

“Doing Your Own Thing?”

A Jewish View

based upon a sermon by

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The fashionable idiomatic exhortation, "do your own thing," is one of the most formidable slogans of our day. It defines the New Left in politics, the New Morality in conduct, and the New Generation in everything from art to drugs and theatre to hygiene. This awkward expression is new, one of the many products of the contemporary semantic experimentation and inventiveness. But as so often happens with neologisms, new words or terms represent ideas that are really quite old and well known.

What it means is that every man must seek to satisfy his own self and not some other. The greatest virtue is to express yourself rather than to submit to the will of another. Values should be autonomous, self-generated, self-satisfying; not heteronomous, obedient to some other person or group that lays down values for you. This orientation therefore rejects any way of life in which the individual is not the center of all his concerns. Hence, all the old standards and criteria, whether in conduct or morality or art or politics, are now brought into question and usually rejected in favor of "doing your own thing." Naturally, religion with its insistence upon God's authority as Creator, is considered *passe*; unless, of course, "doing the religion thing" satisfies one's personal whim or inclination, in which case religion turns into a form of harmless idiosyncratic psychopathology.

As Jews, can we see anything positive in this new attitude? The answer, I believe, is: Yes. There is in it an emphasis that we must relearn for our times. Since the days of Karl Marx, who complained about the "reification" or reduction of man into a "thing," into an object for exploitation rather than a subject possessed of individual dignity and integrity, modern thinkers have been aware of the dangers to the individuality and personality of men. Our society tends to de-personalize human beings. To the extent, therefore, that this new approach seeks to preserve individuality and enhance the uniqueness of each human being, to save him from the tyranny of conformity, it is something which we accept and welcome. Judaism, after all, believes in the creation of man in the Image of God, which means that man in some way recapitulates the attributes of the Creator. But the Creator is unique, He is absolutely different from any other being; therefore, each of His creatures is also unique in some way. No matter how great the population of the universe, each individual member of it is different from every other. He is irreplaceable. That is what the masters of the Kabbalah meant when they said that the soul of each individual Jew has its root in a different letter of the Torah. In the spiritual economy of the universe, every man has his own unique role for which no other human being can be an adequate substitute. If "doing your own

thing" means reenforcing this kind of spiritual dignity and the fulfillment of one's own individuality and destiny, then it is all to the good. Religion has not always been as sensitive to this value as it should, and the emphasis is therefore a valuable one.

However, except for this one important point, the whole "doing your thing" syndrome is without doubt most objectionable—and not only from a Jewish or religious point of view, but also because of general considerations.

For one thing, it is often associated with fuzzy thinking. It makes unclear use of fashionable existentialist and psychoanalytic vocabulary. The "doing your thing" people revel in such terms as "authentic," "spontaneity," "autonomy," "meaningful personal relations," often articulating them with a kind of "sincerity" that might be regarded as a form of secular piety. These are semantically loaded terms, designed to impress us with their virtue. But they do not really mean very much, for they have been over-exploited, ruined by success and popularity. For instance, it is possible to murder—"spontaneously"; to press the button that will drop a nuclear shower upon a neighboring nation—with "authenticity"; to take that which belongs to someone else—as an act of "autonomy"; and for a tormentor to establish "meaningful personal relations" with his victim. Apparently, many of the advocates of "doing your own thing" took their freshmen courses in general philosophy and psychology—and then dropped out and turned off. The favorite words they use, designed to impress the rest of us, have been emptied of the significance they once had. They have been reduced to linguistic caricatures.

Second, this new subjectivism is generally uncreative. The essence of the "doing your thing" syndrome is involvement with the self: self-indulgence, self-concern, self-enhancement—often self-pity, and ultimately self-delusion. This constant attention to the self, this radical subjectivism, means that we ignore the objective world, which refuses to accord to each ego all that importance and self-centeredness. But when we do that, we can make no creative contribution to society.

Thus, in politics, the New Left, which is fundamentally a "do your own thing" phenomenon, is more concerned with means and action than with ends and goals: it involves sitting-in, running riot, walking picket lines, standing out, lying down — exhibitions and breakups and demonstrations and disruptions, whether of racists or liberals, whether of pro-Vietnam speakers or anti-Vietnam Senators. The activists seem to be more interested in their activism than in the desired results for which all this

activity is undertaken. In a recent article in *The American Scholar* (Walter Goodman, "On Doing-One's-Thing," Spring 1969 issue), one writer maintains that "political participation becomes a kind of therapy" for the New Left. It makes little difference what their goals are, as long as they "do their own thing" in the process. "Political strategy is formulated to get the maximum emotional kick." But once you release this excess emotional energy, and get it out of the system, what is left? It remains ultimately uncreative.

To a large extent, we must have the boldness to assert that a similar kind of hoax is being played on us in the arts. I am not referring to serious abstract or surrealistic painting, but the kind of pop-art that has achieved eminence nowadays. Laymen are often made to feel that they are Phyllis-tines or ignoramuses or worse, because they do not appreciate the work of "artists" who are more interested in enjoying the sensation they produce and the shock they administer than in communicating esthetically. Now, there is nothing wrong with enjoying what you are doing; blessed are those who do. But must we relinquish our demand that *skill* be acknowledged in art? Doing-your-own thing may be tolerated; but must it be admired as an art form? When there is no discipline, there is no creativity. When there is no skill that is mastered, no pain that is risked, no anguish that is embraced as part of learning, the result may be of value, but only for the one who practices them.

True personal greatness comes not from abandon but from discipline, in any field. Hasidism meant this when it preached the doctrine of *shevirat haratzon*, the "breaking" of one's own will, self-discipline to the point of denying what you really want in order to learn how to keep your self in check. There is a higher "self" than the appetitive will, and it is that which must be in control.

The rejection of such unpleasant tasks is regressive. It reveals an infantilism in the feelings of omnipotence and self-sufficiency that it inspires in the one "doing his own thing," and in the desire for instant gratification and self-indulgence. More charitably, we might characterize this whole orientation as an experiment in prolonged adolescence. Notice, for instance, the search for identity that is so evident in the young people involved. Every clergyman or social worker or parent of adolescent children knows how difficult a period this is. Growing up is painful—and often leads to temporary distortions. Some adolescents assume that if you "do your own thing," if you express yourself, especially in an unusual and unorthodox manner, you will somehow discover your real identity. Somewhere on the

margins of normality, on the fringes of socially acceptable conduct, you will find out who you really are. But this is based upon a fundamental error. Identity cannot be "discovered," it must be *invented*. The "do your own thing" solution to the "identity crisis" involves an erroneous romantic notion: that the "real me" pre-exists, and all I must do is find it, which I can do if given the right conditions. But that is simply not true. No pre-formed identity will suddenly emerge on the picket line or at a marijuana party. The true search for identity is far more demanding and creative: it means that we must form and forge and create our identity in the crucible of experience, that we must shape it and mold it with every new challenge and stimulus and crisis. And to do this, it is not so important that we *express* ourselves—we frequently do not have enough of a self to express—but to make ourselves available for *impressions* from people and movements and ideas that really count.

The third objection to "doing your own thing" is that it can prove dangerous. What begins as a harmless exercise in permissive egotism may turn into the peril of anarchy—politically, morally, and esthetically. Sooner or later, a person breaks not only the rules that affect solely his personal moral life, but all social bonds: he fails to keep his word, he fails to honor the property and the life of others.

In an important play, "Tango," a contemporary Polish playwright has portrayed the tyranny that must inevitably come in the wake of excessive permissiveness, the degeneration of liberty into license. Ultimately, this egotistical permissiveness will engender a reaction of furious repression in which all freedom is snuffed out. Those who cherish freedom will understand that you cannot always "do your own thing", because if you do—there will come a time when you may be permitted to do nothing at all. Liberty and freedom and genuine autonomy and authenticity are too precious to jeopardize by pushing them to extremes and thus inviting a reaction that will eventually destroy them.

Judaism granting that the fundamental decision to accept God and Torah is free, personal, and individual, nevertheless rejects the idea of total autonomy, of unlimited "doing your own thing." Certainly individuality ought not to be suppressed by a stifling religious conformism. The Torah gives us a wide range of choices in which we can express our own individuality within the limits of spiritual permissibility. One man may specialize in the study of Torah, i.e., the intellectual disciplines; another, more devout and emotional by nature, may find fulfillment in prayer; one may develop expertise in charity and social benevolence, another in the per-

formance of *mitzvot*, and yet others may enhance God's Image through music and art or science and technology. But all of these varied ways lead to self-transcendence rather than self-indulgence. Our ideal is not *autonomy*, but *theonomy*, accepting the law of God—and this acceptance is a highly individual thing. The great slogan of the Rabbis is: "nullify your will before God's will." True emancipation must be preceded by renunciation.

For Judaism, man reaches the fullness of his human authenticity not when he does "his *own* thing" but—to follow through in the same idiomatic vein—when he does *God's thing*, when he lives in accordance with the *devar Hashem*, which in this age of strange jargon we may translate not only as "God's *word*," but as "God's *thing*." The essence of religion is that God, not man, is the center of the universe.

It behooves Jews who are genuinely and authentically committed to Torah to dissent from the self-centered permissiveness now rampant. Furthermore, we must appreciate that "doing God's thing" is no less exciting and thrilling and fulfilling than "doing your own thing." Self-transcendence is far more fascinating than self-indulgence. Let no one imagine that young Jews today who are committed to Judaism are any less happy in their Jewishness than those who have chosen other paths.

In a significant coincidence, in the early part of this month (March, 1969), the daily press told about Barnard College women forcibly moving into men's dormitories at Columbia College. At about the same time, on a wintry Sunday night, students of Stern College for Women joined thousands of others in a long waiting line around Yeshiva University in an attempt to get into Lamport Auditorium — to hear Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik lecture on "Kingship and Holiness!"

While the world "does its own thing," committed and knowledgeable Jews will "do God's thing." If this is just another instance of "doing our own thing," a matter of our individual and personal preference—so be it. "Make His will your will," the Sages counselled in the Ethics of the Fathers.

But before one can consider the Jewish way of life as his "own thing," he has to be ready to submit to discipline, renunciation, self-control, and, above all, painfully to abandon self-centeredness. Judaism teaches the Jew that he finds himself only when he loses himself.

Indeed, the end of the passage just quoted from the Ethics of the Fathers is: "in order that He shall make your will His will."

What a magnificent mutual relationship Judaism envisions between man and God! You do God's thing. Then *He* will do *your* thing.

