

"NO SHORT CUTS"

Today's Torah reading consists primarily of the reading of the Ten Commandments, the asseret ha-dibrot, the giving of which we celebrate on this festival of Shavuoth. The fact that it is the greatest moral doctrine of all humanity, and the cornerstone of all civilization, it attested to in the Bible by the description of the theophany, the dramatic thunder and lightning as the Children of Israel gathered at the foot of Mt. Sinai. Our Rabbis added to the narrative with the description of the cosmic silence that descended upon the world as God was about to reveal Himself to Israel at Sinai.

The universal popularity of the Ten Commandments and the dramatic narrative both in the Bible and in Talmudic literature make all the more amazing the comparative lack of emphasis on the asseret ha-dibrot on our living tradition. Thus, Orthodox Rabbis will, preach about the Ten Commandments much less frequently than their non-Orthodox counterparts. At a Berit Milah, we wish the parents that they raise their child to a life of Torah and good deeds and that they lead him to the wedding canopy - but there is no mention of the Ten Commandments. At a Bar Mitzvah we speak to the youngster about dedicating himself to Torah, to the Mitzvot, to parents, and to community - rarely do we mention to him the asseret ha-dibrot.

Why this remarkable lack of emphasis on the Ten Commandments? Is it a matter of neglect, or is there some principle of historical and ideological importance which is at the root of this?

It will perhaps broaden our horizons and liberalize our Jewish education to know that a particular custom, minhag, which we Western Jews cherish, has not always been looked upon with unanimous favor by our great legal authorities. This

morning, as the reader recited the asseret ha-dibrot as part of our Torah portion, the congregation arose and remained standing throughout. This is an old and precious custom. And yet, some 800 years ago, an Eastern community inquired of the great Maimonides whether this custom, which they had been following, is proper or not. Maimonides, in his responsum or teshuvah, answered with an unqualified "No." He most strongly advised against the tradition of standing during the reading of the Ten Commandments, in order to avoid the erroneous impression that the Ten Commandments are in some way superior to the rest of the Torah.

Lest anyone leave this service with the impression that the Rabbi preached a sermon against the Ten Commandments, and cited Maimonides as authority, it should be known that the decision of Maimonides is based upon solid Jewish foundations. The Talmud informs us that, in the days of the Temple, the Ten Commandments were actually recited as part of the daily morning service, in the blessings that precede the Shema. In the course of time, however, the Sages decided to abolish this custom: bitlum mi-pnei taaromet ha-minim, "they abrogated the custom of reading the Ten Commandments because of the murmuring of the heretics." By "heretics" or minim they probably meant the early Christians, those who declared that only the Ten Commandments were sacred, for only they were divinely revealed at Sinai, and therefore the rest of the Torah does not have the divine authority that Jews claim for it. Therefore, in order to demonstrate clearly and unequivocally that we do not ascribe any greater inherent sanctity to one portion of the Torah over any other, and that we regard every other part of the Bible as equally binding and significant in value to the asseret ha-dibrot, the Sages abandoned the custom of reciting these Commandments during the morning service in the Temple.

So that Maimonides had good reason for his decision advising against the custom of rising during the reading of the Decalogue. If, nevertheless, we do rise, as we in this synagogue did this morning, it is not because we disagree with the reasoning either of the Talmud or Maimonides. Like them, we do

not ascribe any greater validity to the Ten Commandments than to the rest of the Torah. However, our reasoning is that we do not fear this error, because we are confident that our people know that the asseret ha-dibrot are not the totality of our religion. Our people have been taught by eminent teachers from Philo to Saadia, from Abarbanel to the Gaon of Vilna, that the special importance of the Ten Commandments lies not in their inherent superiority, but rather that they include entire classes of mitzvot rather than individual commandments, that they contain "hints" to the entire body of the Torah. Each of the asseret ha-dibrot contained implicit references to a whole category of commandments and principles. Thus, for instance, the prohibition of idolatry in the Ten Commandments also includes the various commandments warning Jews against religious mimicry, as well as such ethical principles as the prohibitions to lose one's temper, for that indicates the momentary forgetting of the existence of G-d. Or, "thou shalt not steal" refers not only to stealing property and kidnapping, but to every form of deception. "Thou shalt not commit adultery" refers not only to one specific act, but to the whole corpus of Jewish moral legislation. So that when we rise for the reading of the Decalogue, it is not only for these Ten Commandments but for the entire Torah which is implied in this particular portion.

The principle of Maimonides and the Talmud, thus remains intact: the Ten Commandments as such are no greater than other part of the Torah. In a word, there are no short cuts to Heaven. The Decalogue contains and suggests but does not supplant the 613 Commandments.

For indeed, the quest for short cuts is part of human nature no less than the desire for a bargain. We would like to be assured that we are doing the right thing - with a minimum of inconvenience, bother, or effort. We feel the duty of filial devotion, and so we seek a short cut: we discharge our obligations on two days a year, Mothers Day and Father Day. We would like to have a literary education, so we follow the American tenet for doing things quickly

and with the least effort: we buy one volume every three months which gives us a convenient digest of some half-dozen current novels. There are even people who seek short cuts in eating nutritiously: they swallow a capsule or drink a glass of liquid which contains concentrated vitamins, protein, and other essentials. Recently, one of the nations foremost physicians warned Americans that they are harming themselves by seeking medicinal short cuts instead of allowing nature to take its slow but sure course. At the least provocation, Americans are prone to reach for the pill or the powder rather than allowing natural processes to heal more slowly but more effectively. As a result, he maintained, America is the best place to be in case of major illness, but the worst place in case of a minor ailment. There are those who seek short cuts to lasting marriages by adopting a few quick principles. And there are those who think that they can win the devotion of their children by an occasional gift or outing rather than constant and serious attention. The tragedy in all these cases is soon forthcoming. People learn, too late, that too often a short cut is really a short circuit.

The same inclination for the short cut carried over into religion. We seek the easiest and most direct way to worship and be known as religious people, and thereby soothe our conscience. With the typical American impatience that prefers Instant Coffee to that which slowly brewed and mellowed, we frantically search for new brands of Instant Religion! It is against this shallow and fallacious conception that the Rabbis of the Talmud argued when they abandoned the reciting of the Ten Commandments because of taromet ha-minim, for this is a modern heresy no less injurious than that of some eighteen-hundred years ago. It is against such superficialities that the voice of Maimonides comes to us clearly today, proclaiming: there are no short cuts to Judaism! There is no Instant Religion! The life of the spirit and the continuation of Judaism is too complex and too delicate for the abrupt, brutal, and unthinking short cut.

You cannot fulfill your obligations towards the observance of Sabbath and holidays and synagogue-attendance by coming only three days a year.

You cannot fulfill your obligations of filial piety and respect by the short cut of Yizkor, instead of living the kind of life your parents would have wanted.

You cannot forego a life-long Jewish education by satisfying yourself with that ersatz substitute of Sunday school, or even the "advanced" course of Bar-Mitzvah training, the vulgar Instant Jewish Education.

You cannot become a full-fledged "good Jew" by taking the short cut of concentrating only on the giving of charity and neglecting the rest of Torah.

And you cannot attain that status even by eating "glatt-Kosher" if this will be a short cut which will tend to release you from the obligations of all the rest of Judaism, its tremendous moral challenges and its ethical demands upon the individual and society.

If the special attention we give to the reading of the Ten Commandments is an indication of an inner feeling that the Ten Commandments alone are sufficient, that these serve as a kind of religious short cut, then they do not deserve that we rise before them. There are no short cuts to Heaven.

It is interesting that the same Maimonides who was so powerfully aware of this principle with regard to the reading of the asseret ha-dibrot, sought in another area to violate the same principle. He tried to reduce the whole ideology of Judaism to thirteen ikkarim, thirteen fundamental principles, each of which begins with the word ani maamin, "I believe." There is a whole literature which deals with this experiment in Jewish dogmatology. The greatest weight of the Jewish tradition was, however, against this effort by Maimonides at theological short cuts. Thus, the great Rabbi Moses Sofer maintained that we have not thirteen ikkarim but taryag fundamentals, and they are the taryag mitzvot, the six-hundred-thirteen Commandments.

So that we have the right to be suspicious when we meet a Jew who tells us that he fulfills all his religious obligations by observing only the Ten Commandments, or only "thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself," or only this or that "Golden Rule." As a matter of fact, we may properly subscribe to the statement of a great writer, George Bernard Shaw, who declared that the only Golden Rule is that there are no Golden Rules!

The Talmud records an interesting story with which we are all no doubt acquainted. It concerns the pagan who came to the two great teachers of his period, Hillel and Shammai, and said to them, each individually, gaireni al menat she'telamdeni et kol ha-torah kulah ke'she-ani omed al regel achat - convert me to Judaism on condition that you can teach me the entire Torah during the time that I balance myself on one foot. Shammai, we are told, rejected him: dachafo be'amat ha-binyan she-bi'yado, he pushed him away with the builder's measuring rod that was in his hand. Hillel, as we know, accepted him, saying: mah d'alakh sani le'chavrekh lo ta'avid, what is hateful to thee do not do to thy neighbor. And he concluded: v'idakh perushah, zil gemor, the rest is commentary, go and study it.

I believe that Shammai and Hillel differed only as to method. But in principle both were as one. Listen carefully to the words we have said. Shammai pushed him away with the amat ha-binyan, the builder's measuring yard that was in his hand. What was Shammai doing with a measuring yard? A teacher carries books. A teacher has chalk in his hand. Why an amat ha-binyan? Here was a symbol with which Shammai tried to explain the profound principle of Judaism that there is no Instant Religion, there are no short cuts. He meant to tell the pagan: you cannot carry over into Jewish life the same attitudes you had as a heathen. You cannot expect that a sprinkling of holy water and some abracadabra by a priest one day a week will make a holy man out of you, regardless what you do at all other times and places. We do not know of short cuts. We have certain special principles, that is true. But they are like this amat ha-binyan,

this measuring yard. A builder has this kind of stick in his hand, and it serves a useful function: it can tell him where to build and how to build, but it is not the building itself! So, a Golden Rule, or Ten Commandments: they can indicate to you the size of your commitment, the limits of your faith, the strengths and weaknesses of your own spiritual personality; they can tell you where your character needs reinforcements, and where your spiritual life must be bolstered if the religious structure of your life is to have a firm foundation. But just as a measuring rod is itself not a building, so a Golden Rule is not a religion.

When the same pagen came to Hillel, he was delighted by his apparent acquiescence to his desire for a short cut. All you need learn, said Hillel, is not ~~do to~~ another what you would not want done to yourself. How simple, how wonderfully easy! But then Hillel added four words which showed that he was no different in his Jewish conception from Shammai: v'idakh perushah, zil gemora, "all the rest is commentary, go and study it." The simplicity of the Golden Rule is deceptive, for all of Torah is the absolute prerequisite for understanding and fulfilling it. You must spend a lifetime of intensive and extensive study, you must give your nights and your days to the contemplation, the understanding, and the ^earning of our holy Torah. Then, and only then, will you be ready for entrance into the body of Israel. The rule I have given you does not supplant Torah; it suggests all the rest of Torah as the indispensable minimum for the religious life of the Jew.

In the long run, the short cut in religion as elsewhere can be ruinous. Jewish tradition has taught that the taryag mitzvot, the six-hundred and thirteen Commandments, are equivalent to the sum (as traditionally conceived) of the two-hundred and forty eight organs and three-hundred and sixty five blood vessels of the human body. The totality of the Mitzvot is in the form of a

spiritual body. If we take the short cut, only the Ten Commandments or any other easy principle, than the spiritual body that results is mutilated, crippled, mauled.

We who want a healthy and wholesome Judaism, not a skeleton or truncated torso, will continue to espouse a life of taryag mitzvot, the full and indulged Jewish life, which is suggested but not displaced by the asseret ha-dibrot.

"For they are our lives and the length of our days, and in them shall we meditate by day and by night." Torah is our life; we shall forego the quick and cheap solutions, the instant methods, the easy short cuts. To Torah, to G-d, to Israel we shall give the length of our days and their fullness and may the Almighty grant us, our loved ones, our people, and all the world long days and long years filled with meaningfulness, happiness and peace.