

President Bush has been described as the president who has done the most of any president in the history of the United States to dismantle the careful separation between the State and the advocacy of any particular church. He has encouraged a climate in which events like the recent battle to remove a sculpture of the 10 commandments from an Alabama courthouse are becoming increasingly common.

I understand and am even sympathetic to the feeling that values in our society are eroding, and the best cure for the social problems that plague us can be found in our religious traditions. I also understand and agree with the argument that the fundamentals of our democratic form of government and the values upon which our country was founded are for the most part consistent with many of the values of the Judeo-Christian tradition.

However, I have read studies suggesting that the citizens of the United States by and large comprise the most religiously committed society in the world, precisely because we don't have a State supported or imposed Church, Mosque, or Synagogue, as do most other countries of the world. Forcing religious values on people by explicitly linking religious symbols with State symbols does not endear people to a religious tradition.

It is best if we come to our religious tradition freely. By doing so, we hold it dearer than if it were forced upon us. We treat religion as an intensely personal experience, and as a matter of law, we do not impose the complete set of values for any particular religion on society.

We are a society hugely influenced by media and the internet, which freely displays a set of values, some of them positive and consistent with our religious ideals; and others, negative and inconsistent with our religious ideals.

I love watching television programs and movies. I am aware that some of what I watch portrays negative images of family life, drugs and/or alcohol use, and irresponsible behavior, often by individuals, such as popular athletes, singers, or actors, people who are idolized by our youth.

These negative images, we can turn off. That's not to say that when some outrageous new offense appears on our televisions, that it isn't sometimes worth making a phone call or writing a letter. Basically, though, if we don't like something we can just walk away.

I think television, music, movies, and popular literature, used carefully, constitute a tremendous opportunity to teach religious values. Consider again the 10 commandments. Arguments in favor of their placement at the courthouse in Alabama focused on the need for deeper religious values in society. However, let me ask the question -- what's the best way to present the mitzvah of honoring one's parents, *kibbud av v'em*? It is very unlikely that anyone is going to see a representation of the 10 commandments, and suddenly remember that God doesn't want him to mistreat his mother. It is much more likely that after watching Judge Amy Gray of "Judging Amy" struggle with her relationship with her mother, for someone to be moved to re-examine one's own relationship to one's mother.

The best works of literature, the best products of media and movies, present a positive religious message 1000 times more effectively than a statue of the 10 commandments outside a courthouse, a Christmas tree on a White House lawn, or a Menorah in a public square.

For examples, we can look at some of my favorite contemporary sources for teaching Jewish values -- one by the name of Hayyim Potter, better known as Harry; another who passed away this year, but is thankfully living on in reruns: Mr. Ephraim Rogers, better known as Fred; and also we'll take brief looks at Judging Amy, ER, and Star Trek.

It's always tricky talking about books or movies in a sermon. 25% of you read the book and loved it; 25% of you read the first few chapters and hated it. Another 25% intend to reading it, and don't want me to spoil it; and the last 25% never read it, don't intend to, and furthermore, don't want to hear anything about it.

Nevertheless, let me venture into these treacherous waters. Pirke Avot teaches, *k'nei l'ka haver* - acquire for yourself a friend. The Talmudic sage Rava quotes an apparently well known proverb of his day, *hevruta oh mituta*. This means, with apologies to Patrick Henry -- Give me companionship, or give me death!

The central theme of Harry Potter is the search for community. For most of his childhood, Harry is isolated. He has no friends. From the moment he finds out he is a wizard and has been invited to Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, he has his first friend in the half-giant groundskeeper Hagrid, soon followed by a close friendship with his peers Ron and Hermione.

We also see a parallel theme revolving around the question of the meaning of the lightning bolt scar on Harry's forehead. It is reminiscent of the mark which God placed on Cain, to protect him after he killed his brother Abel. Harry's scar similarly protects him against evil -- but it also marks him apart from his fellow students. As Harry experiences community for the first time, he also continues his struggle with alienation. The question, asked in a Jewish way, is what does it mean to be created in the image of God. If it means that we are all created equal, then why are some people so different? Ron Weasley is kind of awkward and wears hand me down clothes. Neville Longbottom is a nebbish. Hermione Granger is a know it all. But each of them, with all their unique distinctiveness, is essential in the ultimate plot, that of the struggle against oppression and evil. Further, in their struggle both Harry and Hermione become involved in the most Jewish value of protecting the rights of slaves. Harry tricks Dobby, the house elf's, master into giving him his freedom. Hermione begins a tireless crusade to free all house elves, even those who don't want to be free.

Moving on to Mr. Rogers: Mr. Rogers, an ordained minister, never quoted Bible, because the show was directed to children of every faith. "Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood," however, was clearly rooted in the verse from Leviticus "Love your neighbor as yourself," *v'ahavta l'rei'akha kamokha*, one of the foundational verses in the whole Torah. Mr. Rogers is all about:

**Emet** - truth: While being careful to protect our children, he shows never shied away from the hard questions. He was truthful with his young audience and found the right language to convey difficult answers, even when the truth hurt, such as when he dealt with the death of pets or divorce. It was that honesty that came through in his show.

Mr. Rogers is about **Yirah** - awe: He stressed the sense of awe about the world around us, the people in it, and even the simple experiences. The theologian Abraham Joshua Heschel called it Radical amazement, the sense of wonder about the world around us that elevates us to experience God. You could hear in Mr. Roger's voice the sense of excited curiosity about everything - it's the way children see the world - every little thing is a big event. Somewhere along the line, we become jaded and lose that sense of wonder. Mr. Rogers helps us regain it.

Mr. Rogers is about **Rachmanut**- kindness: The characters of the neighborhood acted with kindness to each other. In an interview, Mr. Rogers said, "Of course, I get angry. Of course, I get sad. I have a full range of emotions. I also have a whole smorgasbord of ways of dealing with my feelings. That is what we should give children. Give them ... ways to express their rage without hurting themselves or somebody else. That's what the world needs."

Turning to prime time network television, if you watch “Judging Amy”, in addition to what I have already mentioned, you see the characters wrestling with the tremendous responsibility of holding people accountable for their actions, and meting out appropriate punishment. The Jewish values: On one hand, we have the instruction to *Dan l'khaf zkhut*, to give the benefit of the doubt, to presume innocence, or at least a reasonable explanation for the questionable behavior, until or unless proven otherwise. On the other hand, we have instructions like *hokhaeh tocheah* and *ayin tahat ayin*, giving appropriate reproach and giving measured punishment to those who violate the law.

ER presents lessons related to the ethics of health care and the allocation of scarce resources. Several episodes have examined the question of treating terminally ill patients; a minor, for example, who wants to die, while the parent wants aggressive treatment. Jewish medical ethics address the questions of when it is permissible to withhold certain types of treatment. There have also been some wonderful episodes teaching us how to care for the dying - one in particular showing the mitzvah of *bikkur holim*, visiting the sick, by the disciples of a dying Buddhist monk.

In the Star Trek world, the prime directive is non-interference in other cultures unless the Federation is asked to intervene. It is a system very much akin to Jewish values, in which we let each person or civilization find its own path - we do not tell others that they need to follow our Jewish path to achieve heaven, for example. Some of the most ethically challenging episodes deal with the question of how to get around this non-interference directive when one is witness to a repressive, murderous government. One can hear echoes of the Torah's instructions to protect the stranger, the widow, the orphan, and the powerless. One of the primary missions of the Starship Enterprise, in many episodes, is to find a way to make peace with civilizations with a vastly different set of values than their own. In Jewish language, they are engaging in one of our highest mitzvot, that of *rodef shalom*.

In short, what I am suggesting today is that you use the media to begin conversations about Jewish ethics with your children, your family, and your friends. One of my Monday night adult education courses this year, **Can we Learn Jewish Theology at the Movies?**, is an opportunity to pursue this approach to popular media. Through viewing clips from such varied films as Star Trek, The Wizard of Oz, It's a Wonderful Life, and Field of Dreams, we will explore the nature of God, Prophecy, Life and Afterlife, Human Nature, the Messiah, and The End of Days.

The media is pervasive in its influence on us. While the ultra-Orthodox world in general rejects the media and its influence on our culture as poisonous, we in the non-Orthodox world do our best to live in the secular world, as well as the Jewish world. May we nourish and bathe our Jewish souls in the waters of the Torah that flows from both of these worlds, sacred and secular; may we be sustained by a media produced diet that uplifts and challenges us to the highest standards of behavior; and finally -- may the force be with us for a good and sweet new year. Shana Tova!