

Choice and Freewill - Part 2 of 3

Choice involves personal responsibility. Personal responsibility is the flip side of acting negatively and divisively. It is the prescription to negative and imposing or invasive messages. Personal responsibility means taking the initiative to interpret events, decisions and actions for ourselves, within the realm of often contradictory and changing authoritarian rules, beliefs and structures. It also means taking responsibility for the results that we invoke through our own interpretations, decisions and choices.

According to Episcopal scholar John Shelby Spong, the way the Jewish tradition viewed and treated authoritarian scripture and its messages was through a spiritual quest called the midrash. Rabbis would interpret events, organize their memory, and shape their religious life and beliefs as events unfolded. Midrash, in its simplest term, represents efforts on the part of the rabbis and on us as seekers, to probe and dissect the sacred, looking for hidden meanings, filling in the blanks, and seeking clues to yet-to-be-revealed truths. To the rabbis' developing this midrash, and on into their writing of the New Testament, it was their assumption that the sacred text was timeless; that is, it was true in the past, true in the present, and true in the future. They used clues from the ancient narratives, rather than concrete determinations, to help them understand God's action today, and his unrevealed plan.

When interpreting the meaning of the life of Jesus and his message of compassion, the Rabbis came to an understanding that the God who had spoken "in the past through prophets was now speaking through his son." So they searched the ancient record for hints, clues, foreshadowings, and possible interpretations that would reveal the great plan and the changing religious authoritarian structure. One had only to possess eyes to envision the unfolding possibilities. The New Testament itself began as an attempt by the Rabbis to interpret the unexplainable.

Resultingly, when retelling religious stories or giving authoritarian messages out of the Jewish religious past for the purpose of illumining a new experience, the Rabbis were not out to build polarizing, divisive, misleading or false messages. They attempted to illumine the new experience by questioning and freely envisioning the ultimate revelation, rather than presenting the past and how it would fulfill the present. This interpretive practice changed as the writers and scholars lost the context of the Jewish midrash tradition.

However, using midrash, our choices are not governed by literal messages of the past, but are fulfilled by our personal eyes, ears, study, analysis, and quest for divine enlightenment and guidance in our life. Certainly, in the midrash tradition, this never-ending quest for clues, hints and understanding of our present decisions, actions, and their results, would be the midrash of today's free-will thinkers. By continually seeking divine answers to complex decisions, we learn to evaluate all sides and realize there is no right or wrong, only spiritual growth according to our own level of understanding and development.

A continually divisive issue subject to midrash interpretation, might, again, be killing. No one believes that taking a life is morally right. Our Sixth Commandment explicitly states that. What some of us firmly believe, however, is that we all have our own cultural, religious and moral beliefs shaped by personal experience and by our own attempts to understand why an event unfolded the way it did.

Thus, the only resolution to sometimes meaningless and heartless killings is to take personal responsibility for interpreting the event through our own filters rather than letting the media interpret it for us. That way, we can best weigh the overall consequences that an event and its impact will have on both ourselves and those closest to us. If we are personally involved in the impending death of another, then the decision that we make will need to consider the impact on all of those involved. This could be in reference to a mercy killing, or a shooting in self defense, or a military seige. These are hard decisions that only those involved can make based on their own personal knowledge and experience.

In *Beyond Morality – A Contemporary View of the Ten Commandments*, Bishop John Shelby Spong talks about the commandment, “You shall not kill.”

The Hebrews were quick to act against practices in the ancient world that were common to other people but were abominations to their principle of the sacredness of life. Infanticide was prohibited in the Hebrew scriptures. Abandoning babies, especially female babies, was certainly not unusual even among the civilized Romans. To the Roman writer Tacitus, the Jewish prohibition against infanticide was a reason for anti-Semitism. On the other end of the lifeline the Hebrews, holding fast to the sacredness of life, refused to dispatch their elderly to a certain death, as was acceptable in some other cultures.

The theme of sacred life is crucial to the biblical story and has been central to the complexities and moral dilemmas of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Because motive and deed could not easily be separated, not only the destructive acts that anger precipitated, but the emotions that fed these acts came to be prohibited. These distinctions remain in our courts, which differentiate between degrees of murder by deliberating accidental vs. premeditated killings, and the mental competence of the killer to distinguish between right and wrong. When the victims and killers are identifiable and the motivations known or at least agreed upon, judgments can be made with a reasonable amount of confidence in the decision.

These decisions seem quaint and enviously straightforward compared to our current choices. In the last quarter of the twentieth century up through now, we have faced ethical quandaries of life and death that have sprung not from scenes of interpersonal conflict but from the extraordinary escalation of technology. Fifty years ago, medical students heard their professors revel at the advancement of machines and medicines that would prolong life, yet create a whole new set of medical and moral dilemmas. That future is upon us. We can delay biological death with technology such as respirators, powerful chemotherapy, organ transplants, DNA manipulation and laser-beam therapy. These life-saving tools no longer seem heroic since they are used so frequently and can delay death indefinitely.

Ethical issues have turned from consideration of the preservation of life, to the quality of life, to the cost of resources – financial and human – and the proper allocation of these resources for the good of society. Does a terminally ill patient have the moral right to refuse treatment that would prolong life but not produce a cure? At what point does technology interfere with death, an expected and normal part of the life cycle, rather than enhance life? A man committed suicide after he developed a particularly painful malignancy where all hope of cure was gone. To tolerate the pain would have required the addictive use of mind-depressing drugs. He chose to die by his own hand while still in control of his faculties. Did he cooperate with death or interfere with life? Who, ultimately, has the right to make life and death choices? (Next month: Part 3)