

Shabbat Hazon

by Rabbi Ralph Tawil

Value: Good behavior towards people is essential for a good relationship with God. Whenever you hear that a person “has become religious,” there is a tendency to think of that change in terms of his taking on ritual observances. Perhaps he prays longer, keeps the laws of Shabbat more stringently, or even dresses differently. What, unfortunately, does not come to mind is that the person has become kinder and more sensitive; or that he has decided to refrain from embarrassing others or gossiping. Would a person who had decided to be a better listener and be more considerate be described as becoming more religious? Or what about a person that decided that all his business practices must be on the highest ethical standards; reporting mistakes in his favor with as much diligence as he would mistakes that cost him money? I venture to guess that in today’s parlance that these changes would be described as proper, the “right thing to do.” They would probably not be described as “more religious.” The prophecy that we read as the haftarah prior to Tisha Be’ab disagrees.

Background: The haftarot which we read in the Shabbat services throughout the summer months are connected with the grievous commemoration of the temples’ destruction of the Ninth day of Ab (Tish’a Be`ab). The haftarot of the three weeks preceding Tish’a Be`ab contain prophecies that are very critical of Israel. The haftarot of the ten weeks following that day of fasting have prophecies of consolation and of a call to repentance. This Shabbat, the Shabbat before the fast day of Tish’a be`ab, the portion chosen criticizes Israel about their diligent observance of ritual laws (i.e. sacrifice, festivals, and even prayer), and their laxness regarding ethical laws. The prophet’s point is that the ritual observance is not only meaningless, it is

abhorrent, when not coupled with proper behavior towards other people. Let's listen to the words of the prophet.

Text: Isaiah 1:10-17, 27

Listen to Hashem's word, you chieftains of Sedom, pay attention to God's instruction leaders of 'Amorah. Why do I need all your sacrifices, Hashem says, I am fed up with burnt offering of rams, suet of fatlings, and blood of bulls; and I have no delight in lambs and he-goats. You come to appear before Me - who ever asked you to do this, to trample My courts? Don't bring Me your futile offerings, your incense is disgusting to Me, as are your New Moons and Sabbaths. I cannot stand holiday with injustice. I hate your New Moons and festivals, they are a burden to Me, I cannot endure them. When you lift up your hands I will turn My eyes away from you; Though you pray at length, I will not listen—your hands are stained with crime.

Wash yourself clean, put your evil doings away from My sight. Cease to do evil, learn to do good. Devote yourself to justice; Aid the wronged. Uphold the rights of the orphan, defend the cause of the widow.

...Siyon will be saved by justice, and her repentant ones by righteousness.

Analysis: Notice the vehemence of Isaiah's rebuke. *Yeshu'ya* referred to Israel's leaders as being from Sedom and 'Amorah, two places notorious for their unethical behavior. Bne Yisrael must have thought themselves very close to God, because they were offering all the sacrifices, praying and keeping Shabbat as they should. Yet the prophet says that all that is disgusting to God when it is accompanied by injustice and mistreatment of society's disadvantaged and powerless. You cannot be cruel or nasty and expect God to listen to your prayers. You cannot be

inconsiderate and close to God at the same time--no matter how much you pray and learn. Proper relationships with people are the prerequisite for a good relationship with God. As our Sages said, "Good manners precede Torah."

Discussion: What does "more religious" mean? (Closer to Hashem, keeping more of the Misvot.) Is it a misvah not to insult or embarrass people? (Most certainly). So if a person decides never to insult or embarrass someone he is becoming more religious.

What do you think Hashem wants more: to pray better, or to be an honest and fair person? (According to what the prophet Yesh'aya said, it is more important to be just and fair.) Emphasize that the best approach is to be honest and a good person, and to pray and observe the ritual commandments as we should. These things are not mutually exclusive.

How can we behave better towards other people? Treat people with respect and consideration. Ask for things by saying "please," and acknowledge someone's favor by saying "thank you." And don't just mouth the words—mean them.

Treat your friends with respect. Of course, this applies to relationships between teachers and students and counselors and campers, as well. Mutual respect and consideration are the building blocks of proper relationships. Teachers and camp counselors must model these behaviors in every contact with students or campers.

For older children:

Why do you think that people who want to become more religious usually understand that in terms of observing

more ritual commandments and not in terms of behaving better towards other people?

Perhaps, because behaving in a good way towards people is considerably harder than taking upon oneself an extra stringency regarding what you can eat. It is much more demanding to never gossip than it is to refrain from violating the Shabbat.

Why do you think that our Sages chose this prophecy to precede the day of fasting and repentance that is Tish'a Be'ab? (When we think about repenting, our focus should be on the more thoroughgoing repentance that is required for proper relationships between people.)