Old Fashioned Modernity: Thoughts for Shabbat Tsav-HaGadol

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By
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A story is told about Rabbi Yitzhak Elhanan of Kovno, one of the great rabbinic sages of the 19th century. He was held in high regard among the Jews of Lithuania; even the “enlightened” Jews thought him to be progressive and broad-minded.

On one of his travels, his train stopped briefly at Vilna. Hundreds of Jews came to the train to see the famous rabbi. A certain maskil (“enlightened” Jew) decided to enter the train in order to meet the rabbi in person. He found Rabbi Yitzhak Elhanan wrapped in talit and tefillin, reciting his prayers. The rabbi had a long beard and was dressed in the “old fashioned” garb of religious traditionalists of those days.

The maskil waited for the rabbi to finish his prayers and then approached him: “Rabbi, I am a writer and a member of the Jewish maskilim. Many times we have spoken of you, thinking that you were a person of the modern generation. But now I can see that you still behave like the Jews of olden times.”

Rabbi Yitzhak Elhanan smiled and replied: “I truly am of the modern generation; but you and your “enlightened” friends are from the olden times. As we say in the Passover Haggadah: ‘Originally our ancestors were idolators!’”

In this retort, Rabbi Yitzhak Elhanan was indicating that what often passes for progressivism and modernity is not actually an advance in the human condition, but is rather a throwback to more primitive times. People who cast off Jewish values and observances may think they are being modern. In fact, though, they are simply reverting to the low spiritual level which existed before the giving of the Torah.

In those ancient times, society was idolatrous and people were not bound by the higher values and standards of Torah.
The giving of the Torah marked a revolutionary advance for humanity, providing the basis for true human progress based on the most elevated laws and ideals.

The Torah taught that humans are created in the image of God, that they have responsibilities to God and to fellow human beings, that they are ultimately answerable to God for their actions.

But human beings have always had the tendency to revert to the spiritual chaos of primitive times. It seems easier to live without the Torah's demands. It is tempting to rationalize religious laxity as a virtue, as being progressive and modern. Rabbi Yitzhak Elhanan cut through this illusion.

When the ancient Israelites received the Torah from God, they stood at the vanguard of human civilization. The world has still not nearly approached the lofty ideas and ideals of Torah. Those who foster the teachings and practices of Torah—who appear to some to be "old fashioned"—are actually at the cutting edge of the moral advancement of our society today.

Yet, contemporary religious traditionalism—for all its internal dynamism—does frequently present itself as isolationist, rejectionist, authoritarian: it really does appear to be "old fashioned," disconnected from the current trends that shape our civilization. In spite of the clever retort of Rabbi Yitzhak Elhanan to the maskil, the maskil was not entirely wrong in his perception.

The Passover seder can serve as a model of how to promote a religious vision which is traditional and progressive simultaneously. It is traditional when we carefully observe the laws of Passover, when we conduct the seder according to the prescribed customs. It is progressive when we focus on the larger messages of the Haggadah e.g. God's providence, the evils of oppression, the importance of human freedom.

The Haggadah provides a progressive framework of questions and answers, of engaging each person according to his/her ability and interest. It is an ancient document that can and should be made relevant to the most modern of moderns.

It is not a virtue to be old-fashioned or to be modern, simply for the sake of seeming to be traditional or progressive. Rather, the challenge is to be spiritually alive and growing, rooted in our traditions and awake to new realities. What is needed is some good old fashioned modernity!

Angel for Shabbat