



If you listen to my laws

This opens this week's Torah reading. Good things are promised to those who obey God's commandments. Bad things are threatened those who don't.

It's the sort of passage that could have inspired the 17th Century philosopher Blaise Pascal. Pascal suggested that if we adopt a lifestyle consistent with the belief in God and there turns out not to be a God, we have made merely a simple error. But if we act as though there is NO God and are proved on our death mistaken, we face eternal damnation. On that basis, Pascal argued, a rational person would surely wager it better to live according to the will of God, even if such a belief cannot be vouchsafed.

It's never been an argument that has moved me – for very Masorti reasons. I do understand that, to the atheist, religion seems a simple way of avoiding having to make up one's own mind about how to behave in any given situation, but that's simply not how I understand religion, and our religion particularly so.

Adopting a lifestyle consistent with a belief in God is simply not a binary decision – it can't be flicked on or off like a light switch. Does adopting a lifestyle consisted with a belief in God mean accepting Jesus as theologically significant, or denying that? Does it mean praying three times a day or five? And even if we are comfortable ignoring the claims of other faiths', there is enough complexity within Judaism to render Pascal's wager meaningless. There is a Biblical verse that commands a stubborn and rebellious child should be stoned to death, but no Rabbinic Jew has ever suggested that that should be done (perhaps because all Rabbinic Jews were stubborn in their youth – I know I was). The Bible says, 'don't cook a kid in its mother's milk' and we derive the entire laws of Kashrut from that point. Sefardim do Hagba before the Torah Reading, Ashkenazim do it after.

It's not that any of these practices are pure inventions, but that each – and myriads of others – is a result of a Masorah, a spiritual inheritance handed down, unfolded through the generations. Every religious act aspires towards an honest and humble response to the gift of our creation in the image of God. But each is a result of decision after decision as to how to do that. The training in this project is careful, nuanced and, by necessity, incomplete. One doesn't train as a Rabbi – a Masorti Rabbi certainly - by knowing that life is precious and murder is wrong – though that is clearly the case! One trains as a Rabbi by understanding how to balance the competing goods, or competing bads involved in the clash of complexity – how should we best support those facing great pain at the end of life, or – dare we look towards Israel and her strife – how to navigate the complexities of bringing peace in the face of appalling violence. Good religious practice is hard.

Pascal was wrong because his conception of religion was wrong. There is no choice but to engage as a human with the choices we make in our lives. There is no security in a flick-switch approach to religion, or frankly anything. This, of course, is one of the great truths of a Masorti understanding of our Jewish existence. It's why I'm a proud Masorti Jew. It's why I'm so delighted to welcome so many members of Masorti Europe and Masorti Olami to New London for this week of celebration for our national and international movement.

Shabbat Shalom

Rabbi Jeremy