

D'VAR ACHER

Joshuah 24:1-3a, 14-24 / Psalm 78:1-8

I like to walk (if I can't ride my bike, that is). It is good exercise. I get to slow down and enjoy what's around me. And I have time to think and clear my head. On one of my regular routes through our extended neighborhood I pass by a house with a gated entrance flanked by two large, polished stone tablets. One tablet is left blank, the other bears the inscription: Joshuah. 24:15.

I always wondered who lives there. Are the owners Jewish? Are they Christian? I say Jewish or Christian because the scripture quote is one heard often both in the synagogue as well as in the church. Joshua, Moses's successor, addresses the people of Israel with these words: "If you are unwilling to serve the LORD, choose this day whom you will serve, whether the gods of your ancestors or the god of the Amorites ... but as for me and my household, we will serve the LORD."

The people, a little unnerved by Joshua's forcefulness, respond: "Hey, don't get all worked up. We, too, will serve the LORD." Joshua is not impressed. "You just bore witness against yourselves because you cannot pull this off." "No, no, no," they say. We really mean it. We will serve the LORD," the people insist. "Well, so be it. But don't come crying when things go South after you abandoned God once again," Joshua continues." And the people say: "Done!"

Now on the surface, it looks like a no-brainer as to how to read this text. Worship God—good. Worship other gods—bad. But then there is always what the Rabbis call "D'var Acher," another word or another opinion. This belongs to the sacred tradition of midrash, a conversation between God's people and the text which has been going on for millennia and will continue indefinitely.

What the Rabbis know, what Joshua and, some, theologians know is that the reading of the sacred text is never closed. And the "reading of our lives" is never closed. There is always another opinion, another point of view, another angle which we have not considered before. And the Rabbis also know that it takes humility before God, the Ruler of the Universe, "Adonai Melech H'Olam," to admit this.

Tevye, the main character of the musical "Fiddler on the Roof" knows this, too. He is famous for "D'var Acher," for another opinion. "On the one hand," he likes to say. "On the other hand," he continues the dialog with himself. "But on the other hand" And on and on he goes. Then, Tevye's life philosophy is put to the test in a real-life situation that just hits too close to home.

As Tevye and his family face the influences of secularism and Christianity, he struggles to reconcile his love for his family with his love of tradition. When his daughter's pursuit of love comes up against his passion for tradition, when she announces that she wants to marry "outside the faith," Tevye is at first willing to adapt, and he does...until he can't. Here's part of the dialog between him and his daughter Chava:

CHAVA: Papa, I beg you to accept us.

TEVYE [to himself/looking to the heavens, as the others all freeze]: Accept them? How can I accept them? Can I deny everything I believe in? On the other hand, can I deny my own daughter? On the other hand, how can I turn my back on my faith? My people? If I try and bend that far, I will break. On the other hand...No. There is no other hand.

Tevye is trying hard to live according to “D’var Acher.” He’s really trying hard to be fair, to consider other points of view, to keep an open mind and an open heart ... until he can’t. He can’t because his dilemma is too personal, because he discovers that he is human just like everyone else.

This is an unresolvable dilemma. Joshua knew this. That’s why I think he called the people’s bluff. After all, he was painfully familiar with their track record: Making a golden calf the moment their leader stepped away for a while. Moaning, groaning, hemming and hawing in the wilderness, “Hey Egypt wasn’t so bad after all.” The prophet Isaiah knew this as he spoke on God’s behalf: “My thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are my ways your ways.” The apostle Paul knew this when he reflected on his own behavior: “For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do.” And Jesus knew this when he challenged the people: “Not everyone who says to me ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father.” In other words: Talk about our allegiance to God is cheap. The proof comes in the living. And living is exceedingly hard!

Looking at the affairs of our world today, there is not a lot of “D’var Acher” going around. Wars and rumors of wars are everywhere, it seems—in word and in deed. Rather than searching for another word, or another opinion, rather than respecting the dignity of difference, as the late great Rabbi Johnathan Sacks would have said, we are individually and collectively engaged in the opposite. Like Tevye, we may confess with our lips that we are committed to dialog with open hearts and minds, until things get too personal ... and we don’t, we can’t .. because we, too, are human, all too human. Like Joshua and the Israelites, we promise to commit ourselves to loving God and others, just to turn around and in the same instance build another “golden calf.” As the text reminds us, “Joshua made a covenant with the people that day and made statutes and ordinances for them at Shechem.”

The Psalmist phrases this beautifully in Psalm 78:

- 2 I will open my mouth in a parable;
I will utter dark sayings from of old,
- 3 things that we have heard and known,
that our ancestors have told us.
- 4 We will not hide them from our children;
we will tell to the coming generation
the glorious deeds of the LORD, and his might,
and the wonders that he has done.

- 5 He established a decree in Jacob,
and appointed a law in Israel,
which he commanded our ancestors
to teach to their children;
- 6 that the next generation might know them,
the children yet unborn,
and rise up and tell them to their children,
- 7 so that they should set their hope in God,
and not forget the works of God,
but keep his commandments;
- 8 and that they should not be like their ancestors,
a stubborn and rebellious generation,
a generation whose heart was not steadfast,
whose spirit was not faithful to God.

We may not always be able to serve the LORD with all our hearts, mind, and strength, but we can try each day anew. In doing so, in striving for “D’var Acher,” in searching for and listening to another word, another opinion, over and over again, we gain an ever-deepening understanding of the God of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Sarah, Miriam and Esther, the God of Jesus, the God of you and me. And one day, perhaps, we may learn to love one another just as God loves us.

One of our members texted me after she read my column in the *Chapel Bell* last Thursday. She saw what I had missed. “Do you think the other tablet on your neighbor’s doorpost is left blank for the other point of view?” Of course, I thought. Why didn’t I see it? But she did. And I am so glad that together we gained a deeper understanding of our life with God and with each other once more.

May it be so. For you, and for me.

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