

Pathways to Peace: the wisdom of Listening, the Power of Commitment

Message on the Occasion of The Parliament of the World's Religions

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The Talmud (Gittin, 59b) declares that the whole purpose of the Divine Commandments is to direct us along "Pathways to Peace", as it is written, "her ways are pleasant ways and all her pathways are peace" (Proverbs 3 v. 17). The Talmudic passage goes on to clarify that the responsibility of pursuing paths to peace, requires that we show compassion and care even to those considered to be idolaters, i.e. those whose values and beliefs are contrary to our own.

Maimonides, the greatest medieval Jewish scholar, in his great code of Jewish law, quotes this Talmudic text and adds another verse from Psalms 145 v. 9, "God is good to all and His mercies extend to all His creatures".

Maimonides message is clear. Pursuing pathways to peace is not only a religio-ethical imperative – it is a theological one no less; namely, that of Imitatio Dei, emulating the Divine qualities. Just as God is good to all and merciful to all His creatures, so we must behave accordingly towards all others.

Already the Bible and Talmud emphasize this obligation of emulating the Divine Attributes above all in our social moral conduct. Maimonides simply seeks to reaffirm the inextricable relationship between our ethical conduct and the pursuit of peace.

Arguably the most famous Jewish sage of the second century of the Common Era, Rabbi Akiva, claimed that the greatest principle of the Bible is the verse in Leviticus 19 v. 18 "and you shall love your neighbor as yourself". In order to emphasize that this applies to every human person, Akiva's contemporary Ben Azzai insisted that the greatest principle must be seen in the light of the fact that every human person is created in the Divine Image.

But these values and ideals often seem to be too sublime to impact upon our daily conduct. Perhaps it was for this reason that Akiva's predecessor, Hillel the Elder – who lived in the first century before the common era – declared that the essence of Judaism is "not to do to others what is hateful to you" – thus paraphrasing Leviticus 19 v 18 in perhaps simpler negative language.

However in considering the challenge of how to love one another in a manner that will truly lead us along the Pathways of Peace, we might do well to note the famous Jewish story in which an eminent Hassidic rabbi related how he learnt the true implications of Leviticus 19 v. 18 from listening to the conversation of two drunks, which went as follows: -

"Do you love me Ivan?
Of course I love you Boris?
Do you know what pains me Ivan?
How can I know what pains you Boris?
If you do not know what pains me Ivan,
How can you love me?"

There is profound wisdom in this insight.

In order to successfully walk together along pathways to peace, we need to develop positive relations with each other. In order to do this we need to know one another – above all we need to know what it is that pains the other.

Accordingly the wisdom of listening to one another is a most important prerequisite in enabling us to proceed towards the vision for which our various traditions aspire. Listening to and learning from one another enable us to appreciate and respect that which distinguishes us; but it also enables us to become so much more aware of all that unites us and the values that we share.

This awareness and appreciation must surely lead us to greater cooperation and commitment. For if we are true to the values that we profess; then we surely have the obligation to work together with those who share commitment to those values and aspirations – to be greater than the sum of our different parts! Indeed to fail to do so is to betray a lack of commitment to the values that we profess.

Accordingly the Parliament of the World's Religions, scheduled to take place in Barcelona in July 2004, is itself an event which takes us another step along the pathway to peace. And the more we listen to one another, learning what it is that gives the other pain and joy; and the more we discover our shared commitments while respecting the beauty of our differences; the further we will take ourselves and our world along that journey towards a shared aspiration of peace and harmony in our world.