

What Does God Ask of Us?

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Shalom, Salaam, Peace Good morning

When I thought of the theme of the conference about peace and economic justice, and then thought how does one ask God about that, the answer that occurred to me was from the book of Micah

**God has told you, human being, what is good and what God requires of you:**

**Only to do justice and to love goodness, and to walk modestly with your God—**

Micah addressees it to Adam— not just Jews— and Adam here is understood generically to be a human being, a person. I take it in two ways: everyone has personal responsibility and we have a responsibility as a species of human beings.

*asot mishpat* – do justice— an action verb do, justice is something to be done— not just believed in, hoped for, prayed for, or valued –it needs to be done.

The Hebrew prophets were clear about what they meant by justice: care for the oppressed, fairness in the legal and economic system, taking care of the

poor, using our wealth responsibly. The requirement made of each of us by God, is to act to bring justice to the world for the poor or oppressed.

The next phrase is *V'ahavat hesed- ahava is love, hesed* has been translated as goodness, kindness, or mercy-love kindness – Love is a very strong word– think about what you would do for someone you fully love. To love means transfer the focus from your own life, your own ego, your needs to the object of your love. Love has within it passion, yearning for– imagine having that kind of relationship to mercy or kindness. Kindness here is the balance to justice– sometimes justice can be harsh, sometimes justice can lead to violence if not tempered with mercy or kindness. In the classic Kabbalist construction *hesed-* compassion is balanced with *din-judgment* to achieve the balance of *tiferet-* a radiant love, wholeness,. Peace is balancing judgment and mercy– if we want to achieve peace we must do justice and love kindness.

For many of us it is our pre-occupation with what we need to get done, our goals that prevents us from doing a kind act. Micah's teaching is that we love kindness or goodness– that means to seek it out– not just when it occurs to us, but to carry the question with us throughout the day how can I act kindly in this moment. This is not the same as “commit random acts of kindness” but

purposeful ones. We each need to ask DO I VALUE KINDNESS AS MUCH AS I VALUE MY ACCOMPLISHMENTS – MY PROFESSIONAL/WORLDLY PRODUCTION.

To walk modestly with your God– *v'hatzneigh-ah lechet eem elo-heh-cha*

modesty or humility is not one of the “in” virtues in our culture. If you think about the images portrayed in the media, its hard to come up with characters who model humility– we may find seekers of justice and even kindness but humility? In the world of pop–psychology and self improvement talk of modesty is rare. We are more likely to teach children to be self assertive than modest– that is until we have teenagers.

Walk modestly with your God, perhaps is saying that the dangers of believing that we are walking with God are arrogance, self righteousness or being convinced that one knows the Truth. The world is full of people proclaiming to know God’s truth who are far from modest. To walk with God modestly is to be in a sense of awe, to sense the smallness of oneself in relation to all Creation.

Maybe the modesty is connected to healthy doubt about the rightness of one’s actions, a careful questioning of one’s motives that keeps us honest.

With our modesty we have to ask our self what God requires of us,

What does it mean to do justice and love kindness when you live in richest country in the history of world and in that country every night millions of children go to bed hungry, hundreds of thousands go to bed homeless and millions can not afford to go the doctor or pay for their medicines. What does it mean to do justice and love kindness in world where millions of people are die of starvation or malnutrition annually, where AIDS is devastating whole countries, where thousands of children die every day because they don't have access to clean water. What does it mean to do justice and love kindness when you believe that the nation you live in unnecessarily attacks another country; our religious traditions demand that we be engaged– – that we act and that we love.

Here is a passage by Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel written during World War II not long after escaping Nazi Germany and arriving in this country.

“Where were we when people learned to hate in the days of starvation? When raving madmen were sowing wrath in the hearts of the unemployed? Let Fascism not serve as an alibi for our conscience. We have failed to fight for right, for justice, for goodness, as a result we must fight against wrong, against

injustice, against evil. We have failed to offer sacrifices on the altar of peace, we must now offer sacrifices on the altar of war.”

We can offer many alibis, the problem is too large, I need to care of my family, I need to get my work done. We can not do that now – we are in a time of great danger in our world– environmental, economic and political, that will affect every living thing. In the last six months we have seen rumblings all over the world, humanity is trying to save itself. It is time to act.

To quote Heschel, “In a democracy some are guilty all are responsible.”

There are many ways to act, we can work to change government policies, to alleviate the immediate suffering, to create new alternative structures, to create new technologies, or to develop a new consciousness, a new paradigm for the living in the world based on cooperation and not domination.

I want highlight one, in part because of what I heard last night.

Another word for justice in Hebrew is tzedek, from which we derive the word tzedakah, the money that we are obligated– not a choice– obligated to give to take care of people who are lacking food, shelter or clothing.

Giving is a way of connecting with others, taking care of others, a way of acting in God’s image. The Jewish philosopher Maimonides teaches that we are

imitating God by being compassionate and merciful– remember *ahavat hesed* love mercy. By accepting our responsibility for the other, acknowledging our connection to another we align ourselves with God. We are strengthening the fabric that connects the universe. The Jewish book of mysticism, the Zohar teaches that doing tzedakah awakens the divine spark lying dormant in us. Those of here last night heard the words of Bishop Ntambo about the absurd, even immoral amount of choice we have in America. For the sake of the preservation of the earth we must all learn to do with less material goods, less choice– most of us can afford to donate more money than we do, remember tithing 10% is the minimum we must give towards alleviating the suffering of the oppressed. And we will be happier.

Perhaps the strongest statement about Tzedakah is in the book of Proverbs “And Tzedakah saves from death”. There are many possible ways to interpret that. I read it as saying, when we are only concerned about our selves, when our egos have no room to take in the needs of those who have less, when we have reached that level of self centeredness we are in effect dead, our hearts are no longer functioning. Tzedakah saves us from that death. Each time our

hearts close a little, it is a minor death, we killed an opportunity to create a connection, to affirm God's presence– tzedakah saves us from that death.

And there is a story that teaches ANOTHER WAY TO understand it.

At the turn of the last century on the Lower East Side of New York there was a poor family, and as typical both parents worked all day in a factory. Every Friday night, the beginning of the Sabbath, Shabbat, the father took his two children, an older daughter and younger son to synagogue and would always return home with a poor person as a guest for dinner. The father regularly taught his children that tzedakah saves from death.

As things happen, the mother became very ill and had to go to the hospital. On Friday the mother died. The children went to synagogue that evening by themselves not knowing about their mother and as was the family custom brought home a guest for dinner. It being *Shabbat* with a guest in the house the father didn't say anything to the children. During the night the daughter heard her father crying. She got up and went to her father and asked, "*Tatta* why are you crying. Mama will be fine, tzedakah saves from death."

The father answered, "My daughter, you didn't understand. Tzedakah saves God from death."

Tzedakah is for opening our hearts to God so that we can do justice, love kindness and walk humbly with God.