

DEVOREEM

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Rabbi Joseph Radinsky

Many times people come to me and say, "Rabbi, I do not see why I cannot do anything I like as long as it does not hurt anybody else. If I want to take dope or I want to get drunk or I want to run around with other women, who is it hurting? It will only hurt me and if I want to hurt myself, that's my business". We cannot go along with this way of thinking.

We believe that a person cannot do anything he likes to himself. G-d made us the custodians of our body and our talents. He gave them to us as a gift to help Him better the world. We cannot destroy them or ourselves needlessly, but even if we would believe that we are the complete masters of ourselves and our talents, it would not be possible for us to hurt only ourselves without hurting others. Drunks have more accidents and everybody's insurance rates go up. Dope addicts need large amounts of money and crime rises dramatically. Broken homes increase the number of welfare recipients and taxes rise. Children from broken homes need much more counseling and psychological services and educational standards fall. The idea that "I can do anything that I want as long as it does not hurt anybody else" is false because everything we do affects others. If by our behavior we burden society with problems and costs which we should have shouldered and which others now must bear, then we are affecting others.

This, though, poses a very different problem. How are we to treat people who choose not to shoulder their burdens? Do we approve, tolerate, leave alone, or punish such individuals? We cannot say in Judaism as they did in certain ancient cultures ^{then} that if a person chooses to lead a certain life style, ~~that~~ we should leave him alone and he should bear all its consequences. If he wants to harm himself or his family, let him. We will not rescue him. We will not help him. We cannot do this because we

believe that we are our brother's keeper. If an individual yells for help even though he brought his problems on himself we are still obligated to help him. What, though, should be the community's stance toward individuals who violate its standards? The Torah has given us standards. How do we get people to uphold them?

In Judaism, we believe that G-d rules the world. Therefore, ultimately He will determine who is doing the right or the wrong thing. It is not our job to judge people. Judaism is by nature a tolerant religion. It is not our job to punish people. Very few offenses are actually punishable in Jewish law by a human court. All the punishments mentioned in the Bible are impossible to implement and are mainly statements of standards and priorities. We leave most of them to the heavenly court. Of course, courts of justice must be established to litigate disputes and make sure that violence is not rampant. Judaism enforces social discipline through the setting of community standards and by admiring and honoring only those who meet these standards. It tolerates everyone, but it only approves those who meet its standards.

There is a big difference between tolerance and approval. In our modern world we have confused these two concepts. I might tolerate another person's behavior which means that I would not seek any criminal penalties against the individual, but it does not mean that I would approve this person's actions. This confusion of tolerance and approval is widespread. ~~Many people think that if they talk or sit down with certain individuals they are approving them and their actions. This is not so.~~ Tolerance means that you let an individual exercise his free will but you do not praise or honor or respect any choice he makes. Approval means that you honor and respect and praise him for any choice he makes. In our modern world, we have a tendency to admire courage, strength, dedication, devotion,

etc., irregardless of whether this devotion was to a good cause or a bad cause. Not all dedication is worthy of approval and praise. I might tolerate certain individuals, but I would never approve what they do. For example, we in Judaism tolerate homosexuals but we most certainly do not approve of what they do. We might tolerate drunks but we most certainly do not approve what they do, etc.

In the Torah portion, Devoreem, which we always read before Tisha B'Av, we have a lesson in the distinction between tolerance and approval. In it we find the expression, "Aicho", which means literally "how". It is an expression of woe. We find the same expression in the book of Isaiah where it says "How the city has become a harlot". This same word, "Aicho", begins Jeremiah's Book of Lamentations which we read on Tisha B'Av. "How the city is desolate". In all three places, a Jewish leader had to come to grips with the people's laxity. He had either to approve, tolerate, or castigate it. Moshe was dealing with people who wanted to do the right thing but their selfish desires clouded their objectivity. They thought they were upholding the Torah's standards. They didn't see the difference between the standards they were to uphold and the things they wanted to do. They had gotten confused. That's why Moshe needed to be tolerant. The people meant to do well. They had special problems. Each one was interpreting his duties and obligations in their own way. Moshe did not approve what these people did but he could understand why they were doing it, and he was trying to help them back on the right path by teaching them, by talking with them, and by encouraging them. They meant well. They caused a lot of trouble, though, and Moshe was getting tired. He needed help in contending with them.

In the time of Isaiah, the problem was different. The people no longer felt that they were doing the right thing. The city had become a harlot. They

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knew that what they were doing was the wrong thing but they wanted to do it, anyway. They did not fool themselves into thinking that what they were doing was right. They knew it was wrong. Isaiah's task was to talk with them and to show them that they did not have to keep on this wrong path. They could do the right thing if they wanted to. They did not approve of what they were doing, and he did not approve of what they were doing. Isaiah's task was to tolerate the people and to keep the ethical and moral and religious standards of the Torah always before them. Even though they were not living up to them, the people should always know that these standards were still there.

The third stage and the one which caused the destruction of the Temple occurred in Jeremiah's time. The people were doing the wrong thing but they wanted to say it was the right thing. They knew objectively that their standards were not the Torah's standards, but they still wanted to say that they were correct standards. Jeremiah says "How the city is desolate". They wanted Jeremiah's approval and the Torah's approval for all the evil they were doing, and if they could not get it, they would substitute their own approval. They did not want to be tolerated. They wanted to be told that they were right. Jeremiah would not do it and he was persecuted. ~~Standards must always be maintained even if people are not following them because there are standards.~~ We must never give approval to things that are wrong even though we must always tolerate the individuals who are doing wrong, because only in this way can we show them how eventually to accept the correct standards. Tolerance and approval are not synonymous.

The Torah teaches us that it is wrong to condemn people out of hand. Moshe Rabbeinu was only allowed to rebuke the Jewish people the day before he died and then only by hints. It is not our place to judge people. It is our place to uphold Jewish standards. Tolerance, though, does not mean

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that we approve of what others do. They can do what they want, but we do not have to tell them that what they are doing is right. In this day and age, it is very important that we maintain both tolerance and standards. There are some who wish to be completely intolerant because they are afraid that if they are tolerant they will be misinterpreted and their tolerance will be misconstrued as approval. There are others who want to approve everything. Both these stances are wrong. Judaism teaches us that there are standards in the world, and that we should uphold them. We are not supposed to approve immorality, unethical, and irreligious acts. However, we must tolerate everyone.

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The Torah portion, Devoreem, is always read before the holiday of Tisha B'Av. In this Torah portion we learn about the difference between appearance and reality. Too often in life we confuse appearance and reality. People are only interested in appearance. They are not really interested in what things really stand for and mean. Religion, if it is only a pageant and a show and does not strike deep into the heart of the individual, is not worth very much. This is what the prophet Isaiah thunders against in this Haphtorah. The people confused appearance with reality. They thought that by looking religion they became religious. Religion was to them a pageant, a spectacle. Isaiah tells them this is wrong. You have to seek justice and relieve the oppressed, judge the fatherless and plead for the widow. His words start out with Chazon which means a vision. The letters there stand for the Hebrew words Chazak Venechazaik, be strong and courageous. It is not always easy to understand the difference between appearance and reality. Sometimes fear of appearances help. In this town the Jewish Federation was really started because many Jewish merchants were ashamed when men with black coats and long earlocks came to their business and approached them for money, so they set up a special fund which was administered by someone away from the business district so they would not be embarrassed. These people would not be in their stores. To them it did not look nice. Sometimes this idea of it does not look nice is terribly destructive. I know a person who felt it was not nice for Jews to do the hard work that was required in his factory so that although he said he was a pious Jew he would not give a Jew a job in his factory. He said it was demeaning. This meant that when immigrant Jews came to town they either had to starve, go on welfare, or leave town. This man did a terrible thing. The Jewish people were told they could enter the land of Canaan because the other people there had become corrupt. They had thought that by going through certain rituals, certain appearances, you

could force G-d to do certain things. Religion is not magic. The difference between religion and magic is that in magic the god has to do what you tell him to do. You have forced him to do it by your ritual. In Judaism we do not believe that. G-d does not have to listen to our prayers. He can if He wants but He does not have to. G-d looks at the whole picture, our actions, our prayers and does what H knows is good for the world. We cannot force G-d to do anything. Society crumbles when good form, style is put over substance. Society also crumbles when people are not allowed to be heard. Moshe in this Torah portion says Eicha, how can I bear this people alone? He should not have to bear this people alone. The Rabbis say he made a terrible mistake by trying to bear this people alone. Everyone must be given an opportunity to be heard. Many labor relations people say that the reason for many strikes is not because of money but because the workers want to say they are important and want to be heard. There is a story they tell about a man in Russia where nobody can be heard really who wanted to leave. He could not get out. He saw that there was a traveling circus about to leave. He approached the owner and asked him to take him on so he could get out of Russia. The owner said he had no openings but his gorilla died last night and if he wanted to put on a gorilla suit he could and get out. That night the cage went over a big bump and the bars between the gorilla cage and the lion cage fell down. The lion stuck his head through the opening and the man in the gorilla suit started to yell, "help, help, help". All of a sudden, the lion shouted, "Shut up, you fool. Do you think you are the only one who wants to get out of Russia?" Destruction came upon the Jewish people because they put form over substance and did not listen to the cries of the oppressed. It is up to us to always remember this, never to put form over substance, appearance over reality, and to listen to the cries of everyone.

