Godliness and "Fraudliness"—Thoughts for Parashat Ki Tavo

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Angel for Shabbat, Parashat Ki Tavo

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"…for you will keep the commandments of the Lord your God and walk in His ways." (Devarim 28:9)

The Torah presents us with a remarkable challenge: to walk in God's ways. But how does one do this? How are we to become Godly people?

The classic rabbinic interpretation is: Just as God is compassionate, you be compassionate. Just as God is gracious, you be gracious. Walking in God's ways entails demonstrating empathy for others; being sincere and thoughtful. At the root of these qualities is: humility. A person must have self-respect, but not be egotistical. One should reflect a religious attitude that is internal, deep, and humble.

Rabbi Hayyim Palachi, a sage of 19th century Izmir, pointed out that to "walk in His ways" entails positive action. It is not enough to feel empathy for the poor, or to wait for a needy person to come to you to ask for help; rather, you must "walk" and actively pursue opportunities to help others. The hallmark of a religious person is good and upright action.

Think of the genuinely pious people you have known in your lives. Think of those special individuals who fulfilled the challenge of walking in God's ways. When I recall such individuals, I am struck by their natural religiosity, their inconspicuous piety. They served God and their fellow human beings with simplicity, without expectation of thanks or reward. They shunned publicity. They were not "play actors," but conducted themselves in a heartfelt, genuine manner.

Jewish folklore speaks of 36 hidden righteous people upon whom the world depends. These 36 are “hidden,” even to themselves. They do not think of themselves as being extraordinary and would blush to learn that they were indeed among these 36 special people. Genuinely righteous people do not seek the limelight, do not want their photographs plastered on billboards or published in the newspapers. If they are public personalities, they nevertheless shy away from self-aggrandizement and excessive publicity. They see themselves as servants of the Lord; they keep their egos in check.

Real Godliness is—real, honest, authentic. The opposite, though, is “fraudliness.” Religious “fraudliness” is characterized by ego-centrism, lack of empathy, lack of humility. “Fraudliness” is manifested in calling attention to one’s supposed religiosity, in using religion as a tool for self-promotion and ego-gratification. Just as Godliness inspires and elevates us, “fraudliness” repels us and offends us.

In his book, “A City in its Fullness,” the Israeli Nobel-prize winning author S. Y. Agnon writes of a conversation between two men who attended prayer services led by a reader with a beautiful voice. The marvel, though, wasn’t his voice. Both men had experienced something much deeper than the aesthetic pleasure of hearing a pleasant voice. “It wasn’t a voice we heard; it was prayer.”

The leader of prayers with a beautiful voice impacted on worshippers because he was able to pray sincerely, to transcend the beauty of his own voice. His chanting inspired the congregation because it lifted them spiritually, it brought them to a higher dimension beyond the egotism of a good voice. His voice presented the words of prayer; but his prayer emerged not from his voice but from his soul.

Such is the nature of Godliness: to use our God-given talents to raise ourselves and others to a more spiritual level of perception.

“Fraudliness” is —fraudulent. It is pretend religion. It is egotism dressed in the cloak of religion.

Godliness is—Godly. It is genuine, humble, compassionate and honest.

The Torah challenges us: “…for you will keep the commandments of the Lord your God and walk in His ways.” (Devarim 28:9)

This is a significant challenge. The way we respond defines whether we are on the road to Godliness or "fraudliness."

Angel for Shabbat