

"JUDAISM AS AN ALTERNATIVE"

In a well known passage, the Makhilta relates that the Holy One offered the Torah to the various nations of antiquity, but that all of them rejected it because of various objections they raised to certain of its precepts. Then He offered the Torah to Israel, and Israel accepted it with alacrity.

Now this is more than an interesting legend, spiced with a dash of Jewish pride. It is the Rabbis' way of emphasizing the revolutionary character of Torah, and especially the Decalogue. The Torah, they meant to say, was given not to confirm standard ideas and prevailing prejudices, but to challenge and change them. The Ten Commandments were meant to teach a religion with a difference, to offer the world an alternative to the colorful but lifeless paganism in which it was immersed, and that that alternative was seized by Israel.

To us, in our age, the Decalogue often seems to be a commonplace. Yet consider how radically new it was in its own day. To a society that practiced paganism and fetishism, the Torah declared "Thou shalt not make unto thee a graven image." To a world which accepted slavery as normal and in which even the free man was doomed to a life of drudgery, the Bible proclaimed the law of the Sabbath, and commanded rest even for the man-servant and woman-servant. And to a civilization which entertained the conception of man as a thing, to be used and exploited, and in which, therefore, old parents who could no longer be gainfully employed were abandoned and discarded as excess

baggage, the Decalogue declared, "Honor thy father and thy mother" -- even if you can no longer obtain any benefit from them.

Maimonides considers this differentness of Judaism a fundamental of Torah. Part III of his Guide for the Perplexed teaches the proposition that whereas Torah did not attempt to diverge from the world so radically that it could not be followed by ordinary men, still the mitzvot take exception to the mores of the masses and to popular platitudes, and emphasize those ideals and ideas wherein we differ from the rest of the world. To Maimonides, one of the major purposes of Jewish life and Jewish law is the verse be'hutokehem lo telekhu "you shall not walk in their statutes" (Lev. 18:3). This is not meant, assuredly, to preach the doctrine that the Jew be different just for the sake of contrariness, but rather to offer the world an alternative to its standards, its slogans, and its sanctified biases.

Indeed, one of the great lights of the Musar movements of 19th century Lithuania, Rabbi Simchah Zissel of Kelm, discovered the same idea in the salient features which Judaism ascribes to each of the three patriarchs. In the Jewish tradition we identify Abraham with the trait of hessed, love and kindness; Isaac with the quality of pahad, fear or reverence; and Jacob with the characteristic of emet, truth and integrity. Certainly each of them possessed many virtues. Why, then, were these three chosen above all others? Because, Rabbi Simchah Zissel tells us, each emphasized specifically those themes which were most neglected by his contemporaries; he attempted thereby to correct the ethical imbalance in the surrounding culture. Abraham lived in a society dominated by Sodom, one characterized by cruelty

and pitilessness and heartlessness; therefore he championed the quality of hessed, of goodness and decency and charity. Isaac dwelt amongst the Philistines, about whom he was moved to say rak ein yirat Elohim ba-makom ha-zeh -- that there is no fear of God in this place. Therefore he dedicated his life to highlighting precisely that quality which they lacked: pahad, a feeling of reverence and the fear of God. Jacob was involved most of his life with his uncle and father-in-law, Laban, who achieved unparalleled notoriety as the great deceiver and thief. Therefore, his chief concern was to represent emet, truth and honor and integrity.

All the patriarchs, therefore, preached their principles despite popular perversions. All of them understood that whereas you must live in history and in the world, nevertheless, in order to enhance the moral and spiritual health of all of society, you may not downgrade your differences ^{with} of the world, disguise your uniqueness, or play down your own peculiar principles. Hence, where cruelty is acceptable, we opt for hessed or pity; where wild abandon reigns, we Jews choose pahad, a sense of awe and reverence; where deceit is common, the Jew strives for emet, truth above all.

During the last fifty years or so, traditional Judaism in the Western world has expended much effort to prove that we are not really that different from others; that we can and do acculturate and adjust and speak the language and the cultural idiom of Western civilization. That is as it should be; had we not done so, we would have lost much more than we did.

Yet we must now return to our original and main function: to offer an alternative to the world; to speak the word of God in the great spiritual abyss; to remain critical of the local idolatries

that desecrate every generation. Now that Orthodox Judaism has, to an extent, become naturalized, we must turn our energies to offering Jewish alternatives to the great world problems. We must speak the authentic word of Torah on the great issues of our day -- fearlessly, ^ecourageously, and honestly.
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How does Judaism offer such options or choices to modern men?
As illustrations, let us consider how three of our religious institutions do indeed offer alternatives to mid-twentieth century man.

We live in an age of almost total mechanization and increasing automation. The machine has become our master, and we have become slaves to the gadgets, beholden to the time-clock and telephone, even as our children are glued to that one-eyed monster called the television set. Our futures are settled for us by uncanny computers which ravenously swallow vast amounts of statistics, only to disgorge omniscient little prophecies about how long we shall live, what we shall eat, where we shall move, and how we shall vote. It is a world that is terribly cold and impersonal and inhospitable.

What a marvelous relief, what a fabulous alternative, the Shabbat is! And if indeed the Shabbat is warm and personal, full of Jewish charm and humaneness, it is because it offers us an alternative: at least one day where we do not push buttons, we do not manipulate implements, we are not at the mercy of electrical discharges, and we do ^{not} engage in travel -- which, inwardly, we do not want to do anyway! A person has time for his family and for himself. Once upon a time we used to commend the Shabbat because on that day, the Jew received a neshamah yeterah, an "additional soul." Today, however, it is sufficient to recommend the Shabbat merely because on that day, unlike

all others, a man has a -- neshamah, a soul! During the entire week, caught up in the gears and gadgets of our complex and impersonal society, man feels that he lacks a self, that he has become reduced to a mere thing: on Shabbat, therefore, he rises above his mechanized and automated environment and he reacquires a soul, a neshamah.

The study of Torah, as any knowledgeable Jew knows, is the greatest of all Jewish commandments. Yet what we often do not realize is that the study of Torah, unlike the study of any other intellectual discipline, is not geared merely to amassing facts. In Torah, as Rabbi Haim of Volozhin pointed out, it is not the acquisition of knowledge that counts, but rather -- the act of study. How important that is for contemporary man! There was a time when we passionately pursued leisure, and imagined that society would be transformed into Utopia when ~~man~~^{we} would attain a greater degree of leisure. Now that we are on the threshold of achieving this dream, we view it with dread. Social thinkers are frightened and apprehensive at the advent of the shorter work week and earlier retirement combined with greater longevity. What shall we do? How shall we spend all this time that we have suddenly obtained?

Judaism, however, has no need to invent new "projects." The purpose of life, according to traditional Judaism, is the study of Torah -- the act of study, the process of learning, the time we spend engaged in the pursuit of Torah. If our children are trained from their earliest youth in the idea that Torah must be studied for its own sake, not merely in order to recite a Haftorah at Bar Mitzvah or to impress ~~the~~^{one's} elders, that study is its own excuse and reason, then

they will continue in this pursuit every available moment. Do we not say, every day, concerning Torah, ki hem hayvenu ve'orekh yamenu -- that the words of our Torah are our life and the length of our days? Indeed, the purpose of our existence, our very lives, is -- Torah: ki hem hayvenu. More than that, when we have discharged our active business or professional duties, which we regard as merely necessary preliminaries to a life of "leisure," then we can devote all our days to the pursuit of Torah, for this Torah is: orekh yamenu, "the length of our days!"

The Jewish principle of tzeniut, of modesty, represents an urgent option for modern man, a crucial alternative for the degradations of our lust-inundated and sex-obsessed world which has obliterated the boundaries between love and lechery. The Jewish standards of morality in its fullness, from the requirement of mihitzah to the practice of taharat ha-mishpahah, are not the moral criteria of the majority of our culture -- not even those of the majority of Jews today! We take strong exception to the prevailing standards. Any true Jew is revolted by the well-phrased libertinism and licentiousness which sullies the undergraduate newspapers of some of our greatest universities, including some that are Jewish-sponsored and Jewish-supported! We cannot, must not, shall not, consent to a situation, which gets progressively worse, in which sex has become the debased coin of the realm, and which is expressed in the modern American pagan's supreme commandment "thou shalt do whatever thy heart desireth." We shall continue to protest the kind of perversion which regards chastity as "square" and considers a "well-rounded character" one that has indulged in illicit experiences. The Jewish principles of purity are not nearly as popular as the cheap promiscuity that has become fashionable. But we were brought into this world to offer alternatives not palliatives!

Such insights abound in Jewish tradition. What we have mentioned are but a few illustrations. Far more work must yet be done. For those willing to invest their time, devotion, knowledge, and skill, there are as yet undiscovered treasures within the Jewish tradition. Labors of love by many people are required in order to elucidate for us the uniquely Jewish approaches to such questions as: business ethics in the changing industrial and managerial structures; the role of woman; the exciting discoveries of modern biology and astrophysics; the nature of man and freedom of the will, in the light of new psychologies; the meaning of ~~genocide~~ ^{the Holocaust} and the question of theodicy; the State of Israel -- a non-Messianic, independent Jewish state; the relation with ethical non-believers and religious dissent in a world of cultural pluralism. There are issues so new that they have not been named yet; and some problems that, because they are timeless, deserve to be taken as fresh and serious challenges to modern Jews to ferret out new but genuinely Jewish alternatives to the old answers. Scholars have before them years of dedicated labor in the great mine of Jewish tradition to identify for us the jewels of Jewish thought, and polish them so as to enlighten mankind with Jewish alternatives on the great issues that are the concern of a world in crisis. These insights can illuminate all peoples; these alternatives can redeem a humanity struggling to survive. And all Jews, whether or not they are scholars, can practice the precepts of Torah which possess, implicitly, the most precious wisdom of our faith.

May all of us return wholeheartedly to that Torah of whose giving three and a half millenia ago we read, and which in effect we re-accepted this morning.

May we re-echo the sublime response of our ancestry; naaseh ve'nishma, "we shall do and we shall understand." Even as we have determined to "do," to practice Judaism, so may the Almighty endow us with the wisdom of ve'nishma -- to appreciate its meaning and its relevance, so that we may in turn offer it as a saving alternative and a cherished choice to a confused and distracted humanity.

Then the Torah will indeed become, as it was meant to be, samma de'hayye, "an elixer of life" -- for us, for all Israel, and for all mankind.