

CRACKED CISTERNS

A Sermon by Dov Treiman, Esq.
Preached on August 28, 2016

*Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart
always be acceptable to you, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer.*

Blanche's Solution to a Problem

Allow me, please, to share with you a story of a Jewish woman of my acquaintance. Her name was Blanche. Blanche had two children in the middle of the last century, a son and a daughter, the daughter being the elder of the two.

There were problems in the family, and the daughter married a severely mentally ill man, who thought of himself as an orthodox Jew. And so he had his own version of living the various rules of Jewish dietary restrictions, separating meat items from dairy items, separating Passover items from the rest of the year, and so on. In his mental illness, he sought to pry away Blanche's daughter from Blanche herself, and she didn't know quite how to handle this.

Her entire life had been spent living in a house that did not keep kosher rules, but she thought perhaps she would get to see her daughter if she imposed kosher rules on the household. In order to see to it that she separated the meat from the dairy and that she kept the Passover separated from the rest of the year, she got herself five sets of dishes: meat dishes for the normal part of the year and dairy dishes for the normal part of the year, meat dishes for Passover, dairy dishes for Passover, and the fifth set for shrimp and pork and all of that.

Two Evils:

Forsaking God & Providing a Substitute

In our scripture lesson this morning (Jeremiah 2:13), we read Jeremiah's warning:

“for my people have committed two evils:
they have forsaken me,
the fountain of living water,
and dug out cisterns for themselves,
cracked cisterns
that can hold no water.”

As we look at this passage and we see that the prophet is talking about two evils, it is reasonably clear that the two are related to each other: the first evil is forsaking God; the second evil is providing a substitute for God.

What are the “cracked cisterns”? It's easy to come up with a facile explanation that the cracked cisterns represent running after false gods. If you want to put names on them like Baal and Ashtoreth, Zeus or Jupiter or any of the others, you wouldn't be wrong.

But you also wouldn't quite be getting the point because the other thing that is so clear from all of the entire scripture, particularly the Old Testament scripture, is that one of the great evils was the idolatrous sin of worshiping the religion rather than worshiping the God whom the religion is supposed to serve.

The prophet Amos joins this witness, writing (5:21-24):

- ²¹ I hate, I despise your festivals,
and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies.
- ²² Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and grain offerings,
I will not accept them;
and the offerings of well-being of your fatted animals
I will not look upon.
- ²³ Take away from me the noise of your songs;
I will not listen to the melody of your harps.
- ²⁴ But let justice roll down like waters,
and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.

Think About That: Worshiping the Religion vs. the God Whom the Religion Serves

Clearly, Blanche's problem was in worshiping the religion and coming up with her five sets of dishes. In fact her entire theology had come down to taking Judaism — and we can certainly do it with Christianity — and reducing it to a set of rules. So when her daughter divorced this disturbed young man, Blanche took the five sets of dishes and continued to use them in her house. She drove her son's wife crazy with trying to keep track of which set of dishes was used for which kind of food.

This was particularly difficult when Blanche had some surgery, and her son's wife had to stay with Blanche and do all the cooking and all the cleaning. She would reach for a dish, and Blanche would say, "No, no, no. That's the wrong one." It was so important for Blanche to do this correctly. Some four decades after the young man was no longer in her life, Blanche still had the five sets of

dishes because she didn't want to annoy God by eliminating four of them.

Oh we do that too. We really do. So it was all about lists for her. These lists that compel you to do this, do that. Don't do this, don't do that. On and on and on. And it was a recipe book for religion. Rather than being in a relationship, directly worshiping God and using the recipes as a means of worshiping God.

God Does not a Hoot Give

I was very involved in a local Episcopal Church for quite a number of years, and that church had in its heyday all of its top leadership being engineers from IBM. As such they knew how to get things running. And so when they set up the altar, they had wooden templates that were laid out on the altar so the candlestick was within a millimeter of where it was supposed to be, where it had been last week, where it was going to be next week. Thus the cross was within a millimeter of where it was last week, where it was going to be next week. And so on through all of the trappings of the church, there were templates making sure that everything was correct down to the millimeter.

Contrast that, if you would, with a woman of my acquaintance, whose struggle to light a candle couldn't make it happen, lost her flame in the process, went and got another flame, but failed to light either candle, and this was fine; the service will survive without any candles lit. And I promise you God a hoot about getting those candles lit does not give. I promise you, Deb did not make the mistake of worshiping the candles. Deb worships God. We all know that. But it's a dreadfully difficult thing to discipline oneself to do.

Those rules make it so easy. The rules are so attractive. They are such a cheap substitute for actual divine worship.

Tosca's Hard Choice

Many of you are aware that I am a seriously damaged fanatical opera lover. One of the reasons I love opera so is that it deals with real human situations in real human dilemmas, giving their real human responses. It might have happened to me just last week in Puccini's opera "Tosca," in which the soprano lead, Floria, is given the choice between being raped by Scarpia, the chief of police, or having the chief of police execute her lover, Cavaradossi. I'm sure it's happened to all of you. And, for those of you to whom it has happened, the natural response to this heart-rending situation is to pray, of course.

One of the most beautiful arias in all of opera is "Vissi d'Arte," that very prayer from "Tosca," in which she is faced with this dilemma between acceding to rape or allowing her lover to be executed. She sings (and I shan't):

*"I lived for my art, I lived for love,
I never did harm to a living soul!
With a secret hand, I relieved as many
misfortunes as I knew of.
Always with true faith, my prayer rose to
the holy shrines.
Always with true faith, I gave flowers to the
altar."*

Sounding good so far, huh?

*"In the hour of grief, why, why, O Lord,
Why do you reward me thus?"*

Here we are starting to run into a problem.

*"I gave jewels for the Madonna's mantle,
And gave my song to the stars, to heaven,
Which smiled with more beauty.
In the hour of grief
Why, why, O Lord,
Ah, why do you repay me thus?"*

And in the Italian, it's even stronger than "Why do you repay me thus?"

"Perchè me ne rimunerì così?" It's "Why do you give me such wages?"

We go through the aria, and we see that Floria has listed five things that she's been doing: with the secret hand, "I relieved misfortune. With true faith, I prayed at the holy shrines. With true faith, I give flowers to the altar. I give jewels for the Madonna's mantle. I give my song to the stars." But she wants to know, having done all that good stuff, why her salary is the choice between rape and having her lover executed.

The problem with Floria's theology is that she is seeing this as salary. She is seeing these as things she can do in order to earn God's grace, except we know God's grace is not earned. That's what makes it grace to begin with, and she is completely on the wrong track.

My Hypocrisometer Is Flashing Disjunct Between My Religion and My Teaching

I have been speaking to you about the difference between worshiping the religion and worshiping the God for whom the religion is set up. There's a problem with that, and the problem is like so many times that I have stood at the pulpit, or my colleagues here have stood at the pulpit, that there is a disjunction between what we say and what we do.

And so I brought with me my “hypocrisometer, which measures my level of hypocrisy on a scale from 1 to 15, and as you can see, I’m right up there around 12, so there is this huge disjunct between my own practice of remembering that the religion is for God and my teaching that that is what we should be doing. The hypocrisometer has been sitting there flashing at me ever since its level rose up there.

But it doesn’t have to be that way. Fortunately I have known two spectacular women in my life at very different times, who showed me how different it could be. One of them was my mother-in-law, who was a truly sainted woman. This was my first marriage, and for her, humankindness, generosity, prayer, donations were absolutely second nature to her. It never occurred to her that this would be something she would

be putting in the theological Social Security pot, hoping to draw down on it someday later. She did it because it was her nature.

And at my last church at Newark Valley, when I first started there, there was a woman, Mary Ellen Guiles, who was very much like my mother-in-law in that regard. She was instinctually wonderful, and it drove me nuts because I’m not at that standard. That doesn’t mean I shouldn’t keep trying to be at that standard. It doesn’t mean we all shouldn’t keep trying to be at that standard. We can work on worshiping God rather than worshiping religion. We can work at checking our practices and seeing if they are for their own sakes or if they are expressions of our love for our Creator.

In the end, it’s all about our attitude. It’s not what we do; it’s what’s pushing us to do it.

Amen.