BS"D

On Peace, God and AI Ethics

Opening Address to the Aurora Dialogues at the Vatican

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Thank you Shruti for convening this important gathering, and thank you Ben Olsen for inviting me to say a few words to help set the tone (your words) for this gathering.

Peace is God's Name

To that end, let me begin with our traditional salutation in Hebrew: Shalom.

It is relatively well known that Shalom means peace. It is also relatively well known that Shalom is the greeting used in Hebrew for both "Hi" and "Bye." What is less well known is that Shalom is actually a name of God. The Talmud learns this from a verse in Judges:

> "The Name [of God] itself is designated 'Peace,' as it is written, 'And he [Gideon] called it "The Lord is Peace."'" (Judges 6:24).
>
> **תלמוד בבלי שבת י:**
>
> גופיה איקרי שלום דכתיב ויקרא לו ה' שלום:

But the Talmud here is doing more than taking poetic license, it is making a oral determination with legal ramifications. The Talmud goes on to explain that:

> "A person may not greet his fellow with 'Shalom' in a bathhouse, because it is stated: 'And he [Gideon] called it "The Lord is Peace."'" (Judges 6:24).
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> **תלמוד בבלי שבת י:**
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> אסור לאדם **שיתן שלום** לחבירו בבית המרחץ, משום שנאמר: "ויקרא לו ה' שלום".

And this Talmudic notion is codified as practical law:

> "In the inner chamber [of the bathhouse], where everyone stands unclothed, even greeting another with 'Shalom' is forbidden."

שולחן ערוך א״ח פד:א

[רמ״א] ... ובפנימי שכולם עומדים שם ערומים אפילו **שאלת שלום** אסור.

Shalom is a holy name and it is thus incongruous to be said in a bathhouse.

So when greet someone with Shalom, we are wishing them peace in the name of God. And when we ask someone "How are you doing?" we say – "שלום, מה שלומך – Hi, how is your peace?" – we are asking them an existential question: how are you vis-a-vis God.[1]

The Source of Morality

And this brings us to our gathering – a gathering of people from all walks of life ad varying faith traditions. We come together to try to morally shape how the most disruptive, powerful, and consequential technology humanity has ever witnessed should be developed, deployed, and ultimately used by the people of the world. Today, truth be told, there is no lack of gatherings around the globe with this very same goal in mind. The difference between these gatherings and ours is, in a word, Shalom. Not because others do not want to achieve a peaceful world, but because Peace is a name of God. And as we are bidden to emulate God, peace is not merely a human aspiration but a divine imperative.

It is an imperative that the Jewish liturgy reminds us to fulfill three times a day: לתקן עולם במלכות שד-י – to fix the world under in the name of God. This divine imperative distinguishes our efforts by imbuing them with the will of God and the word of God. First, when we set about our task, we are inspired in the belief that we are doing the will of God. Second, when we set about our task, we do so within a moral framework shaped by our religious traditions and sacred texts. And this makes all the difference in how we grapple with ethical dilemmas.

I do not mean to claim that secularists are not inspired to do good or that secularists do not have important moral frameworks. But there is a qualitative difference between secular ethics and religious ethics. For, ever since Nietzsche declared that "God is dead," the

[1] It is important to note here that the wording in the Hebrew texts is more precise than the simple translation that one "greets" his fellow with the word Shalom. The Talmud says – שיתן שלום– one "gives peace" to his fellow, and R. Moshe Isserles, in his legal codification of the rule, says – שאלת שלום – "asks of the peace" of his fellow.

secular world has lived bereft of objective morality. In the words of Dostoyevsky, "If God is dead, then all is permitted." And thus Jean-Paul Sartre explained:

> "The existentialist … finds it extremely embarrassing that God does not exist, for there disappears with Him all possibility of finding values in an intelligible heaven. There can no longer be any good *a priori*, since there is no infinite and perfect consciousness to think it. It is nowhere written that "the good" exists, that one must be honest or must not lie, since we are now upon the plane where there are only men" (*Existentialism is a Humanism*, 28-29).

And so even when secularist philosophers try to lean on religious texts, there is something lacking. Take but one example: "Thou shalt love your neighbor as yourself." Rabbi Akiva proclaimed this to be the great principle of the Torah (Sifra, Kedoshim 4:12). And more than one secular philosopher has claimed that his moral approach is ultimately based on this verse. Thomas Hobbes said so explicitly in describing his social contract (Leviathan ch. 14); and John Stuart Mill said so explicitly in explaining utilitarianism (Utilitarianism ch. 2). And many have also said that Immanuel Kant's categorical imperative is a translation of this great commandment.

That said, Israeli professor of philosophy Yeshayahu Leibovitz (1903–1994) noted a most critical distinction:

> "You shall love your neighbor as yourself" does not, as such, occur in the Torah. The reading is: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself, *I am God*." The duty of love toward one's neighbor is not a corollary of man's position as such but of his position *before God*. "You shall love your neighbor as yourself" without the continuation "*I am God*" is the great rule of the atheist Kant. … [With the conclusion "*I am God*" the verse] "You shall love your neighbor as yourself" ceases thereby to be mere good counsel, a noble aspiration or sublime ideal. It becomes clothed in the reality of law [i.e., a moral value with legal imperative], something one is compelled to take seriously as one must take police ordinances seriously [חוק]. (Religious Praxis: The Meaning of Halakhah).

What he is saying is that if the source of your morals is human, they will not carry the demand to action that they would if the source is divine. U.S. professor of philosophy R. Walter Wurzburger encapsulated the idea as follows:

> After hearing "performing X is irrational," [e.g., theft doesn't make sense], one may ask "So what?" But one cannot reply in the same fashion to the statement, "Performing X is a transgression of a divine imperative" (Wurzburger, *Covenantal Imperatives*, p. 80).

So that is the power of divine obligation for the believer – a power that I hope we can tap in this Aurora forum convened under the auspices of the Vatican.

Developing Morality

That said, we are not so naïve to think that are not issues with divine ethics. Indeed, we cannot ignore the fact that our traditions sometimes conflict. Nor can we ignore the fact that even within our own traditions, there are statements that conflict with the our modern moral conscience. How are to navigate these conflicts? How are we to come to consensus when our traditions conflict?

I would like to suggest an approach from Jewish tradition called "Developing Morality." This approach maintains that while we accept our tradition as a binding moral framework, we understand that it is one that demands we continually strive improve our moral conduct. R. Prof. Wurzburger (*Covenantal Imperatives*, pp. 71–72) learns this from the biblical verse that exhorts us "to do what is good and right in the eyes of the Lord":

> [This verse] mandates consideration of prevailing notions of moral propriety. [T]he law itself, …, must accommodate itself to the inevitable changing social, economic, and cultural conditions…. But it is one thing to recognize the important function of conscience as a supplement to purely legal elements, and another to treat it as an overriding authority.

In brief, we need to be open to rereading our texts, but not to rewriting them.

Conclusion

So as we begin our discussions, seeking consensus on the moral dilemmas of this new AI epoch – dilemmas that previous generations could never have imagined – we need to bring our traditions to bear, but we also need to be open to *rereading* those traditions.

Ultimately, we are here to work on shaping today's technologies to make the world a better place. To fix the world in the name of God.

Let us, then, work together on this epochal technology,
in the name of God,
in the name of Peace.

Shalom.