A Thinking Tradition: Thoughts for Parashat Mishpatim

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Angel for Shabbat, Parashat Mishpatim

by Rabbi Marc D. Angel

Ralph Waldo Emerson, in his address “The American Scholar,” spoke of Man Thinking. Ideally, people should think carefully, analyze issues, make reasoned judgments. Man Thinking is self-reliant and original. By contrast, in the degenerate state a person “tends to become a mere thinker, or, still worse, the parrot of other men’s thinking.” In his essay, “Self-Reliance,” Emerson complains that “man is timid and apologetic. He is no longer upright. He dares not say ‘I think,’ ‘I am,’ but quotes some saint or sage.”

Although it surely is important to have a proper base of knowledge, a person should not forego the right and responsibility of making individual evaluations and decisions. After careful thought and study, one has the right—and responsibility—to express a personal opinion.

Some years ago, I gave a lecture on my book “The Orphaned Adult” in which I discussed my feelings upon the passing of my mother. In the question and answer period following my talk, an Orthodox rabbi asked for the halakhic sources for my comments. I was taken aback. I was describing my experiences and offering my reactions to the death of a parent: why would I need halakhic sources to justify my thoughts?

Yet, for this rabbi (and for so many others) one is expected to have authoritative sources for one’s words. One’s own opinion is not valid in and of itself. Too often,

especially in religious life, we don’t trust Man Thinking but demand validation from an earlier authority. Our own opinions don’t count unless they are bolstered by quoting “some saint or sage.” We don’t take into consideration that the earlier sage/authority was expressing an original opinion, was a Man Thinking.

Judaism is sometimes portrayed—and sometimes experienced—as a system of laws, rituals, customs. As a tradition-based way of life, we seek wisdom and direction from the sages and saints of earlier generations. Yet, Judaism in actuality is geared for thinking people, those who not only adhere to the mitzvoth but who seek inner meanings. We don’t only want to know what to do, but why we do it, what is expected, what are the goals. Yes, we do want to learn from the earlier saints and sages…but we then also want to think on our own.

This week's Torah portion begins with God commanding Moses: "And these are the ordinances that you shall set before them." Rashi comments that God instructed Moses not to teach the Israelites by rote but to explain the reasons for the laws. If the people had the opportunity to study the reasons behind the laws, they would more likely internalize and fulfill them.

Rashi's comments relate to "mishpatim", those ordinances that are apparent to reason and common sense. But what about "hukkim", laws whose reasons are not readily apparent? Was Moses expected to offer reasons and explanations for these ceremonial, ritual laws? Or was he to state the commandments and have the Israelites obey them even if they did not understand the underlying reasons for them?

In his "Guide for the Perplexed," Rambam devoted serious discussion to the reasons for mitzvoth. He believed that since God is all-wise, all of the mitzvoth—including “hukim”-- contain divine wisdom. Rambam refers to the sickness in the souls of people who prefer to observe commandments blindly rather than to imagine that God had reasons for giving these commandments. He was displeased with those who thought that the Torah's teachings should be accepted blindly and unthinkingly. This tendency of mind leads inexorably to a superficial view of religion, even to superstition. A mind that is trained to accept information without analyzing and questioning it, is a mind that can be controlled by demagogues.

Albert Einstein offered his view on the vitality of Jewish tradition: “The pursuit of knowledge for its own sake, an almost fanatical love of justice, and the desire for personal independence—these are the features of the Jewish tradition which make me thank my stars that I belong to it” (The World as I See It, p. 103)

We should all feel grateful for belonging to a religious tradition that is deep, wise, idealistic—and that encourages us to think for ourselves.