

## “What God Wants”

Parshat Tetzaveh

Feb. 28, 2015

By Judy Shapiro

I want to share with you today something I've been thinking about for a while; it's not a dvar torah per se, but rather, I want to take a step back and think about a common idea we often express when we try to interpret the Torah.

It is common in our community to speak in divrei torah about “what God wants”. Just last month, Rabbi Ozarowski said in his dvar torah that “God wants a relationship with us”. In fact, I myself have written divrei torah including that phrase, “God wants a relationship with us”. On the High Holidays we speak about how God wants us to do teshuva, to repair our relationship with God and with our fellow man. We interpret Shmini Atzeret as deriving from the idea that God will miss us, God can't let us go so we have one more day of chag in order to extend by one more day the close relationship we have had with God during sukkot. At Pesach we say God redeemed us from Egypt, why? So we could be a free people with whom God could have a relationship, a partnership, a covenant. And at Shavuot we again speak of how God wants a relationship with us, how it's a two-way street, this accepting of the torah and this brit we made with God.

Are we unique in this concept that God wants some sort of partnership with us? Of course, we believe it's us, the Jewish people, whom God is courting. But look around us. All around the world, or at least the so called “western world” of Christianity and Islam, we see that everyone who believes in God, believes that he or she is in some sort of God-inspired relationship. Everyone believes that God is on their side. In fact, I would say that throughout western history nearly every act of national aggression and violence against another people has been done in the name of God or at least with the claim of God's support, of God's relationship with the perpetrator. From the sweep of Christianity over pagan Europe in the early centuries of the common era, to the next sweep, several hundred years later, of Islam over a good chunk of Christian Europe and the middle east, we see people forced to convert in the name of “what God wants”. During the Crusades and then the Inquisition, the Christian perpetrators certainly believed that their actions were for God's benefit and that they were acting as God's partners. The missionaries who tried to convert the entire continents of Africa and South America to Christianity believed it was what God wanted. The Islamic fundamentalists of today certainly believe that God is mandating their attempts to coerce the rest of the world to accept their version of what God wants. And l'havdil, the worldwide network of Chabad shluchim or emissaries is acting to bring Judaism to Jews for the same reason (although never by coercion, obviously): it's what they believe God wants; they are acting as partners of God, to bring others to their version of God's wishes.

We can observe soccer players in Europe and South America crossing themselves before a game or after a goal, thankful for God's role in their victory. Certainly evidence of a perceived relationship and a partnership there! And in this country, there are still southern and rural football teams whose coaches invoke God's help to win the game for their high school- everyone believes God is on their side, God is a partner with the defensive team or the offensive linemen.

Now I am not one of those people who claim that religion has caused more harm than good in the world. I do not believe that because religion is used to validate the actions of an aggressor in a war, for

example, that religion is the cause of that war. Often (or maybe even usually) the aggressor in a war has land acquisition or political power in mind but expresses a God motive for political or popular reasons. What I am saying is that our belief that God wants a relationship with us is somewhat self-serving. What we are really saying is that WE want a relationship with God! We could just as easily have built our religion on the concept of obedience and submission to God, like the Muslims have done. But no, we focus on a more equal relationship, on a partnership that makes us feel more esteemed, more powerful, more equal. Conversely, we could have built our religion on the concept of salvation and guilt, like the Christians did, focusing on what we owe to God because someone died for us. But we didn't do that: we chose instead to focus on a partnership: we owe God but God also gives back to us. Again, a more equal partnership, neither guilt-based (in spite of the many Jewish mother jokes) nor focused on servitude.

At the same time that I agree that Judaism is special and wonderful and unique, I see that it's the height ofchutzpah to assume that of all the billions of people in the world, the 13 million Jews have a more special relationship with God than anyone else. I once spoke with a co-worker who was a fundamentalist Christian, who told me that her relative belongs to a church of only 25 members who believe that only they will be saved: everyone else in the world is damned. We laughed about how silly that is, to believe so narrowly that one has God's approval to the exclusion of the entire rest of the world. But really, my fundamentalist Christian friend believes just as foolishly in only her version of God's choice, and one could say that we Jews are just as silly for believing that our little tiny Jewish people is God's chosen people.

But I'm also not willing to remove God from Judaism, as some forms of Judaism do. I don't believe that Judaism is merely a "civilization", a human endeavor devoid of the God-part of the equation. And I don't believe that "man created God", although we certainly describe God in terms of our own image. I believe that the world was created by God- all of the world, with all of its people precious in God's eyes. So I am deeply skeptical of anyone who speaks as if they know what God wants. And I am deeply disturbed by those of any religion, including our own, who seek to explain disasters or violence by claiming that it's a punishment or a consequence of ignoring God's wishes. That again, is Chutzpah of a most dangerous type.

The bottom line, to me, is that to be a religious person (of any religion) who believes in God and in following one's version of God's way, is to believe that we are special partners, in a special relationship with God. Perhaps we are just projecting our need and our wishes for a relationship onto God. I still like the idea that God wants a relationship with us. I still believe that idea will lead us to a better life, to a fulfilling Jewish life, and to a feeling that we are worthy of such a relationship. However, we should remember that we Jews are a tiny group in a huge world, a world filled with others who also believe that their relationship with God is special. It's not our perceived relationship with God that makes us special; in fact, that perception is shared with the majority of the rest of the world. Rather, it's how we act as a result of that perception, how we act toward each other and toward others in general, that should be our focus. Every time we say "God wants...", or hear someone else tell us, "God wants...", we should take a skeptical step back and think about who is really doing the wanting. There is nothing wrong with admitting that it is we who want a relationship with God, and that we are not alone in that desire.