

May 2, 2008

Shabbat Shalom!

Over the course of my 27-year rabbinate, I have had many discussions with many different people and groups about the relevance of the Torah - and Judaism - to our lives today. I always try to convey what I have learned on my own and from friends, family members and congregants - that our heritage attempts to teach us that we are all connected to each other, that our prayers are poetic expressions of those connections, and that our actions, especially if they are based in kindness and compassion, can enhance and strengthen the ties between us.

I spoke to students at Oyster River Middle School this past Monday about Judaism (four different times!) and, each time, I was asked to share a story that reflects the essence of Judaism. I told the tale about a man who went to the great sages of his time, Shammai and Hillel, asking them to teach him the whole Torah while he stood on one foot. As we may remember, Shammai impatiently and angrily drove the man from his house. Hillel responded to the same seeker, "What is hateful to you, do not do to your neighbor: that is the whole Torah - all the rest is commentary. Now, go and study." According to Hillel, study and prayer must lead to action for Judaism to be Judaism.

*After I told that story, I turned around and saw behind me a poster on a bulletin board about the "Golden Rule." I pointed to the verse from this week's Torah reading in Leviticus Chapter 19, "**Love your neighbor as yourself,**" that was on the poster, and told the students we would be reading from that section in the Torah this week. That is the very teaching which Hillel meant to echo in his "what is hateful to you" statement. **That central declaration of our faith, "Love your neighbor...," which is stated positively, is preceded in Leviticus 19 by a series of "don't" admonitions that tell us how to love/respect our neighbor:***

- ***Don't take something that doesn't belong to you.***
- ***Don't take advantage of someone when you know information that he or she doesn't know.***
- ***Don't treat people of diverse stations in life differently.***
- ***Don't spread rumors.***
- ***Don't resolve to hate a person when you have a problem or issue with him or her, but, instead, talk to him or her directly, honestly and supportively.***
- ***Don't put your energy into seeking revenge or bearing a grudge.***

"Loving our neighbors" is a commandment that lies at the foundation of the ties between us. We can fulfill this mitzvah through e-mail, snail-mail, and in phone conversations, but we do it best face-to-face, when we form a community that generates its own warm and loving presence. Let us do what we can to realize the words of Leviticus 19 and Hillel every day! L'shalom...

**-- L'shalom,
Rabbi Larry K.**