

"THE NEW MORALITY AND ANCIENT EGYPT"

Ours is a sick society, or as a distinguished social philosopher said a number of years ago (using the psychiatric term quite technically), this is an insane society. I do not think it is necessary for me to describe in detail all the symptoms of this social psychopathology. Suffice it to say that this dreary list was punctuated by the rifle shot that so cruelly cut down Dr. Martin Luther King, one of the most distinguished Americans of our times, who is mourned by the entire country -- black and white, Jew and Gentile, rich and poor. It is a measure of our sickness and an index of the enormity of the tragedy that, amongst the very people whom he had come to lead and teach and guide in the ways of non-violence, there are numbers who have reacted to his martyrdom by resorting to arson and looting. Violence and unbridled hatred not only pollute this land and corrupt its national soul, but they are themselves signs of the sickness of the spirit of our country.

This morning I wish to discuss another aspect of our national disease, one that is, paradoxically, proposed as a remedy for our ills, and yet turns out to be a contributory factor to the social malaise with which we are afflicted. I refer to what is called the New Morality -- a complex phenomenon which is actually composed of several schools and subdivisions. It is the finest one, the least crude, that I wish to discuss today.

The New Morality advocates the abandonment of all traditional moral restraints, whether pre-marital or extra-marital or abnormal. There is only one rule: that no one should be hurt or offended. Better yet, it demands respect for the personality of another person, it challenges us to establish meaningful relations with others. It insists that we must always attempt to enhance the ego of our fellow man, and never to exploit him or her. A human being must always be conceived of as an end in himself, never as a means to someone else's ends. As long as this precept is observed, the New Morality considers all of our traditional sex code as superfluous and undesirable.

How ought we Jews orient ourselves to the New Morality? We must be objective, and therefore refrain from a casual, wholesale condemnation of this movement and all it stands for. The idea of personal esteem and the abhor<sup>r</sup><sub>^</sub>rence of exploitation is something that all civilization, especially the Western World, and most especially Judaism, have known before the 1960's. Yet it is good to be reminded of this in a world filled with blind passion, in which people confront each other not as individual humans but as members of races or classes or regions. If the New Morality can help recapture this sense of the value of man, it will have made a significant contribution to bettering our lives.

Yet, having said this, let us immediately add that there is nothing much else to be said in its favor. You cannot be a Jew, in

the truest sense of the word, and advocate the New Morality. Indeed, Shabbat ha-Gadol, the eve of Passover, is the most opportune time to reaffirm our much-despised and heavily-criticised traditional morality, and to reject the so-called New Morality. For the New Morality is quite old; in one form it was already known in ancient Egypt. And our celebration of the exodus is not only a summons to recall a great political and spiritual event, but also a moral occurrence of the first order. When we recall and thank God for taking us out of Egypt, we also thereby deny the morality that prevailed in ancient Egypt.

The New Morality idea of excusing lawlessness by endowing the foul act with special significance -- in this case, personal esteem and love -- is a secularized, humanistic version of ancient paganism. Egypt, in Jewish tradition, was considered a lewd country, especially in the highest levels of its society. The royal house as a matter of custom practiced incestuous marriages: brother with sister, and son with mother. But instead of merely regarding this as a dispensation to those in power, it lent it the sanction of religion. It gave the immoral act cultic meaning. The ancient world developed the institution of sacred prostitution, and it brought immorality into the house of worship. Thus, the Bible commands Israelites never to tolerate in their midst a kedeshah, the Biblical word for a woman of loose morals, and a word which derives from the word for holiness -- for it refers back to the sacred harlot of the ancient world. And Judaism, which resolutely rejected the cultic excuse for arayot

(immorality), takes the same attitude to the personal apology for immorality.

However, I do not believe that we ought to be satisfied with a mere assertion that the New Morality is unacceptable. It is too prevalent and gaining too many adherents, especially on the campus and even amongst Jews, for us to fulfill our obligations with nothing more than a declaration of unacceptability. Let us, therefore, attempt to be a bit more analytic and list four specific objections to the New Morality -- psychological, logical, religious, and moral.

My first point is that there is a psychological side to the campus' enthusiasm for the New Morality -- and by campus I refer not only to students but also faculty, especially young faculty. I do not minimize the intelligence or the idealism of today's college students. As a matter of fact, I believe that in many ways they are superior to college generations of the past. But neither do I believe that the contemporary college student is the final repository of all wisdom and the paragon of all integrity, and somehow freer of what it considers the greatest of all sins, and which it glibly lays at the door of the adult generation -- hypocrisy. I therefore suggest that there is in this exhilaration with the New Morality more than a little rationalization.

The Talmud tells us: Yod'in hayu Yisrael be'akkum she'ein bah mammash, ve'lo avdu akkum ela le'hatir la-hem arayot be'farhesya (Sanh. 63). The Israelites, in their periods of backsliding into idolatry, knew very well that the idols were empty and that paganism

was meaningless. Why then did they abandon Judaism in favor of idolatry? Because they were looking for religious sanction for public immorality. The ancient pagan cults included, as part of their worship ceremony, certain obscene rites, and when the Israelite was overwhelmed by his passions, he did not merely indulge them -- for his feeling of guilt would have been too great -- and so he declared himself a believer in the idol, and therefore was able to satisfy his passion in a supposedly respectable manner. It is all too human a failing -- to enjoy a guiltless misdeed by elevating it into an ideology.

In the same way, I suspect that the current excitement with the New Morality comes not only because of a genuine concern for meaningful personal relations, but as a way to ease a residual conscience, as a hekhsher for what one intuitively knows is wrong, as a kind of "O-U" for what one recognizes is really morally "treif." This personalistic element is all too often a tranquilizer for a conscience aroused by an excess of non-restraint.

Second is the logical point. If, indeed, all that counts is "personal and meaningful relationship," and all traditional morality is to be rejected, then the advocates of this movement must agree to accept adultery where no one is hurt and no one objects and where "meaningful relationships" prevail -- whatever that term may mean. Then, too, incestuous marriages must be approved where the partners respect each other and feel that they fulfill each other.

Furthermore, every form of perversion must now be permitted where this personal element exists. Finally, it is obvious that under such conditions of permissiveness, there can be no marriage and no family, and that all future generations must now be condemned to growing up in a family-less world. Of course, some college sophomores would be ready to argue that point -- but that, of course, is sophomoric, and I do not believe it necessary to offer counter-arguments before an intelligent audience.

Religiously or theologically, the New Morality is truly unthinkable. It is a clear case of the end justifying the means, of the goal of personal fulfillment allowing us to violate every moral principle. I do not mean this only as a theoretical objection; it actually happened in religious history, indeed, in Jewish history. The idea of a just intent excusing an unjust act, of a good kavvanah covering up an averah, constitutes a major part of the theology of the false messiah, Sabbatai Zevi. He developed the weird idea of the "holy sin," which meant that one ought to perform a sinful act if his intentions can be kept noble and holy. His followers spelled out the implications of that idea when they participated in obscene orgies, all in the name of mystical religion -- and because it was religiously approved, they were able to do this without guilt. In religious history, this is known as "antinomianism," the rejection of norms or law or halakhah in religion. The first antinomian sect to grow up in and eventually out of Judaism, was Christianity. No

wonder that the same antinomian element at the heart of Christianity has become manifest in our own days, when at a recent meeting of Episcopalian priests and others, a majority endeavored to justify as "morally neutral" acts of perversion and sodomy, provided that the relations established were "meaningful," and enabled "love" to exist between the partners.

As if this is not depressing enough, we read about two weeks ago of a Jew who accepted this Christian dispensation, and yet dares to call himself a "rabbi." The Jewish chaplain of an Ivy League university which happens to be situated within a two mile radius of this synagogue, said in a report to the press, "The crucial question is not that students are living together, but whether or not the relationship is meaningful and worthwhile."

"Meaningful?" -- what exactly does meaningful mean?

"Worthwhile?" -- to whom? To two young eighteen-year olds overcome in a moment of passion? To their parents? To their future happiness?

Is this the kind of man to whom parents entrust their children's religious, spiritual, and moral destiny when they send them to college?

For shame! The "Rabbi" of Columbia University is unwittingly a Pauline Christian sectarian who brings out not the best but the worst in Christianity and endeavors to sell it as modern, up-to-date Judaism. One might expect that a spiritual leader situated on the campus ought to derive intellectual rigor and strength from living



in an academic community, and not be carried merrily along every wave of whimsy of which college students are capable. Surely students in an intellectual community deserve better of their spiritual leaders. Contemplating such a condition, I feel moved to express myself in Biblical cadences: "In the place of eggheads, there ye shall find eggshells..."

Fourth, there is a moral objection to the New Morality; that is, it is not really moral.

The claim of the New Morality to the honorific term "moral" is its concern for personality. We have already stated that we certainly approve this emphasis. But this concern is ethical, not moral.

Permit me to explain the difference. An ethical sin is one where I actually offend my fellow man, and because such offense displeases God, it is derivatively a sin against God as well. But it is fundamentally a crime against the integrity of a fellow man. A moral sin is one in which I commit no offense against my fellow man at all, only against God and the principles that He sets for us; but the performance of my sin is such that it is carried out through the instrument of a fellow man, with his participation. Thus, robbing or murdering or cheating or gossiping is unethical -- I hurt another human being, and therefore it also displeases the Almighty. But a lewd act in which two people participate voluntarily is no offense against another man or woman but it is an offense against God and therefore primarily an immoral act.



In its introduction to the portion dealing with forbidden marital relationships, the Bible states, "After the doings of the land of Egypt, wherein ye dwelt, shall ye not do; and after the doings of the land of Canaan, whither I bring you, shall ye not do" (Lev. 18:3). The prohibited relationships legislated by the Torah were to keep us free from assimilation both to the mores of Egypt, the place of our origin, and those of Canaan, our destination. What is the difference between Egypt and Canaan?

According to one version of the Sifre, these two countries had each of them a special distinction: lo haitah ummah she'hitivu maasehem yoter mi-mitzrayim, there was no country that had performed such "abominable" deeds as had Egypt; and lo haitah ummah she'kilkelu maasehem yoter me-kenaan, there was no country which had performed such "corrupt" deeds as had Canaan. Egypt's specialty was toeivah, abominations, whereas Canaan possessed special skill in kilkul, corruption. The difference is that abomination, toeivah, is an immoral deed; whereas corruption, kilkul, is an ethical offense.

In this sense, the New Morality is most ethical -- but thoroughly immoral. This is the theme with which we began: the New Morality is ancient Egypt in contemporary form. It is not necessarily unethical, but it is most definitely immoral; it has overcome the defect of Canaan, for it is not guilty of kilkul; but is clearly practices toeivah, moral abomination.

So, the New Morality is neither new nor moral; it is psychologically suspect, logically vulnerable, and religiously ab-

horrent. It is not a viable philosophy by which decent people can live, even when we dignify it as "situational ethics" or "contextual morality." I can understand that smart people, especially smart college students, will find it attractive; smart, but not wise...

Indeed, wise people will recognize its vacuousness -- its rationalizations, its illogic, its abhorrence. The end of that verse we quoted about not imitating the deeds of Egypt or Canaan is, u-ve' hukkotehem lo telekhu, "neither shall you walk in their statutes." The famed Rabbi Joseph Saul Nathanson, the Rabbi of Lwow, once gave a most incisive explanation of those words. The Torah's term for "statute" in this verse is: hukkah. Now we know that many of the commandments are rational and comprehensible, but there are some commandments which are mitzvah beli taam, commandments which apparently have no reason, and defy rationalistic explanation. Such commandments are referred to as hukkah. Rabbi Nathanson adds that apparently not only are there commandments that are beli taam without reason, but it is also possible to think of an averah beli taam, a sin that is senseless, that defies reason! Such an unreasonable sin is also referred to as hukkah. Thus, u-ve' hukkotehem lo telekhu -- "ye shall not walk in their statutes," ye shall not accept a sin which makes no sense and has nothing to commend it in the first place! The New Morality, I submit, is such a hukkah -- an averah beli taam, an immoral ideology with little to commend it.

The Jewish tradition teaches that of the fifty symbolic shaarei tum'ah, degrees of impurity, our ancestors in Egypt possessed

forty-nine, so obtuse and so far gone were they. One of the very few things that did stand in their favor was their moral integrity, which they maintained in the face of Egyptian degeneracy. It is because of this that they were found worthy of redemption from Egypt.

As we prepare to celebrate the exodus, let us recall the great moral strength of our people and determine that we shall not weaken in the face of a resurrected Egypt in the form of the New Morality, whose newness is questionable but whose immorality is unquestionable. Let us determine to remain firm in our dedication to, our loyalty towards, and our practice of the divine morality which has been the heritage of Israel since time immemorial, and which alone can keep the Jewish family and Jewish marriage stable and enduring and the source of our future.

For only through such a morality will past and future, the generation gone by and generations to come, be reconciled. For such was the promise of the prophet Malachi in the end of today's great Haftorah: ve'heshiv lev avot al banim ve'lev banim al avotam, for in the end of days the prophet Elijah will welcome the Messiah and the beginning of redemption, and in that time of redemption the heart of the fathers will turn to their children, and the heart of the children shall be turned to their fathers.