

June 24, 2009

A very early Shabbat Shalom!

What are the gifts that we give to others? We might think of gifts, first, as the presents that we give on birthdays and holidays (including Father's Day and Mother's Day) and for graduations, weddings or other special moments in life. Sometimes, a gift may take the form of an act that one person does for another. Within the Jewish heritage, tzedakah, righteous giving, and g'milut chasadim, doing deeds of lovingkindness, both represent ways in which we can offer gifts of our soul and essence to our family members, friends, community and the world.

In our last session of "Judaism 201," we looked at prayers and other statements from Jewish tradition that attempt to characterize what G-D does for us, gifts and blessings we receive from a divine source. In his book G-D's To-Do List, Dr. Ron Wolfson explained that exploring the ways that our tradition casts G-D's influence on the world can establish an agenda for how we can make an impact by, as some scholars have said, "imitating G-D." As we concluded our discussion, we chose some of the items on G-D's "to-do list" from various Jewish sources and note how we could turn these divine contributions to the world into human action, or, as we suggested during our session, how G-D's to-do list is achieved through what we do. Here is our Judaism 201 suggestion list for the gifts we can offer our fellow human beings and the world:

- *As G-D created plants and animals, we can preserve species and habitat.*
- *As G-D gives sight to the blind, we can promote efforts for organ donation.*
- *As G-D heals the sick, we can donate blood and bone marrow and support medical research.*
- *As G-D visits the sick, we can be comforting to those who are ill, support or volunteer for suicide prevention organizations and hotlines, volunteer for hospice, or go grocery shopping for a sick friend.*
- *As G-D frees the captive, we can offer refuge, volunteer at local jails to support inmates and give them hope and training, assist in resettlement of refugees, or help to give people a second chance in life by offering them a new perspective on themselves and their possible path in life.*
- *As G-D feeds the hungry, we can support food pantries and organizations that serve meals to people in need.*
- *As G-D is a Purveyor of justice, we can make sure that our laws are just, treat other people fairly, raise our youth with good morals, stand up for people who need someone to be their advocate, and oppose bullying.*
- *As G-D is a Guardian of truth, we can work for accurate news reporting, encourage all people to maintain financial integrity, monitor our leaders and government, and write letters to the editor.*

- *As G-D comforts mourners, we can visit the home of someone whose friend or family member has died and offer support them, attend a minyan service at a house of mourning, or attend a funeral.*
- *As G-D is Maker of the World, we can keep the earth clean, preserve its beauty, and share its beauty with others.*

There are many more gifts of ourselves that we can share with one another and with the world. May we continue to add to our version of a divine “to-do list” in ways that will bring greater kindness, goodness, hope and peace to the human family.

-- L'shalom, Rabbi Larry K.

June 19, 2009

Shabbat Shalom!

The most important symbols in our lives are the ones that lead us to action. When we enter someone's home, we might see art on the walls, photos of friends or family on the walls (or on the refrigerator), and books displayed on coffee tables or bookshelves that reflect one's character, interests and values. I often find myself looking around a doctor's office to see what universities he or she attended, what photos or art pieces are on display, and what quotes might be on the wall that point to an approach to work and life. As I sit in my study at Temple, I am looking at a plaque bearing a saying of Anne Frank, “How wonderful it is that nobody need wait a single moment before starting to improve the world!” Outside my study is a wall hanging that says, simply, “B'ruchim Haba-im” – literally, blessed are those who come here, or, more colloquially, “Welcome!” My office walls bear the usual diplomas (and my ordination and doctorate certificates), but also a “mezuzah plaque” and a “mizrach” (marking the east wall of my office, facing Jerusalem), two symbols found in synagogues and many Jewish homes around the world.

The Torah reading for this Shabbat ends with the section that describes the fringes or “tzitzit” put, originally, on the corners of one's clothing as a reminder of G-D's commandments, the mitzvot. For most of the last 2000 years, the tzitzit have been placed on the corners of the tallit. The text is clear on what type of reminder the fringes were supposed to offer. It declared, “LOOK at the fringes and REMEMBER all of the commandments of the Eternal One and DO them.” One commentary notes that the rabbis later explained, “Sight leads to memory and memory to action.” Symbols that we can see have the potential to engender a perspective or philosophy about life that can direct us to, in Anne Frank's words, not wait a single moment before starting to improve the world.” Hopefully, fringes on a tallit, memories of people in our lives who have taught us important and positive lessons, other symbols we cherish, and joining together as one community can guide us to fulfill that mission of TIKUN OLAM – improving the world. May the symbols in our lives lead us to such action every single day!

-- L'shalom, Rabbi Larry K.

