

The following were remarks presented by Rabbi Hillel Katzir at the “Assisi in Maine” event on October 27, 2011, in Auburn, Maine. This interfaith gathering of representatives of religious groups, organized by the Portland Diocese of the Roman Catholic Church, was designed to witness against religiously-motivated violence.

In the biblical Book of Numbers, there is a story about how the pagan Moabites sent some of their women to seduce the Israelite men, hoping to lure them away from the God of Israel, and to the worship of the Moabite gods. In a fit of fanaticism for God, a man by the name of Pinchas (or Phineas as he is called in English), a grandson of Aaron the high priest, took a spear and killed a leader of one of the tribes of Israel, and the Moabite princess he was lying with.

In the biblical text, God seems to approve of this action, and rewards Pinchas by assigning the position of high priest to him and his descendants. But the Jewish tradition has always been uncomfortable with this seeming approval of Pinchas’s violent act. The rabbis feared that this would establish a precedent that would encourage religious extremism. Some commentators understand God’s apparent reward for Pinchas’s fanaticism as actually a preventative measure for it. As one commentator wrote, Pinchas would have to cure himself of his violent temper if he was to function as a priest. It would also give him a way of atoning for having taken two lives – a person is never the same after he has shed blood, no matter how justifiable the cause.

There is a human tendency to think that, if a little of something is a good thing, then more of it would be even better. But often that is just not true. Love is a good thing; but too much love can be stifling, even threatening if it becomes possessive.

A love of God is certainly something that religions teach as a good thing. But a love of God that is so strong as to drive a person to harm another should be a warning sign. In Genesis, for example, Abraham thinks that God is telling him to give his son Isaac as a sacrifice to God. In the end, as we know, God tells Abraham not to harm the boy; and the message of that command is that God does not **want** human sacrifice, whether offered voluntarily, or in the form of killing perceived enemies of God.

Every religion in the world has, at one time or another, been victimized by another, in the name of religion. Almost every religion in the world has victimized others, in the name of religion. And yet these same religions teach, each in its own way, the Golden Rule of treating others as we would want to be treated.

Charles Kimball, a Baptist minister and a professor of religion, in his book When Religion Becomes Evil, asks the rhetorical questions: Is religion the problem? Or is religion the solution? His answer to both questions is – yes. It depends on who is teaching the religion, and what part of the religion’s tradition that person is teaching. As any scholar of scripture – any scripture – knows, it is easy to use pick and choose verses to prove anything we want to prove.

Kimball identifies five warning signs that a religion is becoming evil. They are: absolute truth claims; blind obedience; establishing the ‘ideal’ time; teaching that the end justifies any means; and declaring holy war. According to Kimball, the more of these five signs that appear in a particular religious community, the more we should worry that that religion will cause problems for both its own adherents, and those of another, or no, religion.

I know that groups within the religious tradition from which I come – Judaism – have at times, in our four thousand years of history, displayed some of these signs. But there have

always been other elements within the Jewish world who have opposed those groups as not accurately representing Jewish teaching.

That is a question that must be posed in every faith community where there are differing interpretations of the tradition: what constitutes correct teaching? Some traditions are hierarchical, and such decisions can be made authoritatively for all; although even in those traditions there are dissenters – or, if you prefer, heretics. But most traditions, including mine, are not so structured, and different views must vie for legitimacy.

One way of determining a true Jewish teaching is to hold it up against our central affirmation of faith, the *Shema*. “Hear, O Israel, Adonai is our God, Adonai is One.” That last word, “One,” is more than mathematical. It suggests that what we should all be striving for is a one-ness with God, and a one-ness with each other. And the more our teachings and our actions lead us in the direction of such a one-ness, the more true it must be.

Such a one-ness does not mean that we must all be alike, or that we must all worship God in the same way. I have long believed that, if we were all of one religion, God would be very bored. I admire the teaching of Islam that God could have created us all alike, but chose not to, so that we could learn from each other; and that, if we **must** compete, let us compete in good works, in actions that bring us all closer together, and closer to God.

By this yardstick of one-ness, I oppose interpretations of the Jewish tradition that lead to violence; these cannot be correct, because, by their very nature, they will lead us **away** from one-ness, not **toward** it.

The Hebrew word best known to non-Hebrew speakers is the word *shalom*. We all know that it means ‘peace,’ but it means so much more than merely an absence of conflict. It implies the sense of wholeness and completeness, that brings a sense of peace with it. What we must strive for is the one-ness of all who are created in the divine image, with each other and with God. Only then can there be true Shalom, true peace.

May we all approach our faith traditions in such a way as to increase one-ness in the world. Such an approach cannot help but assure that no one will oppress in the name of God, and no one will be oppressed in the name of God. Wholeness, completeness, true *shalom*, would reign in God’s world.

Keyn yehi ratzon – may **that** be God’s will – and ours.