

Parashat Re'eh

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A historian said on the radio yesterday that Juan Diego, the newly canonized saint of the Catholic Church, in all likelihood never really existed (oh, oh is this akin to last year's controversy about whether the Exodus really took place?). Anyway, when I heard that about Juan Diego I thought to myself, "It's probably easier to be a saint if you never existed." I read in the newspaper that "the church makes saints of the dead to hold up as models for the living." [LA Times, Thursday August 1, 2002, p.A4.]. It's certainly easier to be a role model if you're already dead, I thought to myself, can't fall down on the job.

Judaism doesn't go in much for saints, even though we occasionally throw the word around (or its Hebrew/Yiddish counterpart, tzaddick). Jewish saints aren't the same as Catholic ones, though they are supposed to be role models for the living. Even our big name role models like Abraham and Sarah, even Moishe rabbeinu, Moses, our teacher - had noticeable flaws. From a Jewish viewpoint, flaws make you a better role model - it says you can be human and still be a good person, still be a good Jew, still be a role model. In fact, for Jews the role model is not a saint, but a mensch - the German word for "person" is in Yiddish the word not just for "a human being," but "an upright honorable, decent person," "someone to admire and emulate." [Joys of Yiddish, p.134] Leo Rosten, in his famous book, The Joys of Yiddish, says, "It is hard to convey the special sense of respect, dignity, approbation [warm approval], that can be conveyed by calling someone 'a real mensch!'" Jewish children often hear the instruction, "be a mensch!" (Someone once told me that when he was young he heard "be a mensch!" so often that he thought it was the one of the ten commandments. Later he said, he realized it's not that "be a mensch" is one of the ten, it's that the ten commandments are an instruction manual in how to be a mensch!!) Rosten also writes about the word "mensch" that "the most withering comment one might make on someone's character or conduct is: 'He didn't act like a mensch.'" [p.234]

"What's all this about menschekeit?" you might well be asking about now. Is the word in this week's Torah portion or something? Well, not the word mensch, but a description of one appears in Parashat Re'eh, this week's portion. When Moses is summarizing what God asks of us around the treatment of kinspeople who need help, God says not only shall we not shut our hand from the kinsperson who is in need, not only shall we open our hand to our kin, to our poor, and to our indigent in our land, but when we give, our heart "shall not be bad when you're giving to them." [See Devarim 15:7-11] When it comes to mitzvot, to commandments and instructions, rules and regulations, we're often told just to do the thing, but not why, and even less often are we told anything about how to feel when doing it - But this week we are told: "You shall give to that person, and your heart shall not be bad when you're giving to that person." [v.10] I suppose there are other ways

to hear this verse - maybe it's not about how you should feel when you loan ["lend" from v. 8] to someone in need, maybe it's about how you will come to feel when you do such a thing: "you shall give to that person, and your heart shall not be bad when you're giving to that person." [v.10] In other words, you shall give to that person and the act of giving will make your heart feel good.

It's true, isn't it? Don't you often feel good when you give to someone in need? or to a cause you think is worthy? Makes you feel like a mensch. I gave a dollar to a woman on the street the other day and while thanking me she called me both "sweet cakes" and "angel girl." Wow, I thought, "sweet cakes AND angel girl" -- that was well worth a dollar. By the way, here's the other reason I'm bringing up menshlikeit tonight. It's that Jewish calendar again. It's this Elul thing coming up.

Elul begins next week, and on the Jewish calendar it is the time of self-reflection, of self assessment, of repentance and change. A month that we're offered each year before the Days of Awe to consider this past year, and how we have been in this past year, and what might be next year, and who we want to be next year. The assignment for Elul is to consider: Who we've been, who are we right now - and how close those are to who we want to be. A lot to ask of a month, a lot to ask of a person in one month, and yet Judaism asks it of us each year. Every year -- not just the year following September 11, 2001 - every year. What a gift Judaism gives us. To think that we are not locked in - to think that our whole tradition believes in our ability to change, to become more the person we want to be, to become more the person God wants us to be. What a gift.

It can work on a community level also. Can we become more the congregation we want to be? Can we make those changes we've been wanting to make - improve the communication? take the risks? meet the challenges? grow? And we're invited by Judaism to go even larger - from individual to congregation to the Jewish people. Can we become more the people we want to be, God wants us to be? Can we find something to supplant our feelings of rage and revenge? Can we learn to grieve without seeking vengeance? Can we look for a different way to engage our hearts given the attacks upon us? This is not politics I'm speaking here, I'm not suggesting a military strategy or a pacifist response. I'm not criticizing the government of Israel, or making any suggestions about what it should do. And God knows I don't have a clue about how to get Israel out of this mess. I'm just talking about how our hearts feel. I'm talking about trying to be a mensch in the midst of terrorism and killing and violence and hatred and fear. And maybe only saints can do it - but I don't think so. I think we can.

I invite you to join me this Elul, this month set aside every year for self-reflection and cheshbon hanefesh -- accounting of the soul - each our own soul, not the souls of anybody else - I invite you to join me in challenging our souls: to look inside our hearts for the mensch not the macho, to look for the soft not the hard-heartedness, for the openness not the closing off, the love not the hate, the understanding not the rage: you shall not shut your hand, but rather you shall open your hand to the ones who need you - maybe that's your own self, by the way, who needs you to open your own hand -- and in so doing open your own heart.

Such looking doesn't mean you can avoid seeing or feeling the other feelings - in fact, do

this well and you won't be able to avoid encountering those feelings: the rage and the fear and the anger and the hurt, and their ilk, for they are sure to be there too, residing side-by-side with your gentler feelings. But know that some feelings are temporal things -- they come, they go -- and some are lasting - love chief among them. Some feelings ought to be acted on, and some not - and one can learn which ones and when and how (remember, Judaism insists that we - humans with foibles that we are -- can learn and grow and change). So I invite you to spend the month of Elul exploring your heart and soul, sorting the temporal feelings from the lasting ones, finding the loving side, the gentle side, the open side.

Do not close your hand to the needy among you (or should we say the needy inside of you), rather open your hand...“You shall give to him [the needy one] and your heart shall not be bad when you do so.” [v. 10]. I haven't told you yet what follows in this same verse: “and your heart shall not be bad when you do so because on account of this thing God, your God, will bless you in everything you do and in everything your hand has taken on.”[end of v.10]

If we do this introspection, this reaching out with open arms, reaching in to find open hearts - if we do it well, each of us, this month of Elul, then won't it be sweet, come Rosh Hashanah, to gather together - a community, not of saints, but of menschen, human beings, “decent people,” the kind of people all Jewish parents want their Jewish children to be, the kind of people God wants all people to be. Shabbat shalom