Disruptive Innovation: Thoughts for Aharei Mot-Kedoshim, May 2, 2015

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The business analyst, Clayton M. Christensen, distinguished between two types of innovations. A sustaining innovation builds on a company's basic business by improving its products and providing better value. A disruptive innovation creates a new market that displaces earlier technologies. Sustaining innovation focuses on improving existing products; disruptive innovation moves in a new, unexpected direction that radically changes the market. Sustaining innovation is evolutionary; disruptive innovation is revolutionary.

Before the age of automobiles, people traveled by horse and buggy. Sustaining innovation involved improving on the efficiency or aesthetics of horse and buggy. But once cars were produced at an affordable price, the horse and buggy industry was entirely eclipsed. Mass produced automobiles represented a disruptive innovation, radically transforming the marketplace. The market for horse and buggy vehicles collapsed.

In modern times, the emergence of new technologies transforms the market by offering products that replace earlier technologies. We don't just buy new and improved versions of older technologies; we buy products that render previous products unnecessary or undesirable.

These thoughts came to mind as I studied this week's Torah reading. "You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy." At its inception, Torah religion was revolutionary! It was a disruptive innovation of the first magnitude. It rejected and attempted to eclipse the idolatrous and superstitious religious worldviews that preceded it.

In calling on the Israelites to emulate God's holiness, the Torah taught a distinctive spirituality that linked humans with the eternal God. We are to live with a sense of God's presence in our lives. We are to strive for the highest level of understanding and experience, the highest level of self-perfection, the highest level of interaction with fellow human beings.

The Torah commands honesty and integrity of the highest order: You shall not oppress your neighbor, nor rob him; you shall not delay in paying your hired help. You shall not curse the deaf nor put a stumbling block before the blind, but you shall fear your God; I am the Lord. (19:13-14). The Torah breaks new ground in human interrelationships: You shall love your neighbor as yourself (19:18). The Torah goes beyond family and tribal loyalties: The stranger that sojourns with you shall be unto you as the home born among you, and you shall love him as yourself; for you were strangers in the land of Egypt (19:34). The Torah rejects shamanism and superstition: You shall not turn unto ghosts nor unto familiar spirits; seek them not lest you be defiled by them, I am the Lord your God (19:31).

The ethical monotheism taught by the Torah was something radically new. With the arrival of the Torah, humanity began a revolutionary new path. The Torah undermined polytheism and perverse cultic practices. It taught benevolence and fairness on a universal basis. It laid the foundation for later religions and philosophies that drew heavily on the Torah's key insights. It has influenced billions of people throughout the ages and throughout the world.

And yet, the Torah's disruptive innovation is still a work in progress. The people of the world at large—and the Jewish people itself—have not succeeded in shedding all the negative features that the Torah came to eliminate. We still have plenty of pseudo-religion in the world, plenty of dishonesty, cruelty, violence, hatred.

It would seem that a large number of Jews have failed to recognize the revolutionary and disruptive qualities of Torah. On one extreme, they have huddled into self-contained physical and spiritual ghettos, treating Judaism more as a cult than as a world religion. On the other extreme, they have embraced a secular humanism devoid of the Torah's God-centered religiosity. And in the middle, many are "marketing" Judaism with sustaining innovations rather than with disruptive innovations.

Sustaining innovations: this entails maintaining the status quo with minor marketing adjustments. This sometimes involves serious re-evaluation of the status quo, but often simply leads to an increase in p.r., gimmickry, and entertainment. Synagogues offer "new" and "special" programs that are pretty much the same as the "old" and "unspecial" except for the marketing hype. They seem to exist for the purpose of perpetuating themselves with new members and new income and new projects…but the disruptive innovation is lost in the process. One can attend synagogue regularly but not once feel the presence of God, not once hear words of spiritual dynamism, not once feel personally transformed.

Holiness?

And yet, holiness is precisely at the root of the grandeur and power of Torah Judaism. The Torah view of holiness is not a quality to be experienced by an other-worldly group of ascetics; nor by those who espouse a Godless ethics; nor by those who are comfortable with the status quo of humanity. Holiness is an incredible challenge to rise to the highest levels of spirituality, righteousness and moral courage. It is an incredible challenge to struggle against injustice and corruption. It is a call for disruptive innovation, innovation that will radically transform our world into a better place.

The Torah adventure began as a revolution in human thought and experience. Its goal was to disrupt and dislodge the evils and falsehoods that prevailed in earlier times. The Torah offered a disruptive innovation, a new way of living a happy, meaningful and inspired life.

The Torah adventure continues today. The world is still very far from abandoning the negative aspects that have plagued humanity over the centuries. Those who embrace the disruptive innovation of Torah can help bring the world to a new level of peace and understanding. Those who don’t recognize the challenge of disruptive innovation are part of the problem, not part of the solution.

Angel for Shabbat