

Spiritual Insight For The Week

with Rabbi Bentzion Kravitz

Confronting an Anti-Semitic Preacher



I have encountered street preachers who share the gospel on college campuses. Once, I witnessed a preacher who attracted a large crowd of students by spewing insults and condemnation at professors, women, and other minorities.

A crowd of students gathered to heckle the preacher. He then launched an anti-Semitic tirade which included the statements that Jews have all the money, the Jews killed Jesus, and the Jews are going to Hell.

Upon hearing this, a Jewish girl approached me with tears in her eyes and asked me to stand up for the Jewish students on campus. So I pushed my way to the front of the crowd and loudly denounced the preacher's comments and behavior, and I also questioned his religious conviction. In response, the preacher threw his bible on the ground, stepped on it, and declared, "I stand on the word of the Lord."

After hearing this, I asked the preacher if he believed every word in the New Testament. When he said yes, I asked him to read out loud a verse from the New Testament which says, "*Give to everyone who asks you, and if anyone takes what belongs to you, do not demand it back*" (Luke 6:30). When he completed reading the passage, I asked him for his gold watch, which he immediately handed to me. I then told the crowd that I didn't really want the watch. I explained that my intention was to point out that if you read a passage out of context, someone could even ask for your pants. At that moment, a roar of laughter erupted.

Although I successfully confronted the preacher, I was relieved to hear one Christian student tell the preacher that his arrogance was a sin. Later that day, some Jewish students asked me to explain the Jewish view of arrogance. I began by quoting one of the greatest Jewish thinkers, Moses Maimonides (1138–1204), commonly known as Rambam, who was a renowned Torah sage, philosopher, astronomer, and physician to the Royal Court of Saladin.

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In Maimonides' code of Jewish law, known as the Mishnah Torah, he discusses laws concerning idolatry. He traces the source of idolatry to men who mistakenly thought that God created stars and celestial objects so they may influence the world. Initially, these men offered honor and praise to these "servants" of God. However, over time people attributed independent powers to these objects and worshiped them rather than their Creator.

In the same way, people can mistakenly view themselves as more powerful than they are. Some individuals see themselves as independent of God and arrogantly say, "*I am, and there is nothing besides me*" (Isaiah 47:8). Pharaoh, in particular, took this one step further; he thought he was a god and proclaimed, "*The Nile River is mine; I made it for myself*" (Ezekiel 29:3).

No wonder our sages regarded arrogance as a form of idolatry (Sotah 5a), as it says, “*Arrogance is like the wickedness of idolatry*” (I Samuel 15:23).

The Torah repeatedly warns the Jewish people of the danger of arrogance and self-aggrandizement. In this week’s Torah portion, *Beshalach* (Exodus 13:17-17:16), there are powerful reminders to avoid considering ourselves as all-powerful. Instead, we need to partner with God and trust that together we will accomplish great things.

The first reminder occurs after the tattered Jewish people escape the pursuing Egyptian army and are attacked by the mighty nation of Amalek. As the Jews waged war with Amalek, Moses sat on a nearby hill, and “*Whenever Moses raised his hands Israel would prevail, but, whenever he put his hands down, Amalek would prevail*” (Exodus 17:11).

Moses’ act was not magic. Our sages (Talmud, Rosh Hashana 29a) say that when Moses pointed his hands toward heaven, he was reminding the Jews to look to heaven for God’s assistance to defeat their enemy. When they did so, they prevailed, and if they forgot about God and relied solely on themselves, the enemy would prevail.

We should apply this spiritual lesson to all aspects of life. For example, our sages remind doctors that God is the ultimate healer (Kiddushin 82a), and the prophet urges us to acknowledge that God provides our livelihood (Malachi 3:10).

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There is an important caveat. We must do our part, visit a doctor and work for a living, and God will do His part; otherwise, we are left to our own efforts.

This message is also found in this week’s Torah reading that describes the Manna bread that God provided the Jewish people while in the desert. Every day, they collected just enough for their needs for that day. However, on the sixth day, God provided them a double portion (Exodus 16:29) for Friday and the Sabbath day of rest. This story reaffirms that in addition to our endeavors, it is God Who ultimately provides for our needs.

This message is so central to Judaism we commemorate it at each Shabbat meal by placing two loaves of challah bread on our table.

Trusting in God counteracts arrogance and promotes humility, thereby enabling us to fulfill the directive “*walk humbly with God*” (Micah 6:8). Humility also brings blessings as it says, “*The results of humility are fear of God, wealth, honor, and life*” (Proverbs 22:4).

Shabbat Shalom,

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