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One of the main and most fundamental contention of all moralists of all ages is that ~~it is~~ human nature is not basically unchangeable. Ask any teacher of religion whether change is possible in Man, and his answer is inevitably "certainly". And yet, my friends, if you were to ask me that same question I would have to qualify that assertion. Is change possible? - Yes and No. If by "change" you mean the transformation of the entire character essentials, the metamorphosis of the basic qualities of the soul, the G-d - given talents and personality attributes, the answer is No. There are certain properties of the soul with which you are born, and which you cannot change, willy nilly.

Yet that is not the end of the matter. Because if by "change" you mean not the basic change of the "kochos ha'nefesh", the powers of the soul, but the salvaging of them; not the scrapping and subduing of the fundamental drives of Man, but their redirection and channeling, the answer is a resounding and wholesome Yes. A man may not be able to rid himself of the trait of stubbornness, but he can certainly direct his stubbornness to desired and beneficial directions. Simpler still, a man may not be able to cure himself from insomnia. But he can himself determine whether these waking hours be spent counting sheep or studying Torah.

The Jewish ethical literature has two names corresponding to these two types of change, and there are two schools propounding these opposing theses. One group claims that the highest goal is ~~MTXKUNXHAKMIMESH~~ "SHVIRAS HA'MIDOS", the breaking and crushing of the evil drives of man. The objectionable trait must be broken and destroyed. The other group believes this unnecessary and impracticable. Rather it proposes "TIKUN HA'MIDOS", the correction and re-direction of these dark forces, the channelling of them from the destructive ends for which they had been employed, to new and constructive ends. Redirection, not breaking and destruction, is the highest aim of ethical development. And Hassidim, who were great believers in TIKUN HAMIDOT used to object to the other school's theory and say that SHVIRAS HAMIDOS, the breaking of ~~one~~evil trait, often results in two new evil traits.

It is a remarkable fact, that considering the contemporary emphasis on education, our parents and grandparents, who were probably more successful than us in this field, rarely mentioned that word. Education in Hebrew is CHINUCH. And that word was uncommon in the homes and academies of the most learned and devoted elements of European Jewry. Rather, the emphasis was always on HADRACHAH. That word comes from "Derech" which means "way", and HADRACHAH therefore means DIRECTION. There was never an attempt to break the backbone of a person's character. Instead, it was attempted to ever so gently bend it to its proper and healthy shape. It meant direction and guidance and channeling.

Take, for instance, that characteristic known as KINAH - jealousy or envy. In its usual manifestations it is a terribly destructive and anti-social expression. How many homes have been broken and how many reputations ruined all because of jealousy! And Solomon properly exclaims, ~~וְכַדָּר כַּדָּר כַּדָּר~~, 'tis as hard and cold as the grave. And yet, surprisingly, it is the same Solomon who elsewhere exclaims with equal conviction ~~וְכַדָּר כַּדָּר כַּדָּר~~, the jealousy of scribes increaseth wisdom. Well, which is it - leading to the grave or leading to wisdom? Obviously, it is a matter of direction. If you express it by envying your friend's Cadillac or his home or his wife's mink coat - then it is KASHES KA'SHEOL. If, however, you envy his learning, his piety, his sincerity or honesty then TARBEH CHACHMAH. The same jealousy, the same envy. Only the direction has changed.

The Talmud tells a remarkable story which is a sharp illustration of our theme. The great sage R. Yochanan was bathing in the Jordan one day when there suddenly appeared a man known and feared by the name Bar Lekisha, a man who was the head of terroristic gang of robbers. He was a man of uncommon strength and determination. With one huge leap he spanned the Jordan and came to the side of R. Yochanan intent upon either robbing or kidnapping him. When the sage witnessed this remarkable demonstration of power, he exclaimed,

"CHAILLEICH LE'ORAISSA", meaning, "O, if only such power were used for the study of the Torah - You see, This Herculean bandit subsequently turned to Torah and, as the student and later the brother-in-law of R. Yochanan, redirected and channeled ~~these~~ extraordinary might so that he ultimately became the great and beloved sage, Resh Lakish, second only to R. Yochanan himself. You see, Resh Lakish originally knew that he could never rid himself of this extreme expression of power and thought himself doomed to a life of banditry. It was R. Yochanan who introduced him to the idea of TIKUN HAMIDOS, direction and channelling.

In more recent times there is also such a case. My teacher of Talmud at the Yeshiva, the great scholar Rabbi Soloveitchik recently told of an interesting conversation between his grandfather, the world-famous sage and eminent Talmudist, Reb Chaim Brisker, and his son, Rabbi Soloveitchik's father, Reb Moshe. Said Reb Chaim to Reb Moshe, "My son, not always was I the person you know me to be. I was born with mean and destructive tendencies. I was granted diabolic powers, and I have had to struggle all my life to turn these very powers to constructive ends, to redirect these urges and drives from the Evil to the Good".

And in a way, my friends, the holiday of Purim commemorates this very element of TIKUN HAMIDOS. Mordecai, the hero of the Megillah, was not heir to pink-cheeked angelic qualities. He was a hard, practical man, a man who had tasted exile, who was intimately familiar with the intrigues of the court of Ahasuerus and who had a staunch, unbreakable spirit. Mordecai's refusal to bow to Haman, his brilliant execution of the plan to ensnare the antisemitic tyrant and his adamant refusal to concede defeat mark him as a bold spirit. Now boldness is a thing which is not always good. Mordecai's boldness was an inheritance from his less illustrious ancestor, Shimi. It was Shimi who was the bold and disrespectful insurrectionist who disparaged King David to his face and publicly accused him of being a bloody murderer. It was boldness indeed, and a libelous, false, evil type of boldness, for he besmirched the good name of the saintly author of the Divine Psalms. Yet this same boldness which he transmitted genetically to his descendant Mordecai was used by Mordecai for entirely different purposes. It was used to vanquish a Haman, not to insult a David. It was not the boldness of empty invectives, not the effrontery of disrespectful vituperation; but it was nevertheless boldness. Only it was used in the service of G-d, in the saving of a persecuted people, in the altruistic service of a high and glorious ideal. No wonder the Rabbis applied to him the verse from Job: *מִן הַטָּמֵא יֵצֵא הַקָּדוֹשׁ* Mordecai was the unclean come from the clean, he inherited a certain set of dynamic qualities which had been used for evil, but which he redirected and channelled to holiness.

Our national scene today could learn a bit from Mordecai's determined boldness in the right direction. The two paramount issues in our national capitol these days are the issues of Communism in government and Corruption in government. The main ire of our elected representatives has been spent in trying to dig up incontrovertible proof that certain individuals, who once were distantly related to the government wrote poison pen letters of leftist nature when they were in knee pants. The witch-hunt has been marked by the parallell features of uncontrolled baldness and increasing stupidity. Meanwhile, the search into vital matters of national morals and ethics have gone unattended except for occasional blasts of publicity. What is needed is a shift of emphasis, a redirection. We must switch our emphasis from the silly boldness of the McCarthys and McCarrans to the boldness of seeking out corruption, or, if I be permitted the pun, a New Boldness supporting Mr. Newbold Morris in his determined drive to seek out the sources of ethical degeneration in our government.

Our Conservative Rabbis, for instance, are also very bold. Their boldness knows no limits when it comes to villifying and scandalizing and ridiculing the Orthodox. Every Conservative Rabbi suddenly becomes a Dreiden and Swift rolled into one. Now we know and grant the right to them to disagree with the Traditionalists. But if only this irony and boldness were occasionally used against the Mapam and Shomer Hatzair and the forces of irreligion. If only they would, like Mordecai, redirect and channel their boldness.

And, my friends, not only destructive urges, but also talents and gifts wasted unnecessarily must also be channelled, must also experience TIKUN HAMIDOT. Many of us, Thank G-d, are not possessed of exceptionally destructive tendencies. But many of us have been blessed with special natural abilities which we often allow to go to waste. These too must be captured and harnessed to productive ends. To our talents we must also say, as Rabbi Yochanan said, CHAILLEICH LE'ORAISSA, this strength for Torah. Bertrand Russell tells that he never plays chess, because when he was a child he was fanatically devoted to the game, and he came to realize that if he were to pursue it he would eventually become the world's greatest chess-player. But then he pondered, and saw that his life would thus be wasted, for chess is, no matter how respectful a game, only a game. Harmless, - but of no great benefit to humanity. And so Russell stopped playing chess and instead went into mathematics and logic and philosophy and so was ultimately able to become the co-author of Principia Mathematica. Modern man, because of his increased leisure time, has taken to HOBBIES on a grand scale. There is no doubt a criminal negligence involved in the human genius utterly wasted on golf, football, canasta, crossword puzzles and bridge. A hobby is good up to a certain point. Then it becomes waste. Athletics is wonderful, hygienic. But after a certain limit it becomes a travesty. We must learn to channel and direct these forces and use them profitably and constructively.

The experience of MORDECHAI MI'SHIMI is a universal one, and an eternal one. Its message transcends the provincial borders of ancient Persia of that century and like a beacon whose rays are a blessing to those in the distance, we of today bask in the enlightening thoughts of yesteryear which prove an inspiration and lesson to us.

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