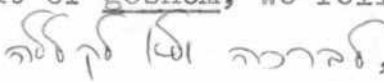
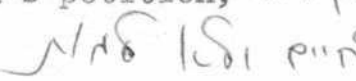


"TOO MUCH OF A GOOD THING"

My thesis is a simple one: too much of a good thing is bad.

That destructiveness in excess, too much of a bad thing, is reprehensible, is obvious. Pain, hunger, poverty, illness, are all bad, and in excess they are very bad.

But it is also true that too much of a good thing is dangerous. Thus, as Jews we have no prejudice against wealth. We favor neither the rich nor the poor. Indeed, we often pray for parnasah. On the two longest holidays of the year, Passover and Sukkot, we offer up our special prayers for tal (dew) and geshem (rain). These are petitions to the Almighty for material prosperity, couched in agricultural terms. There is nothing wrong with having money. Yet, there is such a thing as having too much money, more than one can morally digest. That is why at each occasion, that of tal and that of geshem, we follow the prayers with the congregation's petition, , "For blessing and not for curse," , "For life and not for death." Not always is money a blessing; in excess, it can very well become a deadly curse.

Many of us grew up in financially modest homes, sometimes deprived of ~~the~~ ^{many} things we wanted. Hence, we have, consciously or unconsciously, followed the principle of compensation, and have adopted the policy of "giving the kids what we didn't have." In

"Answer him according to the laws of the Passover (the entire Mishnah of Pesahim), that we are not to eat anything after the Afikoman." Many explanations have been given of this passage in the Haggadah. I prefer to see in it the teaching that everything has limits, even the Seder, even the freedom which it celebrates! Only God is absolute; everything else is relative. And on one has to learn this lesson more than the פֶּסֶח | א, the Wise Son, who is morally alert, and who is in danger of overdoing the good things. It is the ben hakham in our society who so passionately advocates freedom -- or, to use the acceptable nomenclature, liberation. But the Wise Son must understand that the Seder of liberation must have an Afikoman, that vice is often virtue taken to excess.

Indeed, without an Afikoman, without limitations, freedom turns into chaos and anarchy; when it is absolutized, it becomes self-destructing: it shades into slavery itself. Thus, Women's Lib got hold of a good idea -- equal and fair treatment of women in the market place -- and they radicalized it, took it to such an extreme, that they have become not only ludicrous but irresponsible and destructive of the family unit. They are guilty of perpetrating an endless Seder.

A few weeks ago, Irving Kristol wrote a most perceptive article in the New York Times in which he pointed out that the liberal view of censorship had been overdone, and it is this view that is responsible for our society now being flooded by pornography and obscenity. We took the freedom principle, and we applied it

mindlessly and recklessly, and we are now suffering because of it. Too much of a good thing!

It has been pointed out that the counter-culture's moral nihilism, their destruction and distrust of all values, is traceable to their perfectionism. They are so critical of the defects in the society given to them by their elders, so antagonistic to the hypocrisies that pock-mark the Establishment culture, so desirous of instituting the absolutely good and noble and fair, that the result is the destruction of all society in the name of improving it. It is a culture without an Afikoman.

Similarly, international peace is a virtue greatly to be desired. Isaiah and Amos speak of it glowingly, and we shall always hold it aloft as one of the ideals of Judaism for the world. But, it can be overdone and can serve the interests of sheer hypocrisy. Our Secretary of State is a good man, and he would like to go down in history as one who helped advance the cause of peace. But when he counsels Israel to be the gracious sacrifice on the altar of peace, and endanger its own future because, as he put it, geography doesn't really count in the modern world, Secretary Rogers is being a hypocrite. It is, after all, the administration which he serves that recently decided to interdict the Ho Chi Minh trail in Laos -- invading another country, apparently on the basis that geography still counts for something. Someone ought to teach the principle of "too much of a good thing" to the Right Rev. Rogers before he preaches us another sermon from his privileged pulpit in

his Church of Foggy Bottom.

King Saul is an illustration of a man who went to extremes. In the war against Amalek, when he was required to be tough, he was too easy-going and pacifist. When he felt that the Priests of the city of Nob had sided with his enemy King David, he was exaggerating, and should have been kind and generous -- but was brutal. That is why the Rabbis apply to him a verse later enunciated by one of his successors, King Solomon. When the wise king said (in Ecclesiastes) *אל תהיה רשע רב*, "Do not be excessively bad," they apply that to King Saul's murderous revenge against Nob the city of Priests. And when Solomon said *אל תהיה צדיק רב*, "Do not be too much of a tzaddik, too righteous," they apply that to Saul's excessive softness in sparing Amalek.

A charming story is told of one of the leading Hasidic scholars, Rabbi Chaim Halberstam of Sanz, the author of " *פני חיים* ". He held that the maror should be not the romaine lettuce that some of us eat, but the strong horseradish that others use. He would always take great care to eat a sufficient quantity, a *פ'גו*, within the required brief period, even if this was a difficult physical feat and caused his eyes to tear and induced coughing. He would recite the blessing with great kavvanah and gulp the maror down. When he was very old, however, the doctors warned him that he was no longer permitted to eat this maror. When the time for the Seder came about, and all his followers and family were around his table, the old rabbi dipped his fingers into the plate of maror,

lifted the powerful, pungent vegetable, stood on his feet, and with great hitlahavut, with enormous enthusiasm and joy, proclaimed aloud the blessing:

ברוך אתה ה' אלהינו מלך העולם אשר דברנו בנפשו ובלבנו... ונשמעו מלאך.
פזמונים.

"Blessed art Thou O Lord... who has sanctified us with His commandments and commanded us -- to take care of our health!" Whereupon, he put the maror back into the dish and proceeded with his Seder.

The "פזמונים" proved that one must also not be too much of a tzaddik; one must learn to control his גורל, as well as his תורה.

Now, it is easy to dismiss my plea for moderation, my counsel against extremism, as nothing more than an Establishment ethic propounded by someone on the other side of the great divide of thirty years old. But it is more than that. Judaism and Torah, if they are to have any kind of positive function in civilization, must always be judgmental, they must always be critical and fulfill their prophetic function.

That is why during the Eisenhower years, in the 1950's, with their crew-cut pursuit of security and moderation -- and mediocrity -- I spoke against moderation, pointing out its placidity, and asked for more vigor, for more of a radical stance, and indicated the revolutionary aspects of Judaism's ethic.

However, today, in the face of the radicalization of society, which is too often mindless and sometimes a case of extremism

for kicks, a demand for liberation without responsibility, I consider it my duty to bring to our attention Judaism's sense of balance and harmony.

I by no means wish to vindicate the passionlessness which some of us bring to our religious life, the colorlessness with which we try to conform to our own society's dictates, the half-heartedness with which we pursue the moral life. Nor do I mean to recommend a simple, mathematical estimation of the extremes, with us marching down the middle of the road. The Kotzker Rebbe, in a metaphor appropriate to his rural society, maintained that only animals walk in the middle of the road...

Rather, in this age of polarization it is important to point out the danger of Too Much of a Good Thing. What I plead for is that in any moral or ethical problem, and life is full of them at every turn, we consider all values, both during and after the choice between competing values. Any one value, when taken to an extreme, can be corrupted. If we consider all positive values together, even if we must choose one over the other, there is less chance of debasing either ourselves, our lives, or society.

So what we need is a dialectic of virtues, a harmonization of competing goods. We need freedom -- and responsibility; peace -- and self-defense; love -- and morality; patience -- and toughness; discipline -- and independent thinking. Like Hillel, of whom we say *אין אלוהים חסד ואמת*, that he would make a sandwich of matzah and the bitter herbs and eat them together, we

must manage to combine two different mitzvot, one bland and the other bitter, and not overdo either one at the total expense of the other.

Jewish life today must reveal that idea of balance, of not overdoing things, of a Seder that comes to an end with the Afikoman. Religious perfectionism is a good thing. It means insistence upon more Torah, more observance of commandments, more morality. But religious perfectionism overdone can lead to isolationism, the kind that characterizes too much of Orthodoxy today. This is too much of a good thing -- and, *אם ת'צ'י'i*, we are warned not to be too much of a tzaddik. At the same time, tolerance and understanding and acceptance of those of different opinions are certainly virtuous. Without tolerance, society crumbles. But done to an extreme, these will lead to indifferentism, to deciding that it makes no difference what you believe, what you practice, what you want to do. This leads to the breakdown of Judaism, and we are told about this extreme of a good thing *אם ת'צ'י'י'י'i*, do not take too many chances with being too evil, too non-Jewish. Instead, we must have a dialectic of various virtues, an equilibrium between them, not going too far in either direction.

The same might apply to our own Jewish Center services. Certainly decorum is a good thing, one that we must constantly strive to maintain. But there is too much of a good thing too -- and then decorum leads into an ice-age, into a service so frigid

one is in danger of catching a spiritual cold in the synagogue. But if we feel too comfortable and "at home," we convert the synagogue into a market-place and we lose the feeling that we stand before God. Either one alone is -- Too Much of a Good Thing. What we need is a combination of both, in tension and concert with each other, getting the best of all virtues.

That is why in the Jewish tradition the Seder of Passover, symbolizing freedom, must come to an end (hence the afikoman), and we begin the count (of sefirah) to Shavuot, commemorating the giving of the Torah and the assumption of Jewish responsibility. Both -- freedom and responsibility -- are parts of Jewish consciousness. In the same way, the solemnity of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur lead to and are joined with the gaiety of Sukkot and Simhat Torah. Both together make the Jew what he is.

Thus we read at the end of the first chapter of Avot that Rabbi Simeon, the son of Gamaliel, taught that on three things ha-olam kayam, does the world exist: אמת, צדק, ושלום. "On Truth, on Justice, and on Peace." Each of these is a good -- but not an absolute, for they can be overdone. Important as Truth is, uninhibited honesty can be poisonous. It can lead one to the foolish frankness of telling everybody what he thinks of them, even if he was not asked. When you face a dying patient, whether to tell him the truth or not depends solely on the kind of person he is and whether it will do him good or not, whether he

can accept it or not. To tell the truth unconditionally in all circumstances is -- cruel and brutal. Similarly, Justice is certainly a foundation of society; but without mercy and compassion it can become sadistic. And Peace is certainly good, but it can lead to pacifism and passivity in the face of evil, and then it is suicidal. For the world to be kayam, to exist and survive, we must have all of these taken together, so that each can modify the extremes of the other, so that we have a good thing in this world---not Too Much of a Good Thing, which is a bad thing.

Only with this attitude of dynamic moderation can we make our contribution to ha-olam kayam, a world that deserves to survive.