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ZEIDE

Records & Recollections – II

It is a rare quality indeed that allows a man to be both good and great at the same time, for these two are in almost diametric opposition. Only a strongly fortified soul can contain them without allowing one to predominate over the other.

Goodness, benevolence, requires society for its full and proper expression. It is the nature of goodness to be realized on one or ones other than the self. Goodness is a quality of a relationship, and a relationship implies a plurality, more than one. A person has reached the apex of goodness when all his intricate bonds of relationships with his fellow men shine with the luster of benevolence, happiness, and mutual respect. It is through these bonds that the superior faculties of a man's soul are expressed, much as dynamo requires wires for the conduction of an electric current; and the accomplished act of his object having received charity, love, or favor is the crowning achievement of his goodness. Goodness, then, cannot exist in isolation. A hermit cannot execute a human relationship from the within to the without, and is therefore practically incapable of goodness.

Genius, however can thrive mostly in strict isolation when the mind is independent and is free from all social entanglements and can turn in on itself in contemplation of objective ideas. When performing his intellectual or artistic functions, the genius must be free from his normal social duties and obligations. He must then be a hermit, an iconoclast, unhampered and undistracted by social or domestic relationships. In this isolated condition, genius can find self-expression free from the prejudices nurtured by society and unaffected by the deleterious influence of the masses. In this sense, genius is primarily elitist and even egotistical. It is an expression of the self for the self, and its wholeness is guarded by a selfish sanctity. Only after genius has fully expressed itself is the object of its expression may it be viewed and appreciated by society.

The core of the matter – and I now find myself forced to write incoherently – is compounded of two things: one, a certain quality of his which consisted of his that consists of his experience of a particular process and my observation of it., and two, a direct challenge to me, the observer, to equal or imitate it in my own life. I now suddenly recollect the following scene: I am sitting along the length of the long red table in his library, with my back half-turned to the big black volumes in the bookshelves. He is leaning over me, in his shirt sleeves, without a jacket, breathing warmly down my neck and bearing a faint, scholarly nicotine odor about him. We are both peering into a “Rambam” trying to solve some intricate -- to me, anyway – problem which I have come across while studying. He had noticed my difficulties and had asked me what was wrong. I had told him of this problem and explained my predicament. Now he is peering into the giant, yellow-tinged volume for about one minute with his lips pursed till they almost touched his nose. Learning on the table with his left arm and turning the pages with his right hand, he now flexes his eyebrows then lifts them.

I consider this sentiment self-pity because I miss him personally – what he meant to me because of his altruistic and paternal interest in me, and because he was so much an integral part of my life that I could not and still cannot bear to think of life without him. His firm guiding hand, and his generosity of treating me as an equal – which I most certainly was not -- have become a so much part of me that their absence leaves me with a horrible emptiness and loneliness, a sheep cut off from the flock, not knowing whither to travel, which path to choose, and when ultimately making the choices thrust upon me, doing so with a pronounced feeling of uncertainty, hesitancy, and lack of finality.

Underneath all these sentiments that still lie upon me right now, as I write these words, I am aware of a curious and almost completely nondescript feeling that is, somehow, compounded of an annoying diffidence or dissatisfaction with myself along with a palpable confidence in his everlasting presence within me. I do my best to capture this sensation for this record, although I cannot promise to do it justice.

Addendum

I might add, hastily, that this idea of the loneliness of genius is applicable to the spiritual as well as the intellectual, and holds equally on a rational, objective basis as on an individual idiosyncratic one. Hence my belief that the characteristic genius of Israel can be fully expressed primarily when Israel is "alone" --, free from the distractions of Diaspora, an independent nation permitted to channel her energies and devote her time to what she see fit. This, of course, becomes a powerful Zionist argument. Further, there are many references to this, i.e., עַם לְבַדָּד יִשְׁכֵּן. It is indeed our isolation which allows us to express as a nation of our national genius. And, it is only after we have had sufficient opportunity, in our isolation, to manifest our genius by our creative work, that we will emerge out of our hiding and, so to speak, display our wares for the world. This period of creativity in isolation is, indeed, according to Maimonides, the Messianic period. The latter, the reestablishment of contact with the world, as foretold so eloquently by Isaiah and Amos, is a necessary act that is indeed the first great accomplishment of the post-Messianic era.

To return to the scene I described above, still pondering the problem he shakes his hand slowly now downward to the right, now downward to the left, as if he is uncertain of the correctness of the Rambam or, rather, as if manifesting a slight appreciation of my קושיא. He then reverts to pressing his lips, this time for a very short while and then, suddenly, his face lights up in a delightful smile and his eyes begin to dance. I know now for sure that he has detected the fallacy in my reasoning, and is even laughing at himself for not having caught on to it immediately, although I later realize that the point was exceptionally subtle. The matter is explained to me in an organized, systematic and detailed fashion as if it had been prepared for weeks and had been carefully put into writing. When I manifest the first happy signs of cognizance, usually accompanied with an outdrawn "oh-h" which he immediately mimics, ridiculing me affectionately, he raises his face to me and lifts his eyebrows quizzically. I recognize the crystal-clear challenge compounded of "Well, why couldn't you do it?" and "Nu, nu, let's see if you can work out this one," followed by his presentation to me of a new but similar problem.

It is this exhilarating combination of personal relationships, of attitudes and of dialogue that always was with me then, that I reexperienced at the cemetery – the word seems so out of context here-- and which I now feel and hope to feel and remember and treasure the rest of my days. Here I have seen his infallible perspicacity in the developing process of its activity-- not only the concrete result but more important – an act of creation! I observed his dynamic process of coming to a decision which, as was true of almost all of his decisions, was time and again proven correct by the acid tests of experience, a quality which played such a great role in making him the excellent and perfect פוסק, judge, that he was. Again I must sit in frozen admiration and wonder at his remarkable and awesome insights, his ability to discuss the final outcome in all their ramifications, from the pattern of the complex conditions as they were, a quality which is the unique and deciding characteristic of the prophet.

But more than the bewilderment of this objective quality, there lies pierced in my heart, like a golden arrow, the double challenge contained in the “Nu, Nu”?” with which he reproached me, and with which he urged me on. This challenge, which is so important to me and which is of such great significance in my life, I can describe in no other way than by saying that it is – conscience! Yes, that it is Conscience. The outstanding quality of conscience is that it mockingly reproaches you for your past and at the same time, by the technique of challenge, affectionately encourages you to a fuller and more creative future.

I must now again be incoherent and reminisce discontinuously in line with this startlingly correct description of what I set out to record. It was this challenge which forced me out of his room when they were preparing his body for burial -- “Why do you want to see this?” they asked me, and I fled. The same mocking reproach and urge to more self-confident and constructive action surged within me when I visited his grave the day before yesterday. I heard him say to me, in an affectionately mocking, “Why make a fool of yourself crying here now?” And then, “Go home and start studying. You have a lot of constructive work to do that you’ll be missing if you tarry here too long. Not that I mind your presence...”

(It seems that the remainder of this piece is missing)