

Gates of Righteousness

by Joseph G. Rosenstein

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The fundamental problem with orthodoxy, any orthodoxy, any system of true belief (orthos = correct + doxa = opinion), is that in order for it to be "true", all other systems must be "false". So we should never be surprised when any "orthodox" group asserts that it and it alone knows God's will; that's what it means to be orthodox.

One day I was stunned to see on campus a poster that proclaimed that Mohammed was the "last prophet". To say that Mohammed is a great prophet is not enough for the true believer; it must be that there will be no other prophet.

It is not enough for orthodox Catholics to proclaim their opposition to abortion; they must call it murder, thereby delegitimizing all those who believe otherwise. That includes Jews, since our tradition teaches that although abortion is usually inappropriate, there are times when it is mandated (not optional!), and therefore cannot be considered murder.

As with non-Jews, so it is with Jews. (Maybe we thought that we were different?) "If you don't believe the way we do, then you are not following the true God." The Talmud notes that though the followers of Hillel and the followers of Shammai had many different practices (the Shammaites, for example, lit Hanukkah candles in descending order, starting with eight candles the first night), they had no hesitation in marrying into each other's families. The basic assumption in those days was that "eilu ve'eilu divrei elokim hayim" -- both these and those are the words of the living God.

Our world is hungry for spirituality, for connections with the Source of Life, with the One who sustains all. At the same time, much of the trouble in the world happens because everyone claims to have a direct line to God's will, everyone seems to be sure that they know what's right for everyone else.

Every day I pray: "Ribbono Shel Olam, Master of the Universe, protect me from your followers."

They all claim to hear Your voice, and, strangely enough, they think that You're talking about what's wrong with me. I thought that Your objective was to get people to address their own shortcomings, to become holy, "for I Your God am holy". So if they claim that You're talking about me, it must be their own voice that they hear, not Yours.

And that, folks, is what idolatry is all about, substituting your will for God's will.

One sad aspect of the recent controversy is that all non- orthodox Jews know full well that the Union of Orthodox Rabbis was condemned by mainstream orthodoxy not for their beliefs, but for the act of stating their beliefs. They were no longer willing to keep their opinions to themselves. Maintaining the illusion of "one people" requires orthodox Jews to refrain from publicly condemning non-orthodox Jews; however, by virtue of being orthodox, of being "Torah-true", that condemnation is all too often in their hearts.

Can it be otherwise? When David prays "pitchu li sha'arei tzedek" (Psalm 118) -- open for me the gates of righteousness -- he uses the plural, as if to say there are many gates of righteousness.

Instead of insisting that our way is the only way, we can all come to believe that there are indeed many gates of righteousness. Some may choose to be righteous through their meticulous observance of Shabbat, but others may choose to be righteous through their careful sensitivity to those around them. Some may strive to be strictly Kosher, whereas others may strive to be strictly honest. Some may work for "tikkun hanefesh" -- repairing their souls -- while others may work for "tikkun olam" -- repairing the world.

God gives us many opportunities to enter the gates of righteousness. None of us is able to respond fully to all those opportunities; we are human. But all of us can acknowledge and honor the honest attempts of others to strive for holiness.

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