

Sermon delivered in Finchley Synagogue,  
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The Torah's moral code is the accepted cornerstone of Western civilization. Unfortunately, however, despite its widespread acceptance in theory, statistics in recent years indicate that it is honored more in the breach than in the observance. Moral laxity and marital infidelity have become part of a matter-of-fact way of life not only amongst the idols of the amusement world, but for an ever larger number of ordinary people. The most corrosive aspect of this situation is not what it does to those who do not care, but what it has done to the morale of those who are truly moral. Since they are in the minority, or a gradually diminishing majority, they tend to think that perhaps they are wrong. They are afflicted with self-doubt: perhaps unchastity is normal, and those who abstain are not normal. Maybe, as some statisticians have suggested, our whole moral code needs revamping. Since much of what has been previously condemned as immoral and degenerate is now widely practiced, perhaps they should no longer be regarded as wrong and reprehensible.

It is against this devious kind of reasoning that the Torah, centuries ago, proclaimed in clear words, in its introduction to its moral code, the doctrine: "Like the doings of the land of Egypt, wherein you dwelt, shall you not do; like the doings of the land of Canaan, whither I am bringing you, shall you not do; neither shall

you walk in their statutes" (Lev. 18:3). What the Torah is saying is that what is being done -- whether in Egypt or Canaan -- is no guide for what should be done -- whether in those places or London or New York or Tel Aviv or anywhere else. The "is" should not limit and determine the "ought."

A distinguished American man of letters, Joseph Wood Krutch, has brilliantly analyzed our contemporary dilemma as a semantic obfuscation of two concepts which are most pertinent to our discussion. They are, "average" and "normal."

A new phenomenon in our modern age -- with its democratization, its penchant for measuring and statistics, and its mass culture -- is the tendency to identify the normal with the average, to believe that what most people do must be right. The sophisticated call this "relativism." The ordinary man knows it by experience as "being normal." To do as most people do -- that is normal. To do otherwise -- that is abnormal, or subnormal, as the case may be. When a young mother says, "I want my child to be normal," she usually -- though not always -- means that she does not want him to stand out by being too bookish or too intellectual -- or too frum. She means "average," though she says "normal."

This confounding of the normal and the average is one of the most fundamental and disastrous errors that anyone can make. In order to remain civilized and prevent our whole society as well as our personal lives from deteriorating to the lowest common denomina-

tor, we must appreciate the tremendous abyss that separates the average from the normal. The average is only a description of the facts; the normal is the ideal, the principle, what ought to be. It is only in a perfect world that the average is normal. In real life, the average is usually far below the normal. In fact, to be completely normal is very rare indeed.

From this it follows that it is the normal, not the average, which is desirable and for which we should strive. Otherwise, life becomes meaningless, even ludicrous. For instance, in the population at large there are some people who have only one leg, and some who have none. Thus the average man or woman has about 1.9 legs. Nevertheless, the normal person still has two legs. If we were to accept the popular error, and say that what is average is normal, and that this is desirable, then anyone who has two legs ought to be required to cut off an inch of one of them! If the average is declared the normal, then all genius and excellence must be banished. All art must be reduced to cartooning or poster painting, all music confined to the blaring of Rock 'n Roll, and all literature limited to "Best Sellers."

Hence, whether we are concerned with morality or kashrut or Shabbat or ethical conduct, the Torah warns us against mimicry. We must imitate neither "the doings of the land of Egypt" nor those of the "land of Canaan." The loyal Jew must retain the full force of his humanity and not cut down his ideals to conform to the level of his practice. The normal must never be identified with the merely average.

It is therefore a matter of special concern that in both our countries there has in recent years emerged an effort to reformulate the traditional moral code which the Western world has inherited from Judaism -- in effect, a movement to transform the "normal" in moral conduct. What is most startling is that this "New Morality" has won the sanction of the avant-garde churches. According to this doctrine, all that really counts in human relations is that the relations be human; that no relationship ever be such as to hurt or offend another and that, on the contrary, the purpose of all activity be the entry into "meaningful personal relationship." Other than this, however, the New Morality sees no reason to respect any inherited "taboos," and is willing to abandon all traditional moral restraints.

Now we can have no quarrel with the New Morality's emphasis on respect for the human personality. In a progressively dehumanizing world, such reminders of the integrity of personality are all to the good, though they are by no means novel. Yet, having said that, there is little else to commend the New Morality and much to condemn it.

This is not the place to undertake a full critique of this new movement or mood. Let us merely sum up our major objection to it by saying that it is based on a deliberate and catastrophic confusion of the average and the normal. Reading the literature of the New Morality, and especially its theological advocates in "progressive" Christian circles, leads one to the sad conclusion that what we have

here is the hypersophisticated enshrinement of the debased average as the approved normal. The New Morality is a misguided cult of moral mediocrity only barely redeemed by its ethical motif. Ethical it may be; moral -- certainly not.

Apparently, many of the younger members of some of the Churches have become frightened by the obvious failure of Christianity in this Secular City. Their reaction has been analagous to what Reform did in response to the inroads into traditional Judaism as a result of the Emancipation: since most people do not observe, change the law to conform to accepted practice. The average was endowed with the halo of the normal, and the ideal reduced to the real. Hence, the hegemony of numbers, the enthronement of statistics.

In both cases -- the Reform capitulation in the last century in "ritual" matters, and the Christian devaluation of morality in sexual matters -- we are confronted with a failure of nerve, the inability to hold on to fixed ideals and principles amidst the turbulence of social movement and widespread neglect of the norms of right conduct.

In the present case of moral relations, there is evident a bad case of despair. It is the act of a desparate religious community when it abandons its soul and, in order to hold on to its adherents and appeal to the masses, gives its seal of ecclesiastical approval to "the doings of the land of Egypt..[and] the doings of the land of Canaan."

There is, furthermore, an irrational element to this re-

jection of Jewish morality in the name of a shallow personalistic ethic. Will people really be happier and "fulfilled" when society countenances adultery and various forms of degeneracy? Will children be brought up in a healthier atmosphere when the family has disintegrated as a direct result of the new dispensations of the New Morality?

The end of the verse cited at the beginning reads, "neither shall ye walk in their statutes." The last word, in the Hebrew, is chukkot. The late Rabbi of Lwow, Rabbi Joseph Saul Nathanson, of blessed memory, pointed out that when this term is applied to a commandment, it usually denotes a mitzvah be'li taam -- a command without reason, a statute which defies easy rational explanation. Apparently, there are also averot be'li taam -- transgressions which have nothing reasonable to commend them. And, surprisingly, there are people who find themselves attracted to these irrational and pointless offenses so that the Torah most explicitly warns us: "neither shall ye walk in their chukkot." What the New Morality has done, with the hekhsher of some Church groups, is to propose moral doctrines which lack taam -- reason, or taste. Even more than a failure of nerve, this represents a failure of intelligence.

We Jews have only one standard of normality: the Halakhah. Our norm (law) is the law of the Torah. The validity of our Halakhah remains unaffected by the magnitude of the defection from its observance. The normal Jew is one who studies Torah and performs mitzvot -- even if the average Jew has little connection with this kind of life.

Moses was told concerning Aaron that "he shall not come at every time (be'khol et) into the sanctuary." And Hasidim interpret that as "with all that is timely." Not all that is fashionable in culture or stylish in philosophy or modish in morality must be brought into the sanctuary of Jewish life and be declared acceptable for the Jew. As Torah Jews we remain ever cognizant of the gap between the "is" and the "ought", between the normal and the average, between morality and mores, between the law of the Torah and all the "doings" of the Egyptians and Canaanites.

Does this mean that Orthodox Jews must isolate themselves in little insular ghettos, whether residential or mental? No, it does not. We have several generations of successful experience with the blending of Torah values with the study of secular culture. But this by no means implies blanket approval of all of Western civilization. We can certainly not accept as final, ultimate, or genuine the moral judgments and ethical standards and religious norms of a world which countenanced an Auschwitz -- an obscenity which will haunt Western culture until it vanishes into obscurity.

Rather, we neither ignore nor accept the canons of the contemporary secular civilization. We do study, examine, discuss, contemplate, and engage in dialogue with it; and on the basis of Torah as our norm we evaluate it critically, accepting the good and rejecting the bad.

Above all, this judgment of the average by the normal, of the real world by the ideals of the Torah, is a redemptive act.



Our task is to redeem all the world through Torah.

"And ye shall be holy unto Me; for I the Lord am holy, and have set you apart from the peoples, that ye should be Mine" (Lev. 20:26). In the beginning only the people of Torah belong to Him -- ve'heyitem li. That special relation of the Jew to his Maker is reinforced by his separateness from other peoples, by his obstinate refusal to assimilate, by his stubborn rejection of "the doings of the land" of Egypt and Canaan. But the purpose of this apartness is noblesse oblige: "that ye should be Mine" -- ye, all the peoples of the world, even Egyptians and Canaanites, will be redeemed from the crass average by the nobility of the normal and thus be "Mine."