Good People, Good Jews: Thoughts for Parashat Emor

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Angel for Shabbat, Parashat Emor

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In the midst of relating laws concerning the various festivals, the Torah portion includes a verse concerning gifts to be given to the poor. “And when you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not wholly reap the corner of your field, neither shall you gather the gleaning of your harvest; you shall leave them for the poor and for the stranger: I am the Lord your God” (Vayikra 23:22). This is a reminder that whatever we “own” is actually on loan to us from God; and God instructs us to share this “loan” with the poor and downtrodden.

Careful observance of the rules and regulations is important; but this does not in itself make us into religious people. Religiosity entails a philosophic awareness of the presence of God in our lives, and a commitment to live righteous, compassionate and moral lives.

The Talmud (Yevamot 47a) instructs on what is to be said to a non-Jew who wishes to convert to Judaism. We are to tell the prospective proselyte that Jews are subject to oppression. If he/she is still interested, we are to inform him/her of “some of the light mitzvoth and some of the heavy mitzvoth.” The Talmud then specifies that we are to inform the candidate of the agricultural gifts that must be given to the poor and the tithe for the poor. Only afterward are we to tell the person the punishments for violating such mitzoth as eating forbidden food and violating the Sabbath laws. The Talmud—as the Torah itself—places high importance on the laws relating to providing for the poor. Anyone interested in living a fully Jewish life—including those who wish to convert to Judaism—must recognize the centrality of righteousness and compassion in the Torah way of life. We are not only to observe the ritual commandments; we are to become fine, moral, caring human beings living in the presence of God.

In popular parlance, Orthodox Jews often use the term “shomer Shabbat” or “shomer Shabbos” to designate an observant Jew. Stores advertise in their windows and on the labeling of their products that they are “shomer Shabbos.” That is the code phrase for indicating that one is “frum,” religiously proper, and worthy of our trust and respect.

Although I fully agree that Shabbat observance is a key ingredient in our religious way of life, I think it distorts our religion to refer to “religious” Jews as “shomer Shabbat/shomer Shabbos.” One can be a scrupulously careful Sabbath observer, but also be a thief, miser, boor, and abuser. Shabbat is a component of religious life, but isn’t the only component. To single it out as the sole identifying factor of Jewish religiosity is to misrepresent the nature of Judaism. The Torah and Talmud provide many ritual laws that are intended to bring us closer to and more aware of God. The ritual laws are not ends in themselves but serve as the means to shaping us into spiritual, decent human beings. We must strive not merely to be shomer Shabbat, but to be honest, fine, compassionate human beings. We must strive not merely to fulfill the technical laws of the festivals, but to remember to provide for the poor, the stranger, the widow and orphan.

When Rabbi Hayyim Angel was still a rabbinical student, he wrote a short statement responding to the question: Who are religious Jews? That statement well reflects ideal Orthodox Judaism: “Religious Jews are those whose hearts smile when their mouths do. Religious Jews feel pain in another’s misery, joy in another’s happiness. They know that perfection is impossible, yet they strive for it. They are trees rooted in the earth with their branches extending towards the heavens. Religious Jews are cisterns who do not lose a drop; they are springs of water which steadily increase. They observe the commandments with an adult’s intelligence and a child’s enthusiasm. They act in a manner that is a credit to themselves and which earns them the respect of both Jew and non-Jew. They are prepared to sacrifice for God, their people, their laws, and their homeland. Religious Jews are a unified mass of sand, yet individual stars who shine on the world.”

Instead of referring to observant Jews as “shomer Shabbat/shomer Shabbos,” we ought to use the term “shomer Torah,” understanding that Torah includes a religious worldview, a set of ritual laws, a distinctively moral, righteous, and compassionate way of life. Anyone who isn’t a good person, by definition isn’t a religious Jew.

Angel for Shabbat