wonder workers who can perform miracles for them, and who can promise them blessings in the name of God. How arrogant are such charlatans, and how gullible are such people who turn to them.

I (like so many others) regularly receive glossy pamphlets from an organization asking us to give charity to their cause. This group must be spending a considerable amount of money to produce these glossy advertisements, filled with pictures of "saintly" looking rabbis and sages. The recent brochure tells us on

the front page, in bold letters, that if we contribute to their charity, we are ASSURED of blessings. All contributors to their charity "are assured that they will merit a good, sweet year with no distress or serious ailments." The message is that those "sages" who run this charity have a direct line to God, and can give God exact orders as to who to bless and who not to bless--based, of course, on whether people contribute to this charity. This type of solicitation of funds is a reflection of charlatanism, a profound degradation of Torah. It astounds me how anyone would want to lend his name to such a solicitation, or would want to contribute to such a group.

In this week's Torah portion, we read of blessings and curses--that are dispensed by God, and God alone. No human being has the right to presume that he/she knows and can control the eternal and infinite God.

Genuine religion rests on a foundation of humility and a sincere striving to come closer to God. It calls on us to take responsibility for our spiritual lives. Charlatanism rests on a foundation of spiritual arrogance i.e. that some few "sages" can manipulate God and guarantee how God will act. Charlatanism tries to reduce us spiritually, and to make us dependent on an inner clique of wonder workers.

In the battle between genuine religion and charlatanism, let us each come down of the side of genuine religion. Let us undermine charlatanism by our commitment to live a proper religious life.

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