Don't Be Fooled: Thoughts for Parashat Tsav

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By Rabbi Marc D. Angel

The philosopher, Soren Kierkegaard, once observed: “There are two ways to be fooled. One is to believe what is not true. The other is to refuse to believe what is true.”

A recent scandal in the State of Washington provides an example of people believing what is not true. A Seattle man formed the Christian Prayer Center, and called on people to contribute to his organization in order to receive blessings and prayers. He posted false testimonials that assured would-be contributors of miraculous cures and fortunes that would come to them if they would donate. This man has recently been ordered to pay up to seven million dollars in restitution to an estimated 125,000 desperate consumers who paid for prayers in their times of need.

Similar scams exist in the Jewish community. “Kabbalists” and “Wonder Workers” promise to generate miracles and blessings on those who will contribute suitable amounts. Law suits have been brought against some of these people, and some of them have been fined and even imprisoned. And yet, many thousands of people—especially at times of crisis—are ready to contribute significant sums of money to those who pose as religious miracle-workers. In fact, people who prey on the frightened and the gullible public are sinners and thieves. People who send them money are guilty of believing what is not true.

Many are fooled because they refuse to believe what is true. The truth is that religion is not a gimmick for manipulating God into performing miracles for us. The truth is that personal religious development comes about only through our own efforts. It cannot be bought from wonder workers; it cannot be gained vicariously. We each have a direct link to God, and we do not need intermediaries to intercede on our behalf.

What is the difference between a genuine religious leader and a charlatan?

A genuine religious leader tries to bring people closer to God, tries to inspire people to intensify their spirituality so that they may approach God and live in the spirit of holiness. A genuine religious leader tries to foster receptivity to a

religious worldview, empowering the individual to draw on his/her inner resources in the quest to come closer to God.

A charlatan dresses in "religious" garb, talks "religious" talk, but offers a very different approach. A charlatan pretends that he/she can manipulate God, can make God accede to his/her orders and prayers. A charlatan promises adherents all sorts of blessings and rewards, if only the adherents will follow instructions--and make the appropriate donations. A charlatan attempts to magnify his/her power, and to minimize the spiritual power of others. The charlatan does not want the individual to feel independent, but to feel dependent on the mercies and interventions of the "holy man" or "holy woman".

One of the famous Hassidic masters, the Kotzker Rebbe, had an aversion to people coming to him to ask for blessings and miracles. He wanted people to pray for themselves and for their families, to have personal spiritual strivings. He did not like the Hassidic model of a Rebbe who was supposed to be a wonder worker who could do miracles and control God.

Unfortunately, the teachings of the Kotzker Rebbe (and so many other religious leaders of like mind) have not taken root among a segment of the Jewish community. People are still looking for "Rebbes" or wonder workers who can perform miracles for them, and who can promise them blessings in the name of God.

In this week's Torah portion, we read of offerings that were brought in the Mishkan. These offerings are known as korbanot. The root meaning of korban/korbanot is “to come close.” These offerings were intended to bring people closer to God. Although the priests played their roles in the process of korbanot, the ultimate responsibility rested with the individual who made the offering. The goal of this system was to establish a closer direct relationship between the individual and God.

Genuine religion rests on a foundation of humility and a sincere striving to come closer to God. It calls on us to take responsibility for our spiritual lives. Charlatanism rests on a foundation of spiritual arrogance i.e. that some few "sages" can manipulate God and guarantee how God will act. Charlatanism tries to reduce us spiritually, and to make us dependent on an inner clique of wonder workers.

Some people are fooled because they believe what is not true. Some people are fooled because they refuse to believe what is true. Don't be fooled! Our responsibility is to seek a true and honest religious life.

Angel for Shabbat