A Balanced Approach to Religion: Thoughts for Parashat Devarim

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The New York Times (July 15, 2012) included an important article by Ross Douthat entitled “Can Liberal Christianity be Saved?” He points out that the liberal denominations of Christianity have increasingly identified themselves with “progressive” causes--and in the process have experienced a drastic drop in membership and church attendance! He writes that “…liberal Christianity has simply collapsed. Practically every denomination…that has tried to adapt itself to contemporary liberal values has seen an Episcopal-style plunge in church attendance.”

One explanation for this precipitous decline is that the church's message has become so universal, that people do not see a sharp difference between “liberal Christianity” and secular humanism. One can simply be a good human being, without needing the trappings and expense of church membership.

A similar phenomenon has been noted within the Jewish community. The liberal denominations of Judaism have also experienced a dramatic decline in membership and synagogue/Temple attendance. They have increasingly focused on universal themes such as social justice and “tikkun olam”, while downplaying commitment to ritual observance of mitzvoth and engagement in Jewish theology and philosophy. People conclude that one can fulfill Jewishness by espousing universal ideals—without making a concomitant commitment to Torah and mitzvoth. While trying to be more “relevant,” the liberal denominations are actually becoming more irrelevant.

On the other side of the spectrum, the more conservative religious denominations have been experiencing growth in membership and attendance. Indeed, the more extreme groups seem to be enjoying the most robust increases. Apparently, many people are looking for religious structure that is more demanding, more comprehensive, more “authentic.”

Yet, many thinking people find the extreme conservative religious framework to be seriously deficient. It is too authoritarian, too conformist, too dogmatic, too

coercive.
In the Jewish religious world, the position of Modern Orthodoxy is balanced between the universalism of the liberal denominations and the extreme particularism of the right-wing groupings. Modern Orthodoxy stresses commitment to Jewish beliefs and ideas, and demands adherence to halakha. It provides a meaningful structure for life and a spiritually sensitive way for the individual to serve God and humanity. While unflinchingly devoted to the particularistic teachings of Torah and mitzvoth, Modern Orthodoxy encompasses the universal values of Judaism - values that flow from the ideas and ideals of Torah. It respects our autonomy, our intelligence, our ability to assume personal responsibility. It allows room for creative thought and action.

In this week's Torah portion, we read that "Moses took upon himself to expound the Torah" (Devarim 1:5). We might have expected the verses to continue with an explanation of the various laws of the Torah or interpretations of its key teachings. Instead, Moses continues by offering a review of the forty year history of the Israelites since the Exodus from Egypt. Moses believed that this history lesson served in some way as a proper exposition of the Torah.

Apparently, Moses was teaching the Israelites an essential truth. In order to understand the ideas and mitzvoth of the Torah, they first had to understand their own history, their own experiences. The Torah is not an abstract set of rules designed for a utopian world. Rather the Torah is grounded in reality, in the practical concerns of human beings as they actually cope with the challenges of life. Moses taught that to understand the Torah, the Israelites first had to understand their own distinctive history and their own distinctive mission. Once they had a solid and clear sense of their specific context and their specific identity, they could go on to play their spiritual role in the unfolding of human civilization.

Only after Moses reviewed their history did he go on in future chapters to expound to them on the beliefs and mitzvoth as well as their future role among the nations of the world. He was teaching, in effect, the need to be grounded in particular history and observances, as a foundation for concern and work for the improvement of society in general.

In our contemporary efforts to transmit Judaism to our communities, we need to espouse a religious worldview that is clearly and authentically rooted in the history and experience of the Jewish people, that is unflinchingly committed to Torah and mitzvoth. At the same time, we need to balance our particularism with our concerns and actions on behalf of the universal betterment of humankind.

Short cuts often lead us to dead ends. Long cuts often lead us into labyrinths. Let us think carefully as we proceed in the unfolding of Judaism for our and future generations.

Angel for Shabbat