

Rabbi Shimon vs. Agriprocessors

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Shanah tovah to everyone. What a wonderful feeling it is for us to be together, to pray as one *kehillah kedoshah*, as Rosh HaShana 5769 is really, finally, upon us.

The words and the melody of *Avinu Malkeinu* still vibrate in the air from a few moments ago. Don't you feel it? Singing those words with our Cantor and choir, for many of us, is a quintessential moment of the Days of Awe. At every service during Rosh HaShana and Yom Kippur, we'll say those words again in front of the open ark, "*Avinu, Malkeinu.*" We sing them loudly, and boldly, as if those hoary metaphors weren't already strained to the breaking point. "*Avinu? Malkeinu? Our Father, Our King?*" Oy! Really? All our old anachronisms are showing! In 21st Century theology, can we really think of God in such a way? Can we really say such a prayer?

Maybe tonight we can, if we can deflect a little bit the male-ness of those images, and the anthropomorphisms that they carry along. God as a Parent? Maybe, if one of the things we carry in our prayers is a yearning for support, for nurture, for comfort.

Maybe, too, the image of God-as-Parent is valuable when we consider how many come into the synagogue looking for a place to call... Home. In fact, for the past month at Shabbat services, the Cantor has been chanting Psalm 27: *achat sha'alti mei'eit Adonai, otah avakeish*: One thing I ask of God, only that do I seek: to live in the house of God all the days of my life... Even if my father and mother abandon me, God will take me in."¹ (Psalm 27:4,10). I know many people who come into this sanctuary during these 10 days, just looking for that open door to bring them back home. To those of us, the metaphor of God-as-Parent makes a great deal of sense.

God-as-Parent? Yes, if we understand that just as parents love us unconditionally, we, in our Freudian ways, always have their standards in the back of our minds that we try to live up to. If we look to our parents for honesty, for loving judgment: "I will always love you, including those times when you disappoint me." I suspect that one of the most valuable gifts this time of the year brings is the desire we carry for some sort of judgment, for being held accountable... After all, being held accountable for our actions means that our actions *count for something*, that they are not in vain. In that case, these prayers make a lot more sense.

Avinu Malkeinu, we say, *sh'ma koleinu*: Hear our voice. Treat us generously and with kindness, even when we don't totally deserve it, because that's what a loving parent does, even while you have high expectations of us.

¹ Psalm 27:4, 10

So what does God-as-Parent expect of us? What does every parent expect? “You should call once in a while, come and visit...” Consider this for a moment. There comes a moment in every parent’s life (especially young parents) when you turn to your children, open your mouth to say something, but the words that come out of your mouth aren’t your own. That’s because at that moment, the voice that emanates from within you, the one you hear in your head, sounds exactly like your mother or father. You can’t believe it. How did I turn into my mother? you ask yourself.

I have it on good authority that this is a fairly universal experience. A rite of passage of being a mother is hearing yourself say: “You’re wearing that?” And countless fathers before us have said, “You know, when you behave like that in public, it reflects on your parents.” My God, it gets to the point where you just know the day is coming when you’ll hear yourself say, “If you get in an accident, I just hope... you have clean underwear on.” [Bill Cosby once remarked, “I thought that’s what an accident was.”]

Well, strange as it is to say, God expects the same of us. An often unremarked-upon aspect of the Torah’s teaching is the expectation that what we do reflects on God, just as what we do reflects on our parents.

A story: In the days of the Talmud, there was a sage named Rabbi Shimon ben Shetach. Rabbi Shimon once purchased a donkey from a neighboring Ishmaelite. He brought it home and was showing it to some of his disciples, who inspected his new acquisition closely. There, they found a precious jewel suspended around the animal’s neck – which Rabbi Shimon had not noticed beforehand. The students were thrilled for their master’s good fortune. “This is a great blessing!” they cried, “A sign of God’s providence. Rabbi, you’ll be rich!”

Rabbi Shimon paused. He looked at the jewel, looked at the donkey, and turned to his students. “I’m sorry,” said he said with a weary voice. “I bought a donkey, but not a precious jewel.” And promptly he returned the jewel and the donkey to the Ishmaelite who had sold it to him.

The upshot of the story comes at the end, when the Ishmaelite takes Rabbi Shimon by the hand, raises his eyes towards heaven and says, “*Baruch Adonai Elohei Shimon ben Shetach!* Blessed is Adonai, the God of Shimon ben Shetach!”²

That blessing doesn’t mean that the Ishmaelite was so overcome by Rabbi Shimon’s integrity that he converted to Judaism. Quite the opposite: an understanding of this story relies on the fact that a noble and honest member of another faith, another people, sees the integrity of Rabbi Shimon and sanctifies God – from his distance.

Now, what do we learn from this story? We learn that part of Jewish living, whether we like it or not, is to be God’s press agent. Like our parents told us that the way we behave reflects on them, God tells the Jewish people that upright behavior reflects back on our Divine Parent. In other words, Shimon ben Shetach was a mensch. By the letter of the law, he was entitled to keep the jewel that he had found. But the

² Midrash *Devarim Rabbah* 3:3

standard to which he held himself was higher than the letter of the law. His integrity and uprightness sanctified God's name in the world.

What bothers us about this idea? To many of us, religion is such a private affair of the heart. Like sex and money and politics, it is a most personal matter not to be discussed in good company – and, let's be honest, especially not in front of our neighbors or strangers who aren't Jewish. Let's keep it at the Temple. The story of Shimon ben Shetach teaches that, like it or not, we carry our Judaism with us, like a *chai* around our necks, like a *mezuzah* on our front door, for the world to see. And we have a responsibility that the rest of the world says Judaism's spiritual standards remain high. Otherwise it reflects on our Parent (much worse than not having clean underwear!)

Contrast the story of Rabbi Shimon ben Shetach with another, American story. Postville, Iowa, could be the stereotype of heartland America. Located in the northwest corner of Iowa, it is a place of farmhouses, rural routes, and clotheslines with "stiff cotton shirts and overalls."³ It is a place of pick-up trucks and John Deere tractors. It is also the home, since 1987, of the largest Kosher meat-packing plant in the world.

The story of how a Chasidic family brought their kosher meat business into the most rural buckle of the Bible Belt is the subject of Stephen G. Bloom's fascinating book *Postville: A Clash of Cultures in Heartland America*. Rural Iowa did not know what to make of the Chasidim when they first arrived. Postville was a town suffering from dire economic depression in the late '80's and early '90's. Until the day arrived when the family of Aaron Rubashkin, a Lubavitch Jew and owner of Agriprocessors, Inc., bought up large tracts of land in the area. The juxtaposition of small-town Midwestern America and the *streimals* and black suits of Chasidic Jews certainly sounds like the makings of strange bedfellows. And the arrival of this enormous business venture was, as you can imagine, controversial. The Iowans and the Chasidim made awkward neighbors.

In recent years, many scandals have shaken Agriprocessors; perhaps you've been following the saga in the news. First came allegations, several years ago, of the brutalization and the abuse of animals. These were the first murmurings that not everything was kosher in Postville. After all, the Torah teaches that *tza'ar baalei chayim* is a Mitzvah: we are commanded by the Torah to understand that animals have feelings and to protect them from any undue suffering or abuse.

Then, this year, all hell broke loose. On May 12, the U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement staged a raid on the Agriprocessors plant, the largest such raid in American history. They found hundreds of illegal immigrants working at Agriprocessors. David Neil, the labor commissioner for the state of Iowa, said that in his 30 years of working on labor issues he had never seen anything like it.

Subsequently there have been formal charges of 57 violations of child labor laws. Other workers were taken off the job because of alleged safety violations. There were allegations of an illegal crystal meth factory. Workers told authorities that if they

³Stephen G. Bloom, *Postville: A Clash of Cultures in Heartland America*, Harcourt, Inc., 2000, p.32.

complained about the conditions, they were threatened with being arrested and deported.

And if that were the whole story, we might say – *dayenu*, enough already. But in the public relations front, spokespeople for Agriprocessors – cloaking themselves in the piety of traditional Judaism – denied everything. There is even evidence that their public relations firm was caught forging documents on the Web, pretending on a blog to be one of the Rabbis who has been criticizing them, in an effort to smear his name and humiliate and discredit him.

Clearly what we have here is the very antithesis of Rabbi Shimon ben Shetach. There, God's name was elevated in the world by a Jew's commitment to going beyond the letter of the law. In Postville, the message seems to be, that as long as the lungs of the slaughtered animal are perfectly smooth – for that is the definition of "Glatt Kosher" – then it doesn't matter what corners are cut and what lives are damaged. The name of God is trashed. Among the crimes is the image that is perpetuated in the world, that people will say: "I guess by their God, that behavior is okay. I guess that's permitted by their Torah." As Rabbi Eric Yoffie, President of the Union for Reform Judaism, has pointed out: "The scandal has raised basic questions about the ethical foundations of our religious tradition, about undue deference to the wealthy and about Jewish indifference to injustice in our midst."⁴ Like it or not, Agriprocessors reflects on you and me – whether or not we keep Kosher.

We should be outraged. We should be appalled. And we should be humiliated, because what is happening in Postville is called a *hillul hashem*: A desecration of the Name of Adonai in the world.

I've kept Kosher for most of my life. It means a great deal to me; *Kashrut* provides a lot of religious meaning and spiritual discipline. And for some time, my family has decided that meat from Agriprocessors can't come into our kitchen; it has to be considered *trayf*.

Remember the four basic rules that make food Kosher:

First, among mammals, only those which have split hooves and chew their cud are qualified to be kosher; and the birds that are not Kosher are specified in Leviticus.

Second, that meat and poultry must be slaughtered in a specific, humane manner – as described by our tradition, it is a manner that minimizes the pain that an animal feels.

Third, when it comes to fish, only those that have fins and scales are considered kosher.

And fourth, there is the prohibition of mixing milk and meat.

And like many things in Jewish tradition, as a Reform rabbi I believe that these principles are not all-or-nothing. Any Jew who chooses not to abide by every detail of the laws of *Kashrut* can still incorporate some aspects of sacred eating practices. For instance, I think every Jew should seriously hesitate before eating pork – given all that it

⁴ Rabbi Eric Yoffie, "Orthodoxy's Kosher Crisis," *Forward.com*, September 25, 2008.

has represented as an anathema to Jews throughout the ages. And it doesn't make you a hypocrite if you balk at pork but eat other foods that are not Kosher. Whoever told us that Jewish practice was an all-or-nothing proposition?

What keeping kosher does is this: it brings Godliness into the mundane. It doesn't reserve holy moments for Shabbat and holidays; it brings holiness into everyday acts, including that most animal-like of human activities, the act of eating. Holiness, however, cannot exist in a vacuum; the values of what is ritually proper and permitted must be forced to fit with what is ethically proper and permitted.

There are people out there, in the wake of the scandal, who are doing precisely that. A movement has been launched called *Hekhsher Tzedek*. "Hechsher" means "certification," and "Tzedek", of course, means "justice."

The *Hekhsher Tzedek* proposes a new kind of food certification. Alongside the dietary laws there are other considerations. They ask:

- Under what sort of the working conditions do the employees prepare this food? Are they exploited by the managers, or do they receive fair wages and fair benefits?
- What is the environmental impact of the food preparation?
- What are the business practices of this company? Is there corporate transparency for the consumer?

To receive the certification, a company would have to live up to some high standards.

Let's not make the mistake of thinking that the *Hekhsher Tzedek* initiative might be one that Reform Judaism sits out because it is still a minority of our members who eat. The fact is that the Central Conference of American Rabbis – the Reform Rabbis' organization – became the first national organization to endorse *Hekhsher Tzedek*. The Conservative Movement continues to wrestle with it. In truth, this movement is a microcosm of everything we say we're about: putting our faith and our highest values, quite literally, where our mouth is.

On this Rosh HaShana, I urge you to consider some questions that the *Hekhsher Tzedek* raises – big questions, which every Jewish kitchen has to wrestle with:

- What is your personal standard for the food you put in your body? What is your family's standard?
- Many people who don't keep Kosher still expect their synagogue to have a different standard. What should be the standard of food be that comes into the Temple? (This would be a good question for our Tekiah initiative to take up.)
- As a society, we've determined that food that is explicitly harmful should be taken off our shelves. Well, what about trans-fats? As you know, they have gone the way of cigarettes in Boston restaurants: they are considered a public health risk.⁵ Should food that is inherently deadly be considered non-Kosher?

⁵ http://www.boston.com/news/local/articles/2008/09/13/trans_fats_now_banned_in_boston_restaurants/

This is, indeed, as one Rabbi was quoted, “a mirror moment” for American Judaism.⁶ Which means it is a Rosh HaShana sort of moment. Because this is the season for holding the mirror up to our lives and asking if our actions correspond to our most highly held beliefs.

The whole ugly Agriprocessors affair has been a *hillul hashem*, a desecration of the Name of God in the world. But if there is a place to find comfort, it is knowing that there are voices to counterbalance them, the voices that say Jewish ritual and Jewish ethics are inextricable from one another. The people of *Hekhsher Tzedek* are those voices, and I pray that we may add our voices to theirs.

Tonight, and tomorrow, and the next day, we will sing together: *Avinu Malkeinu: Sh'ma Koleinu!* Our Parent, our king, please, hear our voice. What kind of voice is it that we want to put out to the world this Rosh HaShana? I pray that it is a voice of complete integrity and honor, one that puts the highest values of our faith on display. If so, then the world will respond with a resounding call: “*Baruch Adonai Elohei Am Yisrael!*” Blessed is Adonai, the God of Israel!

And we’ll know that somewhere, somehow, Rabbi Shimon ben Shetach will be smiling.

⁶ Rabbi Menachem Creditor, quoted by Sue Fishkoff, “Hekhsher Tzedek Launches Holiday Drive,” JTA, September 18, 2008.