

"CAN I LOVE MY NEIGHBOR IF I HATE MYSELF?"

The principle of neighborly love, ahavat re'im, has become a central theme of all Western civilization. The other religions of the West have taken over our mitzvah of ve'ahavta le'reiakha kamokha, "thou shalt love thy neighbor -- or fellow-man -- as thyself," mentioned in today's Sidra, elevated it above all other religious commandments and precepts, and declared it the Golden Rule.

Indeed, our Sages too considered it a most important mitzvah. It was R. Akiva who taught that ve'ahavta le'reiakha kamokha -- zeh klal gadol ba-Torah, that the love of fellow-man is a great principle in the Torah. It is the very heart of so many other laws which regulate man's social behavior and ethical conduct.

Yet remarkably, the Rabbis were not unanimous in their enthusiasm for "thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself" as the cardinal principle of Judaism. Amar lo Ben Azzai, bi'demut Elokim asah oto zeh klal gadol mi-zeh --- Ben Azzai said to R. Akiva, the verse "in the likeness of God He <sup>made</sup> Him" is a yet greater principle, she'lo tomar ho'il ve'nitbazeti yitbaze haveri imi, ho'il ve'nitkalalti yitkalel haveri imi -- for were we to rely only on "love thy neighbor as thyself," then a man might say, since I have been disgraced let my fellow-man be disgraced with me, since I am accursed let my fellow-man be accursed with me, (text as quoted from B. Rabbah in Rekanti, unlike that of J. T. Nedarim 9:4; see too Torah Shelemah, Ber. 5:1).

What penetrating insight Ben Azzai had! "Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself" is a noble, sublime ideal. But in practice it cannot work as the most abiding principle of Judaism for most people -- because too many people despise themselves, and if they related to their neighbors kamokha, as they think of themselves, hatred and contempt would reign in the world. Love your neighbor -- yes; but not necessarily "as thyself." Instead, love of

man must be based on the fact that man is created in the Image of God -- bi'demut Elokim asa oto. We must value man not because we see in him our own likeness -- kamokha -- but because we see in him God's likeness -- demut Elokim.

Ben Azzai has, of course, revealed to us an idea which modern psychology has long taught and which modern life has sadly but fully confirmed. Self-love and self-esteem are relatively uncommon. Self-contempt and even self-hatred are far more prevalent. In a society where this holds true, therefore, decent social relations must be established not up on the basis of our personal feelings, but rather upon our religious commitments. That harried and hurried bundle of nerves we call modern man, with his precious complexes that all but crush him and his view of life which keeps him tottering on the brink of ~~utter~~ meaninglessness and on the precipice of purposelessness, can learn the civility and the ethic of Torah only by a fresh and powerful belief that God made man in His likeness, and he therefore is something special and worthy of love. Otherwise, there is little indeed to love and esteem.

Can there be any question but that homo sapiens of the mid-twentieth century is more pitiful than loveable, more contemptible than admirable? In Kew Gardens a few weeks ago over 36 people witnessed an innocent woman <sup>a being</sup> slowly murdered. Not one made an effort merely to call the police. What can such people really think of themselves? Heaven help all of us if they love us kamokha, as they love themselves!

A week later, in Albany, 4000 people raved like lunatics and savagely encouraged a demented young man to leap to his death, and hurled curses at him when he hesitated to entertain them with a dramatic suicide. Need one be a psychologist to conjecture that these people were expressing their own suicide wishes, that they considered themselves worthless and deserving of death and therefore took it out on this hapless person perched on a high ledge? They "loved" him kamokha, as much as they love themselves.

The same holds true, I submit, for the disgraceful behavior of some 50 or 100 adult onlookers who earlier this week piled out of passing buses to watch with calm disinterest a pogrom by a gang of teen-age Negro hoodlums against a Yeshiva in Brooklyn. It is much easier to forgive the underprivileged slum youngsters who staged the attack, than the cruel and cowardly adults who have they had any self-respect, shed all human self-respect. Indeed, <sup>^</sup>if they would have immediately and intuitively rushed to the defense of the innocent victims. How right, unfortunately, Ben Azzai was!

I feel that not only do people generally suffer from a lack of self-esteem, but we Jews especially show signs of abandoning our Jewish self-<sup>-respect</sup>~~esteem~~ and self-love. Recently, for example, a string of Jewish organizations, including Bnai Brith and the Jewish War Veterans, ~~have~~ sent delegations of their leaders to visit the head of another religion in Rome. <sup>only a few weeks ago</sup> Yet ~~recently~~ <sup>^</sup>a new Chief Rabbi was elected in Jerusalem. Why have we heard nothing of delegations of leaders making a pilgrimage to the Holy Land to offer their greetings to him? Or is the head of the Jewish rabbinate any less precious to Jews than the head of the Catholic hierarchy? Have we reached the point where an audience with the Pope is a status symbol prerequisite for American Jewish "leadership?"

What shall we say of Jewish men who, at any solemn function, ~~outside their homes,~~ conduct themselves with full gentlemanly dignity, but in their own house of worship violate every standard of respect with an endless flow of conversation? <sup>women</sup> What shall we say of American Jewish <sup>^</sup>who abide by all canons of good taste and dress appropriately for every occasion, but enter the synagogue dressed in a manner that violates the most elementary principles of Jewish modesty and propriety?

But of course all of this is merely the reflection of the larger problem of our particular and peculiar age. At a recent conference on Jewish Philosophy, I heard a well known professor of philosophy say that in this Age of Auschwitz, one can speak of God only with embarrassment. My own reaction is that, of course,

the atrocities of the last war have presented a great obstacle to faith. But far more than God, it is man about whom it is now embarrassing to talk! How can we any longer think of human beings as worthy of love and loyalty? If you have the strength to read the articles under the headlines in our press about the Frankfurt trials of the Auschwitz murderers, if you are willing to risk becoming sick to the pit of your stomach -- and we must read these reports -- then you will agree that considering how human beings have acted, "to be human" is almost an obscenity!

The current trials in Frankfurt remind us of the utter depravity of the Nazi sadists. Study after study reveals the moral degeneration of the German masses, of the Poles who cheered while the Warsaw Ghetto burned, of the Ukrainians at Babi Yar, and those of other countries who abided and abetted this horrible bloodshed. "The Deputy" has exposed the damnable indifference of the religious leadership of the Western world. It will not be long before detailed studies will be forthcoming on the moral collapse of the wartime leadership of the United States and England. And a couple of days ago Mr. Nahum Goldmann (J.T.A., April 22) had the courage and moral forthrightness to admit that Jewish leadership in the free world too was not guiltless. "All of us, leaders included, failed during this important test" and kept quiet when they should have been staging sit-ins and stall-ins and even die-ins on the steps of the White House in order to help European Jewry.

O how tragically right Ben Azzai was! Ve'ahavta le'reiakha kamokha, "thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself," is a great mitzvah, but it is not the greatest principle or klal gadol of Judaism; for when there is little <sup>left</sup> self to love, one ought not love others in the same way! Secular Humanism, the optimism of "man's inevitable progress," is dead and meaningless. Instead, we must rely on bi'demut Elokim asa oto, a commitment of faith that, despite all this, man is worth saving and loving merely because God made him in His image, and not because man is inherently worthy of it.

But perhaps we ought to moderate our pessimism about human nature in our times. Ben Azzai's idea of demut Elokim as the basis of the Torah's social legislation, indeed the basis of all decent social life, may mean not only the belief that man is worthy only because God made him. It may also imply the possibilities <sup>for</sup> ~~to~~ decency in man's character, since man bears a likeness to his Creator. Despite the preponderance of the mean and the ugly in man's character, there is also a little bit of the Godly and the humane. Amongst the masses who howlingly reveal the beast in man, there are some individuals whose still, small voice sounds a note of sanity and morality; and this minority may yet, in the long run, prevail! Kamokha, when you take man or society as a whole, he or it may be most unappealing. But occasionally a man or a group still shows that there is a deathless and priceless goodness in the human personality. It is this spark of Godliness, this dot of goodness, this atom of sublimity, of demut Elokim, that redeems man and makes us optimistic about our ability, ultimately <sup>to</sup> ~~transform~~ transform all of life with the power of our love.

So that even those of us who take a more jaundiced view of the nature of modern man, who maintain that the kamokha of most men is unlovable and unattractive, must look for the redeeming goodness that separates man from beast, for the demut Elokim which irrepressibly erupts here and there and casts a shaft of light into the gloom of man's heart. For zeh klal gadol ba-Torah, this is a great Jewish principle -- and a great Jewish enterprise.

Most people may be like the onlookers who, with icy indifference, will neither help nor summon the police. But here is one man who does leap from his car to help, and there is one young child who does plead successfully with the sick man not to jump from the ledge. Many ~~men~~ may incline to the criminal silence of Popes and Presidents and Prime Ministers who had "better things to do" than stop the slaughter of millions of non-combatants. But the demut Elokim does emerge from the wreckage of man's character, in the form of a priest or minister <sup>or even</sup> who chooses imprisonment <sup>rather than</sup> death with the victims of Hitler ~~over~~ consent by silence, in the form of a proud Jew who is obsessed with the idea of saving human life.



9) May I recommend to you a book which may restore your hope that man is worth cherishing: Harold Flender's Rescue in Denmark. After reading for so long the depressing tales of man's monstrous madness, it is exhilarating to read of his natural, spontaneous goodness and bravery. After telling of the unusual courage of a Danish ambulance driver in saving Jews at the risk of his own life, the author relates that when the young Dane was later questioned as to why he acted the way he did, he matter-of-factly replied, "What else could I do?" -- "a statement of refreshing contrast to what was said by so many Germans and other nationals who, when asked why they never lifted a finger to aid the Jews, replied, 'What could I do?'" The "What else could I do?" of the Danes is the demut Elokim shining forth from the murky depths of the flimsy "what could I do?" of the rest of Europe, the sordid kamokha of most Western man.

There were perhaps periods when R. Akiva was right -- when man's image of himself was sufficiently elevated to permit basing all of society on ve'ahavta le'reiakha kamokha. In an age such as ours, however, there is yet a greater klal. For us, depraved as we have become, Judaism holds forth a more relevant and compelling challenge -- bi'demut Elokim asa oto, that man is created in the form and image of God. That fact alone makes him precious. And the potentiality he possesses for goodness, for expressing the "likeness of God," makes it worth striving for the survival of man.

Today the hope for man is not man. It is God -- and the Godly within man.