

But what if we're wrong?

8/29/01

By Neal Ross Atkinson

Congregation Shir Shalom

*At a small house of study somewhere near Jerusalem, Rabbi Eliezer ben Hyrcanus is vehemently arguing a point of Jewish law.*

*"As proof that I'm right," he tells his colleagues, "let this carob tree uproot itself!"*

*Lo and behold, the tree rises up, walks a short distance, and digs its roots into the earth.*

*However, the other rabbis are unimpressed. "We don't learn the Law from carob trees," they say. "You're wrong."*

*Eliezer's other miracles -- a stream flowing backwards, the study-room walls partially collapsing -- are similarly rejected. And when the voice of God proclaims Eliezer correct, the rabbis reply that the Law was given to humanity, and that the majority, not God, decides its interpretation. And Eliezer has to accept the majority's ruling.*

*Some time afterward, one of the other rabbis meets the Prophet Elijah and asks, "What did God say when we refuted Him?" Elijah replies, "God laughed and said, 'My children have bested Me.'"*

The preceding tale comes from the Talmud, an immense collection of Jewish law and lore compiled about 1,500 years ago. I'm very fond of that story, because it reflects my views on a number of topics: the nature of religious truth, the role of humanity vis-à-vis its connection to God, the importance of thinking for ourselves while acknowledging something bigger.

In that vein, here's a question: "If you received incontrovertible proof that your religion's basis was more fable than fact -- invention, rather than revelation -- how would it affect your life?"

When I recently asked that in an online Jewish forum, some people replied that it wouldn't make much of a difference -- that Judaism is an inherently worthwhile system regardless of its origins. But I was surprised to hear others say they'd "drop Judaism like a hot potato if it wasn't real."

If you're thinking, "But Judaism isn't real, my religion is," please go back and re-read my question.

Currently, there are more than 6 billion people sharing the planet with us. Many of us follow religions which pattern life's immense complexities into manageable chunks. Although these belief systems often develop a self-consistent logic, they're essentially based more on intuition and interpretation than reason -- and while many share common values, they're also mutually exclusive to a greater or lesser degree. Thus, the chance that any one of them represents Absolute Truth is amazingly small.

As someone who's studying to become a rabbi, to practice a religious tradition and teach it to others, I should probably be frightened that I might be dedicating my life to perpetuating a fiction.

Actually, what scares me is the attitude that our beliefs are worthless unless they're absolute – that religion is somehow above doubt, criticism or analysis.

And that's really the point of my question – do we use religion to explain our ethics, or to justify our prejudices? To assume responsibility, or to avoid blame? To reach out to each other, or to build walls?

Like Rabbi Eliezer, sometimes we look for proof in the wrong places. But maybe that's why we live in a community – because sometimes, our greatest proof is in each other.