

Faith Matters



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Embracing Difference

Given all the abhorrent “us and them” going on in the United States, I’ve had reason to reread the amazing letter George Washington wrote to Newport, Rhode Island’s Jewish community in 1790.

Here’s the part that always touches my soul:

“It is now no more that toleration is spoken of as if it were the indulgence of one class of people that another enjoyed the exercise of their inherent natural rights, for, happily, the Government of the United States, which gives to bigotry no sanction, to persecution no assistance, requires only that they who live under its protection should demean themselves as good citizens in giving it on all occasions their effectual support.... while everyone shall sit in safety under his own vine and fig tree, and there shall be none to make him afraid.”

President Washington writes passionately that “toleration” of those who are different is insufficient; his point being that to be a good American means to embrace our fellow Americans in the fullness of who they are - the things that make them uniquely different.

Given this perspective, it occurred to me that many holiday messages emphasize the things people of different faiths and traditions share in common; the goal being to lift up our shared humanity, which indeed is a beautiful thing! And yet...

And yet, maybe it would be even more powerful, authentic and Washington-esque to offer a holiday message that highlights things that differentiate faith traditions one from another so that we can say with confidence and pride, “Indeed our faith traditions and beliefs are not the same, my fellow beloved American!”

This brings to mind a classic misconception about rabbis. During the spring semester of my senior year of college a friend suggested we go to a bar we’d never been to before. We decided to introduce ourselves to two women sitting together at a booth and got to talking. Hearing that my friend and I would be graduating they asked what our plans were.

-“I will be going to rabbinical school.”

-“Medical school?”

-“No, rabbinical school. I want to be a rabbi - you know, a minister for Jewish people.”

And then came the expected question, “Are you allowed to get married?”

With a nod and a smile I said, “Yes, getting married and having children is encouraged. I’d have no interest otherwise.”

Her facial response said, “thank goodness for you!”

Judaism believes that every soul is born pure and with free will. We can use that freedom to strive for societal good or the opposite, engage in self-centered disregard of others.

The goal of Jewish learning and practice is to strengthen ourselves spiritually so we not only bring goodness into the world but also gain self-control over our physical appetites that, if unchecked, often result in pain, hurt and suffering. No doubt, spiritual strengthening is an ongoing, lifelong effort.

So for example, Judaism sees human sexuality as beautiful and good but knows that it can lose that luster if abused. (Did you know that to be “fruitful and multiply is the first commandment in the Torah?) The same, by the way, is the case for things like food and drink, money and language. The Torah’s mitzvot, the commandments, offer wisdom and

guidance which includes thoughts on how people who are married treat one another....including married rabbis!

Given the holiday season, here is another example where Judaism differs - our understanding of the Messiah. A famous rabbinic teaching immediately comes to mind - “if while planting a tree someone comes and says ‘the Messiah has arrived’, first finish planting the tree and then go see.”

While there are many nuances to how Jews over the centuries have understood the idea of the Messiah, the overall perspective is that the messianic age will reflect a time when there is no warfare or disease and every social evil will be banished. Even more, this peaceful world will be founded on compassion and justice.

A broadly accepted perspective, one I personally adhere to, is that the job of Jewish human beings is to strive with heart, soul and might to bring about these messianic ideals; to bring healing and goodness into what is, often tragically, a very broken world. This is the *raison d’être* for following the Torah’s commandments.

In Judaism, belief takes a back seat to action. It is on us to use the time we have on earth, our effort, energy and resources, to plant as many trees as possible.

Dear reader, I hope you found these examples of how Judaism is different illuminating.

One final thought. For me, George Washington’s letter hints at a favorite Talmudic teaching: “The righteous of all nations have an equal share in the World to Come.”

May we all be blessed to sit in safety and security under whichever tree gives us comfort and joy.