

"WHY MORAL PEOPLE NEED TORAH"

A fundamental of Judaism that is a perpetual source of wonderment is the relation of religion and morality. A major part of Torah concerns the social and ethical obligations of man to his fellowman. The question is, why should it be necessary to have revelation at all for ideas and regulations of behavior that man can arrive at independently? Do we not know of societies preceding that of Israel at Sinai which arrived at moral codes by themselves? Do we not know individuals who are not committed to Torah and who nevertheless lead ethical, decent lives?

The question is too extensive and the problem too significant, to attempt anything approaching an exhaustive answer. But on this festival of revelation, permit me to commend one specific line of approach.

The site of the revelation is called by two names in the Bible, Sinai and Horeb. The Rabbis, as is their wont, offer us a remarkable insight by means of a play on words. They took these two names of this mountain where the Torah was revealed, and related them to two rather negative terms. Sinai is reminiscent of sin'ah, hatred, and Horeb to hurvah, destruction. Essentially, what they mean to say is that Torah, revealed at Sinai-Horeb, is what allows man to avoid hatred and curtail destruction in the world.

Simply put, the Rabbis meant that the Torah is, as Zvi Kolitz has called it, "the great deterrent" against the innate evil that rises from the breast of man. Torah restrains him, it curbs his evil propensities, it allows man to repress his concupiscence and envy by accepting the moral code of revelation.

However, just as Judaism acknowledged man's evil inclination, so it posited his native moral intuition. Man is, after all, created in the Image of God, and just as God is good so does man possess extensive reservoirs of goodness and morality. Man naturally possesses noble wishes, the feel for ethical living. Men are good and virtuous on their own, even without divine instruction.

Why then is Torah necessary? It is needed because it contributes the setting, the structure, the context for moral life. It takes man's disparate and fragmented moral inclinations, and unifies and integrates them into an overall pattern of living.

This is necessary -- and this, I believe, is the major import of the Rabbis' play on words -- because there is nothing quite as dangerous as virtues on the loose, ideals gone wild, ungrounded goodness. Without the structure and the grounding provided by Torah, virtues can turn venomous, ideals can devour us, goodness can strangle us. Never before has any generation realized as does ours that moral perfectionism can turn nihilistic and threaten us with total destruction.

What the Rabbis implied is that without Sinai we are at the mercy of sinah (hatred) and without Horeb we are at the mercy of hurvah (destruction), all wished upon us by ungrounded virtues. We need Torah not only to curb our yetzer ha-ra, but also to direct the yetzer tov, lest it become a Frankenstein's monster and turn upon us.

Here are but a few immediate examples of how a virtue, overdone, can undo us.

Honesty is, everyone will agree, a great ideal. But honesty can sometimes shade into uninhibited frankness, and frankness is often used as a tool to humiliate another person, with total insensitivity to his feelings. Honesty, then, can be used as a weapon to crush another human being. The person who honestly tells you what he thinks of you, and in the process demolishes your ego, has taken a virtue and, because it is ungrounded in anything deeper and more transcendent, allowed it to become an instrument of evil design.

Consistency is another such example. Certainly, consistency is a desideratum. But consistency can lead to rigidity, to immoveability, to an unwillingness to change for the better: since I already made a statement or performed an act, I feel that my future conduct must be mortgaged to consistency with my past.

Humility, one of the greatest of all virtues, can prove a source of hurvah. If I feel totally humble and lacking in importance then I yield to the feeling of impotence with regard to improving myself or bettering my society. I then lose my self-respect. And a man who has no respect for himself can have no respect for others. Hence, sin'ah, or hatred.

How does Torah solve the problem? How does Sinai impede sin'ah and Horeb avoid hurvah?

Each virtue or ideal, by and of itself, can be destructive if it follows a straight line of development. Great ideals carried too far are usually counteractive. But within the context of Torah, within a

total religious situation, where moral principles issue from one Source and give man the feeling of responsibility to that Source, there takes place what might be called a dialectical motion: each virtue is checked and modified by an opposite virtue, and both blend into a third ideal that preserves the best of both. In this manner, all of man's life is integrated, unified, elevated.

Consider the following illustrations and we shall see how individual virtues can lead to sin'ah and hurvah, whereas if they are integrated dialectically in the context of Sinai and Horeb, they add up to a torat hayyim, to a living Torah.

Idealism is a superb phenomenon. But it also can be deadly. *morphs into ideology -- idealism in rigor mortis -- and*
Idealism sometimes is accompanied by excessive zeal, which turns into blind passion, and ends up as fanaticism. This is the way of hurvah, destruction.

Realism alone, a virtue usually *professed* ~~possessed~~ by those of middle age and over, is certainly a virtue for people seriously attempting to construct the good society. But realism alone usually turns into resignation, the acceptance of evil and corruption, and this gradually becomes reaction, and finally -- cynicism. This is the way of sin'ah or hatred.

However, when each reacts upon the other, when each modifies the other, when a man has the combination of idealism and realism as a result of his anchorage in Sinai-Horeb, he then has avoided the pitfalls of hatred and destruction.

Freedom is certainly one of the noblest ideals of man. Yet, freedom taken to an extreme is utterly destructive. If everyone will "do his thing" without recourse to a transcendent Judge and without concern for his fellow man, there can be no constructive life. Personally it leads to immorality, and socially it leads to anarchy. This is the way or hurvah.

Its opposite is responsibility. But responsibility can be taken to an extreme too. People who feel overly responsible for everyone and everything, live under a crushing burden. All of existence becomes joyless, and they begin to lose spontaneity and therefore initiative. People who are constantly oppressed by the burden of responsibility, by the guilt feelings that it engenders, hate life. This is the way of sin'ah.

We have many such examples of each element taken to an extreme by itself. The freedom of parents to crush prenatal life, which now seems to be in vogue, will eventually lead to utter destruction, because it is only a small leap of logic from feoticide to infanticide, to getting rid of infants who may not fulfill our ideals of mental and physical health, or, eventually, ethnic and genetic respectability. The opposite can also be oppressive and bring hatred and animosity into life: an absolute decision that never must the life of a fetus be taken. Halakhah combines freedom and responsibility, and offers us guidelines as to when the one should be exercised, when the other. When freedom and responsibility react upon each other and with each other, dialectically,

we have attained the moral maturity of Judaism.

Reason or intellect have always been accorded the greatest respect in both the Jewish and Western traditions. Yet, by themselves, they make life insufferable. In our own days they have resulted in the passion for research, harsh and cruel technology, the depersonalization of society, the fostering of inhumanity. Parents and children are strangers to each other, husband and wife barely know each other, teachers and students are related to each other as employer and employee or even worse. This is the way of sin'ah, hatred.

Reason must be merged with emotion. But emotional experience and expression alone are also inadequate. The New Romanticism of the campus has tried to correct the balance by reintroducing into American life the validity of sentiment, feeling, heart. But it has tended to ignore the element of intellect, it has tended to downgrade the role of the academy as a meeting place of ideas and criticisms. And so, this New Romanticism and celebration of emotion and sentiment have turned into hysteria, to a clash of blind passions, the way of hurvah, or destruction.

When we take these two ideals together, and allow them to play upon each other and modify each other, then we have the adam ha-shalem, the "whole man" of Jewish tradition.

The same might be said for love and discipline. Love by itself can lead, amongst equals to promiscuity, and from parents to children to what has been called "smother love," to a warping of the child's per-

sonality. It is the way of hurvah. Discipline alone leads to rigidity, to a lack of warmth and affection in family and society, to a sense of isolation and alienation by the individual who feels crushed in his loneliness. It is the way of sin'ah or hatred. Together they lead to the fullness of Jewish life, to the interplay of din and rahamim, justice and mercy, which is the reflection in human society of the attributes we notice in God.

As a last example, we might take the tendency to look to the past and the one to look to the future. There are those who, especially in Jewish life, seem fixed upon the past. Their entire Jewish expression is one long yizkor. But this is the counsel of despair, it reflects a sense of unhappiness and even sin'ah towards conditions that prevail today. The other extreme is that of ignoring the past and acting as if we can create Jewish life de novo, all from a fresh beginning, looking only to the future and ignoring our roots. This is stupid, it is the way of hurvah, or destruction. A true Jewish attitude requires consideration of the past and looking to the future at the same time. To drive on the highway of life, according to Jewish teaching, we must keep our eyes on the road ahead, but every now and then, regularly, look at the rear-view mirror to know where we have come from.

It is worth repeating what I have said before from this pulpit -- anything worthwhile is really worth repeating occasionally -- in the name of the great Kotzker Rebbe. He said: klug iz krum, intelligence can sometimes lead to crookedness, as intellect is abused for corrupt

ends. Gut iz ni'uf, goodness can sometimes lead to immorality, when out of sheer love one consents to demands that are immoral. Frum iz shlecht, piety can sometimes be malicious, when it is expressed as self-righteousness and intolerance. Aber gut un klug un frum, das iz a Yid -- when you combine these virtues of goodness and cleverness and piety, then you have -- the whole Jew.

All that we have said on Revelation as the unifying factor in the moral life, on Torah as the undergirding and transcendental stabilizing factor of virtue, we can find in a famous passage in the Book of Ruth. When Boaz first makes the acquaintance of Ruth, he blesses her in the following words:

יְהוָה שְׂכָרְךָ מְלֵא וְיִשְׂרָאֵל הָאֱלֹהִים יְשַׁלְּמְךָ כְּכָל עֲמָלְךָ
 וְיִשְׂרָאֵל הָאֱלֹהִים יְשַׁלְּמְךָ כְּכָל עֲמָלְךָ

"May the Lord recompense thy work, and may thy reward be complete from the Lord the God of Israel, under whose wings thou art come to take refuge" (Ruth 2:12).

The Malbim asks: is not this verse repetitious? The first half and the second repeat each other -- the Lord recompense your work, may your reward be complete.

No, answers the Malbim, there is no redundancy here; each expression means something different. שְׂכָרְךָ and מְלֵא are rewards for different kinds of activities. שְׂכָרְךָ is the wages of the עוֹלָם, the artisan, whereas מְלֵא is the salary of the לְבַיִת, the day laborer. The poel (artisan) is one who is paid for piece work, he is compensated only for what he achieves, no matter how

long it takes him or how little time he spends on it. The sakhir, however, is paid not for achievement of specific tasks, but for the time he spends in his labors, whether it be an hour a day a week a month or a year.

What Boaz said to Ruth is this: may God compensate you for your work as a poel. Before you accepted the Revelation of Sinai-Horeb, whilst you were yet outside the community of Israel, you were a highly moral person, one who was ethically gifted. Everything you accomplished that was noble and decent will receive its reward from God. But you will be compensated as a poel, only for what you achieved that was deserving and noble. But you lacked an overall pattern; your life was moral, but only in its individual expressions, not as a totality. Now, however, that you have come to rest under the wings of God, that you have accepted the Torah of Sinai-Horeb, all your life is integrated in the service of God, every moment is lived under this great commitment to the Covenant. Now God judges the overall pattern of your life, He sees how your virtues blend and mesh and merge, and He considers not your individual acts alone, but their totality -- you are a sakhir, and your reward will be great and complete, not only when you are actively engaged in particular moral missions, but in their totality. As a Jew and the heir of the Sinaitic tradition, your reward is shelemah, whole, as you have come to place your entire life in all its aspects under "His wings."

Without Torah, without Revelation, we can have at most ⁷⁸⁸⁰, moral credit for individual deeds, and, at worst, the ravages of sin'ah

and hurvah, hatred and destruction.

Let us rededicate ourselves on this Shavuot, once again, to the great Covenant of Sinai, the great heritage of Horeb, so that not only will the Lord recompense our work, but that our reward, our *shod l'ni* be complete and whole before the Lord God of Israel.