

Shabbat Message -  
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### “Humanity Begins at Home”

Years ago, there was a television commercial for “Whisk,” a popular laundry detergent. Its tagline was the relentless taunt, “Ring around the collar.” It was aimed at frustrated housewives who couldn’t get their husband’s shirt collars perfectly clean, which is already a problem on many levels. To some television viewers, it was just another commercial for a laundry product. But if you observed carefully, you saw more than “ring around the collar.” You also saw a theme in modern marketing, namely, how to go from dirty to clean, or sin to salvation. “From sin to salvation” was a Christian theme. It was easy to understand and easy to market. You might think that’s ridiculous; it was just a commercial. But it’s not ridiculous. Marketing professionals played into the fear that literally hung around the necks of those who believed that cleanliness was next to godliness.

But this Christian motif on television was more than a nod to Christian faith. It was just one subtle example where Christian hope for salvation would impose on public issues. Today, the rise of Christian nationalism is more than a commercial tagline and it’s not subtle. It’s dismantling the separation between church and state, again. In recent news, the subject of the Ten Commandments in school is being debated. But it’s not new either.

In the late 1990’s, I served a congregation in a small city. I was invited to speak to a civic group about Judaism. After my presentation, there was time for Q&A. The first question came from a woman who asked me if I believed whether or not the Ten Commandments should be displayed on public grounds and in public school classrooms. As a “Jewish person,” she asked, how do I feel about it?

As a Jewish person and a rabbi who honors the separation of church and state, I said, I believed that the Ten Commandments should not be displayed on public grounds or in public school classrooms. That was the short answer. I continued.

I added that the Bill of Rights provide for the freedom of and freedom from religion. No one who enters a public space should be coerced or subjected to the suggestion or force of a religious position. I said that I honor what the Ten Commandments represent for people of faith; but the Ten Commandments are numbered differently for Catholics, Protestants and Jews.

There are still only ten, but if one is Jewish, then the first commandment is, “I am the Lord your God who has taken you out of the land of Egypt.”

If one is Catholic, the first commandment begins with “I am the Lord your God who has taken you out of the land of Egypt,” and includes, “You shall have no other gods besides Me.”

If one is Protestant, the first commandment is, “You shall have no other gods but me.”

So we’re not only debating whether or not the Commandments should be displayed; we’re also debating which version of the Ten Commandments we’re debating! Is it the original ten from Torah at Sinai, or the ones canonized in the 4th century, or hundreds of years later during the reformation?

The Ten Commandments, I said, are not a talisman against evil thought and deeds. They won’t prevent wayward adults walking to the court house to adhere more closely to

society's norms; and they won't prevent disobedient children to be inspired by the looming tablets affixed over their heads in their classrooms.

I concluded my answer to the woman by offering this: Let's honor both church and state, I said. Let's maintain a prominent place for the Ten Commandments, and let's preserve the rights of all citizens to observe religion without a state sanctioned religion in public. To accomplish both goals, I said, let's begin with the premise that "Humanity begins at home." And, if respect for humanity begins with core values found in the Ten Commandments, then they should be displayed in the home. I recommended that they be displayed over the door on the way out of the house. This way, adults and children would see the commandments; they would be motivated to live by them when they entered public space; and they would carry them in their hearts and minds wherever they went...ideally.

In Judaism, the home is called a "mikdash me'at," a small sanctuary. The Jewish home is dedicated to everything we inspire, teach, and share in the synagogue. I have said before, "If Judaism isn't happening at home, it isn't happening." The same can be said of any home where other religions are observed. There they teach, engage in conversation, and act on the moral duties of their respective faith. But if parents teach hate, amplify conspiracy theories, and demonize minorities, there's no set of Ten Commandments or prayer time at school that will neutralize the poison and invectives their parents feed them.

I took an extra moment to explain that Jewish families affix a mezuzah on the doorpost of their homes. It doesn't contain the Ten Commandments. It contains the verses from Deuteronomy 6:4ff, which begin with the words, "Shema Yisraeil, Adonai Eloheinu, Adonai Echad," Hear O Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord is One." The following verses are what we commonly call "V'ahavta," and they articulate the commandment to love God with all our hearts, our souls and our might. The commandment to affix the mezuzah follows, "you shall inscribe them (these teachings) on the doorpost of your house."

The mezuzah reminds us of God's presence. It's not a talisman; it follows from Psalm 127, "If God doesn't build the house, its builders toil in vain." Being mindful of God's presence at home invests our time there with mitzvot; a full awareness of Judaism's expectations of us. With mitzvot as a guide, even emerging adolescent passions can be channeled into productive and honorable deeds.

The public display of the Ten Commandments represents the focus of our concerns about the separation of church and state. But today there are more reasons to be concerned.

In Texas, the following Senate Bills are currently in committee and potentially on their way to a vote. Here they are, in brief:

SB 1396 requires public schools to adopt a period of prayer and Bible reading for students and employees.

SB1556 authorizes public school employees to pray or engage in religious speech while on duty.

SB 763 allows public schools to employ chaplains in place of school counselors; and, SB1515 and SB1721 mandate the display of the Ten Commandments in every public-school classroom.

Fanatics exist on both sides. There are those who are secular and blame religious teachings for fomenting these incidents, altogether; and there are those on the far right who teach only a narrow view of God's love. In the middle are those who struggle mindfully every

day to identify religious ideas that speak to our time and place, and which validate norms and principles for the sake of humanity. I think we can all agree that in a home where values founded on principles of dignity, civility and liberty are lacking, its inhabitants are condemned to live lives of bigotry, intolerance and servitude. The result is rarely positive, and the victims are always part of a tragic ending to what was supposed to be a marvelous life story.

Parents, rabbis, priests, ministers, imams, and neighbors share a profound responsibility to teach, inspire, guide and protect impressionable young people. We owe it to them. We owe it to ourselves. In a world that we did not create, we should treasure the power we've been given to inspire hope to build a better world.

Where do we go from here? Judaism is a religion of action. Reach your congressional leaders in Texas and let them know that these Senate Bills are anathema to our expectations for the separation of church and state, and that if basic dignity isn't taught at home, it's already too late.

As you make your way home, enter the house for the first time again, acknowledge the mezuzah on the doorpost of your house, if you have one, and let God's presence build the home you wish to know for yourself, your family, and everybody who will ever be touched by your words and your deeds. Remember, "Humanity begins at home."

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