

"MENSCHLICHKEIT"

In Yiddish, the word for "man" -- Mensch -- represents more than a biological species, the homo sapiens. A Mensch is also one who has a mature personality, a fully developed character, a sense of finesse and savoir-faire, one who is courteous, well-mannered, and amply endowed with the qualities of patience and self-restraint. One of the greatest compliments we can pay a person is to ^{say} of him that "he is a Mensch"; conversely, to say "he is not a Mensch" is an indictment of him.

Interestingly, the Hebrew word for man, ish, implies the same shade of meaning. Thus, when David on his death-bed gives Solomon his last instructions, and tells him ve'hazakta ve'hayita le'ish, be strong and be an ish, he does not mean "be a man" in the usual sense, but rather: be a Mensch !

Our Rabbis evidently rated Menschlichkeit very high in the list of virtues. Thus they taught in the Ethics of the Fathers (2:6) that ein boor verei het, an empty-headed person cannot be sin-fearing; an am ha-aretz or ignoramus cannot be a hasid or pious man; the shy person cannot become a lamed or student; the quick-tempered cannot be melamed or teacher. There is here an ascending scale of values: from verei het, or sin-fearing individual, to hasid, the pious one, to the student, to the teacher. The last, and thus the highest of all, is given as: be'makom she-ein anashim hishtadel liheyot ish -- where there are no Menschen, you try to be an ish or Mensch. Menschlichkeit, therefore,

is higher than sin-fearing, piety, studying, or even teaching Torah!

What is a Mensch ? A single comprehensive definition is too difficult and too elusive. Let us, rather, list some of the ingredients of Menschlichkeit and analyze some of the problems that are, in fact, crucial to the philosophy and religious outlook of the modern Jew.

First, a Mensch is one who does not shrink from a difficult task which his conscience requires of him. He does not invent little excuses for his moral laziness. When Moses, as today's Sidra reports, saw a terrible injustice committed by an Egyptian against a Hebrew, va-yifen koh va-koh va-yar ki ein ish, he looked about him and saw that there was no ish, no true Mensch, one who would rise to the occasion and rescue the oppressed from his persecutor; therefore he himself smote the Egyptian. In a place where there were no Menschen, Moses was the Mensch, the ish. Maimonides (Guide, 3:45) incorporated this teaching into his philosophy of prophecy: before a man can receive the divine inspiration of nevuah, he must first show the moral heroism that is reflected in great acts of social justice and humanitarianism.

Yet that is not as simple and clear-cut as may seem. Actually it requires a wealth of common sense and not-so-common intuitive judgment to be able to walk the tight-rope between two extremes: impulsiveness on the one hand and procrastination on the other.

A child, an immature person will also respond to a sense of duty --- but precipitously, thoughtlessly, and prematurely. He will impatiently

leap to conclusions without thinking. As a result, he will one day decide one way, the other day he will take off in a different direction. A Mensch, however, is more responsible and more consistent. One commentator (Ha-ketav ve'ha-Kabbalah) sees the root of ish as yesh or yeshiut ---- the quality of being substantial, consistent, settled or lasting. A Mensch does not vacillate. His impulsiveness is moderated by yeshiut, by constancy and thoughtfulness. [#] But there is the other extreme that a Mensch must equally avoid. That is the tendency to dawdle endlessly and so never rise to the challenges of life. There are people who are so thoughtful that they can never come to a decision -- even when life demands it. The American critic Lionel Trilling speaks of people who are so open-minded that their brains fall out ! They always contemplate what is right, expect and hope to do it -- but never get around to it. When Moses looked about for an ish to take up the cudgels on behalf of the oppressed Jews, he never found any. No doubt there were many who knew what had to be done -- but were busy making up their minds if this was the right time. They probably considered the effects on good Egyptian-Jewish relations. Will it make the Egyptians worse? Was possibly the Egyptian justified in his own mind? There were probably those who shook their heads and said, "something ought to be done" -- but never did, until Moses came along. This endless procrastination, this paralysis of will in the face of over-riding duty, is incompatible with Menschlichkeit .

David says, in the Psalms (Ch.90), kilinu shenotenu kemo hegeh -- we have spent our years like hegeh. That last word is usually

translated as " a tale that is told " or " a sigh " -- from the word lehegot, to speak or utter. But the Gaon of Vilna has a far more acute insight: hegeh is related to the word higayon be'khnor, to play on a harp or lyre. Thus, "we have spent our years tuning up" --- always preparing, practicing, expecting, waiting --- but never accomplishing. What a tragedy -- spending a life tuning up, but, never quite producing a single ^{el} clear note melody! Some of us suffer from that -- and it is a defect in our Menschlichkeit. We want to study and use our heads, learn some Torah. So we prepare, inquire about classes, set the alarm, look about for baby sitters, buy notebooks -- we tune up, but never quite get around to it. We would like to be as charitable in a significant way as we know we should. So we think and question, discuss it with our accountants, partners, wives, children, --- and then we discover that life is past -- kilinu shenotenu and we still have done ^{none} nothing of those things we deemed so precious and so wanted to! Kemo hegeh -- those who only tune up are not yet Menschen. No wonder the ancients said that a man is an olam katan, a microcosm or small world. For just as a world has to be delicately balanced, so a Mensch must be harmonious and balanced between impulsiveness and procrastination. Then he is an ish.

The second ingredient of Menschlichkeit is: meekness, the awareness of one's own limitations. No man is a Mensch who thinks he knows everything. Of Moses we are told: ve'ha-ish Mosheh anav me'od, the man Moses was exceedingly meek. Meekness is what made of Moses an ish, a Mensch.

In a cynical moment, the American humorist Ambrose Bierce (Devil's

Dictionary) defined "Man" as "an animal so lost in rapturous contemplation of what he thinks he is as to overlook what he indubitably ought to be." That, of course, is the definition of man as an animal, and is the very opposite of a Mensch. Menschlichkeit is the civility that comes to a man when he realizes how great he can become and ought to become, and how little of that greatness he has achieved. This sense of limitation and inadequacy makes us more tolerant of the failings of others, and endows us with forgiveness and forbearance. The best criterion of a true Mensch is one who always has a healthy respect for other human beings --- even those who aren't Menschen!

Finally, a Mensch is one who has a spiritual dimension to his personality. A man becomes a Mensch when he recognizes his obligations to God.

On that famous statement that Moses looked about him va-yar ki ein ish, and he saw there was no ish, the usual interpretation is that there was no one else to be an ish and smite the Egyptian. But the Rabbis of the Midrash offer a more novel insight: the ish referred to is the Egyptian himself! Raah ⁵she'ein tohelet shel tzaddikim omedet hemenu ve'lo mi-zaro ~~ad~~ sof kol ha-dorot. Moses invoked the divine spirit and looked with deep insight into this Egyptian and perceived that there was no hope that either he or any of his descendants to the end of time would ever be tzaddikim -- righteous. Therefore, he felt it proper to slay him for his wickedness. In other words, he saw that the Egyptian was not an ish. Menschlichkeit, ~~therefore~~, implies at least the possibility of tzidkut, of a spiritual dimension.

For the Jew, this spiritual element is -- Torah, Judaism. For our people, Menschlichkeit is inseparable from Yiddishkeit. If there is

anything that modern Jews have suffered from, it is the cultural schizophrenia that keeps Menschlichkeit, the full, participating, blossoming, worldly personality, apart from Yiddishkeit, the specifically religious element. We have made the tragic error of imagining that you can be a true Mensch without being a Jew, or a good Jew without being a Mensch.

As a matter of fact, this was the philosophy of the Haskalah, the movement of Jewish "Enlightenment" which to such a great extent ^{was responsible for} ~~leads to~~ our contemporary assimilation. Yehdah Leib Gordon cried out his famous slogan: heyeh yehidi be'vetekha ve'ish be'tzetekha, be a Jew at home and a Mensch outside your home. The result was that without Yiddishkeit, there was no Menschlichkeit -- neither at home ^{or} abroad ! If you do not have a Jewish office and Jewish vacation ^{and} Jewish lecture-hall, in the sense of the spirit of Torah, then you cannot have a Jewish home and you cannot be a full, integrated Mensch in any real sense. The true answer to the Haskalah's split personality came from R. Samson Raphael Hirsch who presented his Torah concept of the Yisroel-Mensch -- the integration into one personality of true Yiddishkeit, the finest of Israel, with comprehensive Menschlichkeit in the cultural and personal sense. [#] This indeed was the greatness of Moses, the finest example of a Jewish Mensch. He fulfilled the first requirement -- he responded to the call of conscience, neither too impetuously nor too tardily, by protecting the Hebrew and slaying the Egyptian. Secondly, he was a man of weakness and fully cognizant of his all too human limitations. And, above all else, he was a spiritual person.

One of the great Psalms (Ch.90) begins, Tefillah le'Mosheh ish ha-Elohim, Ado-nay ma'on ata hayitah lanu be'dor va-dor. A prayer by Moses, the man of God: My Lord, thou wast a dwelling-place for us from generation to generation, Moses was an ish-ha-Elokim, a man of God --- one who combined Menschlichkeit and Gettlichkeit, marvelously blended into one personality. This kind of person knows that you can be a full Mensch -- a political leader, a general, a diplomat, a legislator; and yet the fullness of Menschlichkeit comes only when you know that the ma'on or dwelling-place of your Menschlichkeit is God Himself, that the address of your destiny and residence of your heart and soul is God and His Torah.

It is that luminous personality of Moses, the personification of Jewish Menschlichkeit. That remains our undying, inspiring example -- be'dor va-dor, "from generation to generations"