The Ways of Pleasantness: Thoughts for Parashat Hukkat, June 30, 2012

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By
Rabbi Marc D. Angel

The Talmud (Taanit 4a) cites the opinion of Rav Ashi that any rabbinic scholar who is not hard as iron is no rabbinic scholar! A Talmid Hakham must hold strong convictions and must not bend under pressure. Yet, a few lines later, the Talmud reports the opinion of Ravina: “even so, a person must teach himself the quality of gentleness.” Yes, commitment to principles is very important; but so is maintaining a compassionate and loving attitude.

The ideal religious personality strives to harmonize both of these qualities. One must be courageous in upholding Torah and mitzvoth, must be hard as iron to resist improper compromises. At the same time, one needs to maintain a gentle, non-confrontational attitude; one must not be overly rigid and inflexible.
In our tradition, Moses is often depicted as being hard as iron. He was unflinching in his commitments and strict in his judgments. By contrast, Aaron is described as being one who “loves peace and seeks peace”—a man of gentleness. There was a distance between Moses and the public; he was austere, not easily approachable; but people felt comfortable in the presence of Aaron. While they respected Moses, they loved Aaron.

This week’s Torah portion reports the death of Aaron: “And when all the congregation saw that Aaron was dead, they wept for Aaron thirty days, even all the house of Israel (Bemidbar 20:29).” When the Torah recounts the death of Moses, it states: “And the children of Israel wept for Moses in the plains of Moab for thirty days (Devarim 34:8).” Rabbinic commentators have noted a significant difference between these two accounts. When Aaron died, “all the house of Israel” mourned. “All” the people—men, women and children—suffered a loss; they all wept the passing of a friend, a gentle and kind leader. But when Moses died, the Torah does not say that “all” mourned for him; rather there is a general expression of grief among the children of Israel, but not everyone felt the loss with the same degree of intensity and sadness. The public mourned Moses out of respect; they mourned Aaron out of love.

In our times, it is vital that we be strongly dedicated to our principles and values. It is essential that we maintain the courage to stand up against those who would undermine Torah and mitzvoth. Yet, it is also vital—more than ever—that we teach ourselves to act with gentleness and kindness. Too often, religion is presented to the public with an angry, ugly and iron face; it is perceived as a mechanical, overly strict and authoritarian way of life. We need to be sure that religion is lived and presented to the public in a spirit of love, gentleness and kindness. “Her ways are the ways of pleasantness, and all her paths are peace.”

At a time when so many Jews are alienated from Torah, it is imperative that we put more emphasis on the view of Ravina—that we learn to conduct ourselves with pleasantness and gentleness. We need to draw more on the approach of Aaron who loved peace and pursued peace.

Insisting on unnecessary stringencies is not a sign of piety but of folly. It drives people away from Torah. It not only discourages people from adopting a Torah way of life; it also alienates people who grew up within the Orthodox fold.

An Orthodox rabbi recently issued an email to his community, in which he offered permissive views on several halakhic issues. He provided his reasoning, along with halakhic sources that supported his views. He was quickly and harshly condemned by “right wing” rabbis who insisted on the more stringent views. One rabbi went so far as to declare that anyone who follows the opinions of the “lenient” rabbi will be condemned to severe punishments in the next world! Apparently, this rabbi believes he has the keys to the next world, and that he is empowered to speak on behalf of the Almighty!

Such arrogance in the name of Torah is reprehensible. “Lenient” views that are halakhically valid—are halakhically valid! It is appropriate for such views to be circulated. Being “strict” does not mean being “more religious”; it often means that a person has not studied the halakha well enough, or that he/she prefers stringencies even when lenience is justified and correct. If one has legitimate objections to a halakhic position, one should state them clearly and calmly, providing the relevant sources to support his/her position. Calling names, making threats, and condemning others is not the way of Torah, but authoritarianism gone amok.

The ways of the Torah are the ways of pleasantness. That is a fundamental principle no one should forget.

Angel for Shabbat