Ice, Fire, and the Search for the Middle Path: Thoughts as We Approach Pessah

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The Jerusalem Talmud (Hagigah 2:1) teaches that the way of Torah is a narrow path. On the right is fire and on the left is icy snow. If one veers from the path, one risks being destroyed by either the fire or the ice. The Torah way of life is balanced, harmonious and sensible. It imbues life with depth, meaning and true happiness. Yet, it is not easy to stay on the path.

Veering to the left freezes the soul of Judaism. When one abandons the warmth of traditional Jewish belief and observance, one falls prey to the ice of skepticism, materialism, hedonism. One confronts what Viktor Frankl has called an "existential vacuum", or what Peter Berger has termed "spiritual homelessness".

Veering to the right causes one to become embroiled in religious fanaticism, excessive zeal. This tendency generates a spirit of isolationism, self-righteousness, xenophobia, authoritarianism. It reduces the Torah way of life to a self-imposed physical and spiritual ghetto.

The Jerusalem Post reported a survey indicating that about 2/3 of Israeli Jews will participate in a Seder for Passover this year; about 80% of new olim will do likewise. This means that one-third of Israeli Jews and 20% of new olim will **not** be at a Seder. For this huge number of Jews, participation at a Seder means little or nothing. They do not feel a religious—or even a national or cultural—impulse to celebrate Pessah with a Seder. If this is so in Israel, it is all the more so in the diaspora. This is the way of ice, the freezing of the soul of Judaism.

On the other hand, we witness the patterns within Orthodoxy where stringencies upon stringencies are added to Passover observance. Food items need multiple hashgahot to appease various segments of the community. Religiously observant people don't eat in the homes of other religiously observant people who do not keep up with all the latest humrot. This is the way of fire, the burning of the soul of Judaism and turning the Torah life into a cultic framework.

How do we stay on the healthy, balanced middle path of Torah? Why do the forces of ice and fire grow so strong, as the middle path seems to grow weaker and less confident?

Modern Orthodoxy stands for the middle path. It strives to maintain devotion to Torah and halakha, while avoiding the extremes of the right and left. Yet, Modern Orthodoxy finds that its children are being pulled toward both extremes. Some move to the right, thinking that this is a “more religious” approach. Some move to the left, surrendering to the prevailing secular values of society. Why does Modern Orthodoxy feel imperiled?

It is difficult, even uninspiring, to fight for moderation, balance, compassion and inclusiveness. It is so much easier to take extreme positions, where one can argue from the vantage point of ice or fire, rather than to be “lukewarm”. At a time when the vision of Modern Orthodoxy is so desperately needed, Modern Orthodoxy seems to have lost its voice, its confidence, its ability to steer intelligently between the way of ice and the way of fire.

All Jews—whether Orthodox or not—need to hear a principled and articulate expression of the middle path of Judaism, that veers neither to the right nor to the left. Happily, there are some Modern Orthodox voices that are rising to the challenge. Let us all listen carefully. The future of Judaism and the Jewish people are at stake.

Angel for Shabbat