

NORMAN LAMM

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FROMM AND ERLICH

No, this is not a note on some imagined connection between Eric Fromm and Paul Erlich. Not at all.

It is, rather, an outrageous pun on an equally outrageous situation.

Our Orthodox Jewish society seem to be progressively obsessed with frumkeit, piety or religiosity. We have the frum, the half-frum, the "FFB" ("frum from birth") and the "BT" (Baal Teshuva -- the newly frum) and, most notably, the frum and the super-frum (or glatt-frum).

Now, there is nothing wrong with asserting that there are different levels of piety, varying degrees of frumkeit. My problem is with the term itself, and especially its use as a label, both pejorative and honorific. The very plethora of quantative measures of frumkeit is an indication of demonstrative piety with all its attendant exhibitionism.

Any truly religious personality must recoil from such crude means of evaluating fellow human beings, and Jews should be especially sensitive to such gross ostentation and conspicuous frumkeit which is anathema to genuine spirituality.

If not frumkeit, what then? When I was a child, I was taught the Hasidic maxim that, "a galach (priest) must be frum;

a Jew should be ehrlich." Ehrlichkeit means integrity, honor, honesty. Ehrlichkeit is the true distinguishing characteristic of the religious personality, whose exquisite moral sensitivity must reject invidious comparisons of more or less piety.

Frumkeit, at best, refers to mitzvot she'bein adam la-makom, the relations between man and his Creator. It says nothing directly about the quality of one's relations with his fellow humans. It requires an additional step to include bein adam le'chavero, social behavior, in the rubric of the Man-God relation. But this is not the Jewish way, which grants bein adam le'chavero autonomous status.

Ehrlichkeit, however, covers both areas. Integrity is a quality that describes both man's ritual and his social conduct. One's "religious" life, no less than his ethical life, can be honorable or dishonorable. The best word for it in Biblical Hebrew is temimut. Father Jacob was described as ish tam -- a whole or honorable man. The Yiddish would be -- an ehrlicher mensch or vid. And one of the most comprehensive of all commandments is: tamim tihyeh im Hashem Elohekha, be ehrlich with the Lord your God.

So, with apologies to the two savants whose names we illegitimately borrowed for the title of this piece, especially the first, let us be done with Fromm and start being Erlich.