

ON BEING OUT OF TOUCH

It is no great news that our world is a rather unhappy one. Judging by the quantity of sleeping pills sold, Peace-of-Mind books on the best-seller lists and lectures on how to overcome all sorts of personal problems, most of us are in a pretty bad shape. And the best sellers, the sleeping pills and the lectures do little to help us in our unhappiness.

Most recently, one book has appeared which is different from the rest. It is different because the book itself is far more profound than the eager salesmen of Quick Happiness offer us, and because the author is one of the outstanding psychoanalysts of our day. Dr. Erich Fromm's latest thought-provoking book is entitled "The Sane Society", and addresses itself to the problem at hand - why is ours such an unhappy day.

According to Fromm, this profound unhappiness of contemporary man can be traced to the ALIENATION of the individual from the basic and essential forces of life. The alienated person experiences his very self as an alien, an outsider. He is out of touch with himself as he is out of touch with any other person. The individual has become only a cog in the great machines of production and consumption. We do not know how bread is made, how cloth is woven, how a table is manufactured...we live in a world of things, and our only connection with them is that we know how to manipulate or to consume them. Our lives have become depersonalized, and we have given up every vestige of self-hood in order to achieve the thin and shallow Success which everyone is expected to strive for. Our people are educated, well-fed and profess a belief in G-d. But underneath it all is a great spiritual void and religious bewilderment. Modern man is an alien in his world.

This is the analysis Dr. Fromm has to offer. We are unhappy because we are alienated from life, and out of touch with both others and ourselves. It is a brilliant analysis, and you can convince yourselves of it by reading the book.

Now, what is the solution? Stop deifying the machine, Fromm tells us. Be done with this hollow glorification of power and success. Create the Sane Society "in which man relates to man lovingly, in which he is rooted in bonds of brotherliness and solidarity". No one can disagree with the intention of this solution. But we may take exception to its practicality

First, it is difficult for individuals, in order to rid themselves of alienation in their own lifetimes, because it takes more time than that to remake all of society. It is perhaps too much to ask of us to enter into a relation of immediate brotherliness with others when the others are not prepared for it. Second, it is very possible that the lack of brotherliness and creativity, the very fact that we are out of touch with ourselves, is partially a result of our lack of alienation and aloneness, and not the cause of it. So prescribing brotherliness for the disease of alienation is no more than removing a symptom, not going to the root of the malady.

But third, and most important, is that even if we grant all other objections, the solution will not work for us Jews. It may be bold and unpopular to say so, but the fact is that we Jews, wherever we are, were, are and always will be regarded and made to feel like aliens. It is not of our own choosing - it is hard, stubborn, irreducible fact that no matter how extensive our political rights, no matter how deep our loyalty to the nations of which we are citizens, no matter even how much we want to be accepted completely and not as aliens, our very differentness makes us just that - aliens. Except by suicide, we cannot rid ourselves of our Jewishness, and that Jewishness always marks us off from all others, it makes us aliens. And let me make myself clear: not only do the half- and three-quarter- anti-semites regard us as being alien. The finest gentile thinkers, people of great moral and intellectual substance in their own right, do so. The renowned Protestant theologian Paul Tillich recognizes the differentness of the Jew when he asserts that there must always be a Judaism

if only to act as a corrective against Christianity's relapsing into paganism. That great economist Thorstein Veblen said of us that the Jew is "an alien of uneasy feet...a wanderer in the intellectual No Man's Land...seeking another place to rest, further along the road somewhere over the horizon." It is the Jew's differentness, his being an alien, that is responsible too for the fact that he has shown himself a leader in all kinds of progressive movements, in politics, in labor, in economics. Whether that alienation has evoked admiration or condemnation of us or by us, the fact remains that we are aliens, and that even if the rest of society should become, in Fromm's words, "sane", we would remain the aliens.

Now, if that be so, we are faced with a very unappetizing conclusion. If alienation is the root-cause of modern man's great unhappiness, and if the Jew must forever, in the Diaspora, remain an alien, then it would follow that the Jew must forever be doomed to unhappiness. Must it be so? Must we, in all truthfulness, concede that to be a Jew is to accept the fate of unhappiness and misery?

I do not think that it must be so. And allow me to explain by an illustration, drawn from this week's Biblocal portion, in comparison with the predicament of most of us American Jews.

The rise of Joseph in ancient Egypt is a Biblical Horatio Alger story. He started out as an immigrant, a slave and a prisoner, unknown and unwanted. Within a short time, by the use of a lot of brain power, he has become a powerful figure in government - second to Pharo alone - and a man of great personal wealth with a reputation as a wizard of finance. He marries into an important family and literally has the world eating out of his hands. Most American Jews have experienced a similar rise in political power, economic wellbeing and material success in this blessed country.

But the picture is not complete until we add the anti-climax, one the Bible tells of Joseph and which we recognize as ~~german~~ applying as we l to our own situation. For all his success, for all his eminence, for all his fame, no Egyptian would break bread with him! "For the Egyptians would not break bread with him, for they consider it an abomination". The great vice-lord of Egypt, saviour of their empire and favorite of Pharoah - he was abominable to the most menial Egyptian, because he was, after all, a Jew! - an outsider, a foreigner, an ALIEN. Is it not so too with the American Jew? - despite all his attainments in the world of commerce or science or the professions, despite all his patriotism and sacrifice for America - he remains a Jew, an alien, whether for good or for bad, whether it results in him being tagged as a man with drive and ambition, or as a subversive and either capitalist or communist, or, ultimately, as the descendant of those reputed to have crucified the Nazarene.

But here is where our comparison ends, and with great abruptness. ~~The American Jew, despite his~~ ~~we~~ Joseph is above all a happy man. He doesn't care one whit whether or nor he is socially acceptable. He doesn't bother with worrying about not being invited to dine with his Egyptian peers. Loyal to Egypt, yes. But forcing himself upon them - not necessary. He has been successful in his undertakings and he is happy. He has two children, and names the first Menashe in recognition of his gratitude that he has forgotten the grudges against those who made his youth one stretch of uninterrupted misery, and the other Ephraim in thankfulness for his great success. He is an alien, he knows it, and yet he is supremely happy!

What of our American Jew? You know the answer as well as I do. He can be a major industrialist, a millionaire, happily married, in good health and a man of influence. But if, Heaven forbid, he is not invited to the gentile Country Club, if he sees a "restricted" sign on a hotel billboard, if he detects the least sign of his own social unacceptability in gentile society, he is ready to commit suicide! All his other real successes are hollow for him, he is resentful, he is anxious, ready for the psychiatrist's couch and, as a result of his ALIENATION, a miserable, forlorn, unhappy man. This alienation has transformed and ruined his life as no failure in business could do. Life's pleasures have no real allure for him beside this great tragedy of social alienation.

So then, while this alienation which we Jews must experience whether we like it or not has caused much unhappiness in the ranks of American Jewry, it is not a situation which must necessarily continue to exist. It is still possible to find happiness, as did Joseph under similar conditions.

Wherein lies the difference between the Josephs and the great majority of our fellow-Jews? It lies in this: that the American Jew is a COMPLETE ALIEN, utterly without roots, whereas Joseph has roots which run deep, and his roots are - in heaven! He is spiritually anchored, religiously fastened, he is not an alien to G-d, and hence his happiness is supreme, much greater than the kind of happiness society would experience even if it did adopt Erich Fromm's advice. Whereas the Josephs are close to G-d, rooted in Torah, in touch with the Almi--ty, the American Jew, that composite being, is estranged from his Maker, has no roots in a spiritual realm and is out of touch with G-d just as he is out of touch with his fellow humans and hence himself. The brotherliness - to all people, the creativeness, the relatedness which Dr. Fromm preaches as the solution to alienation, is found in Joseph and all the Josephs who have roots in Heaven and are not aliens to G-d. Having this greater, deeper and more permanent companionship and relatedness, the social alienation they experience on earth is not only tolerable, but, what is more, becomes creative! Not unhappiness but happiness, not anxiety and neurosis but tranquility and creativity are the lot of those who are not alienated from G-d. The true Jew has never been like a tree, with roots in this material world, but like a hanging vine whose roots are in heaven and who can enjoy the earthly atmosphere all the more because of it.

Philo, the great Jewish philosopher of the bustling metropolis Alexandria of 2,000 years ago, wrote that those whom the Torah calls wise are always represented as sojourners - aliens! "Their way is to visit earthly nature as men who travel aboard to see and learn.... To them the heavenly region, where their citizenship lies, is their native land; the earthly region in which they become sojourners is a foreign country" (quoted in "Selections from Philo" ed. ~~Hugo Bergman~~ Hans Lewy, p.37). That is the point we are making: when a man is deeply religious, truly pious, when he is in touch with G-d and a citizen of Heaven, then his alienation from petty little societies is not worthy enough to make him unhappy.

As we American Jews begin the fourth century of our sojourn, let us remember that - that the sense of alienation does not reflect unfavorably on the hospitality of America or the loyalty of Jews; and that that alienation can destroy our happiness unless we end the estrangement between ourselves and our Father in Heaven, unless we reaffirm our citizenship in Heaven, our relatedness through Torah and our brotherliness in all men because they were created in the Image of G-d. May the supreme happiness be ours as we keep ever in touch with G-d.

* examples: attractive work, law work; got - 34 calls for, overbilled him money, Singapore