

A-226

Extreme Moderation

(or pushing Moderation to extremes)

[good for publication]

1. The Book of Koheleth we read today is a study in the lack of moderation. It is an inquiry of a restless mind searching passionately for the meaning of life, first proposing solutions which are clearly immoderate, and then rejecting them immoderately. Solomon's first solution to the problem of how to live is a materialistic one. He will be a man of leisure, drink wine immoderately, assure himself of great publicity, build fabulous homes and gardens, amass a fortune in gold, silver and slaves. It is an intemperate, immoderate, extremely materialistic solution, with no bones made about its plain selfishness. But Solomon rejects this way of life - and the rejection is extreme. No, he says, the whole idea of material possessions and comfort is sheer, absolute nonsense. V'HINEI HA'KOL HEVEL U'RE'US RUACH - it's just plain vanity, chasing the wind. Next, he is immoderately attracted to the life of the intellectual: HA'CHACHAM EINAV B'ROSHO, he says, only the wise man has eyes to see the world as it is, and the educated man is as superior to the poor ignoramus as light is to darkness - K'YISRON H'ORE AL HA'CHOSHECH. Again an extremist attitude. But this too he rejects - and with equal vigor and intemperance. Wisdom as a way of life? No, GAM ZEH HEVEL, that is as foolish and downright nonsensical as living for eating or for convenience. The wise man and the fool both die, so why bother being wise.
2. But Solomon is a wise man, the wisest of all men ever to have lived. And so he looks for the right way - in Moderation. KI L'ADAM SHE'TOV LEFANAV NASSAN CHOCHMAH V'DAAS V'SIMCHAH - the right kind of man is one who is moderate, who has a little of everything, who sticks to the middle of the road - he has wisdom and knowledge and happiness, he is moderately well read, moderately clever, moderately wealthy, moderately everything. Is not that, the reader feels, the best solution? Isn't this the point at which Solomon should have put down his pen, wiped his brow and said, "Done with it! I've got the answer and here my book ends!"? But no, Solomon decides that Moderation for itself as a way of life is equally vain and meaningless, GAM ZEH HEVEL U'RE'US RUACH. And here Solomon rises to his greatest heights in condemning what to him is the most vain of all vanities, and he in eight of his most famous passages he cries out, LA'KOL ZMAN V'EIS L'CHOL CHEIFETZ TACHASS HA'SHAMAYIM - there is a time for everything: there is a choice of either/or, you must choose between one course of act on or another, you can't be moderate at all times: EIS LA'LEDESS V'EIS LA'MUSS, a time to be born and a time to die. Can anyone, he asks, tell me how to be moderate in choosing between life and death? EIS LE'EHOV V'EIS LISNO, a time to love and a time to hate; is the "middle road" of any value? - is that called living, or is it just existing for a whole life in a deep freeze? EIS LA'CHASHOSS V'EIS L'DABEIR, a time to keep silent and a time to speak. The middle road? - vanity of vanities, for then you have disturbed the silence and still not said anything, you just cannot compromise between speaking and not speaking. So that moderation, for Solomon, as a complete way of life, is out of the window. It is as foolish and as dangerous as any of the extremes. And the conclusion of Koheleth is itself a clear, unequivocal answer which is decidedly not moderate. SOF DAVAR HA'KOL NISHMA, after all is said and done, ES HA'ELOKIM Y'REI V'ES MITZVOSAV SHMOR, fear G-d and observe His commandments, KI ZEH KOL HA'ADAM - for that is all of man's life. It is absolute. There is no middle road in the decision to obey or disobey G-d. The right answer to the riddle of life, Koheleth teaches us, is not necessarily a moderate one.
3. A message of this sort, of course, goes against the spirit of the times in which we live and is bound to shock a good number of us. In America of 1956, "Moderation" is the ideal virtue. The word "extremism" is about the ugliest word in our dictionary of ideas. Both political parties today are hugging the middle of the road and trying to outdo each other in being moderate. Even Russia is - dare we hope? - becoming a bit more moderate, in its means if not in its ultimate goals. Schools are moderate in what they expect of their students. Businessmen know of the success of mutual funds where people expect only moderate returns on their investments. Husbands and wives are satisfied if their marriage is moderately successful. Everything and everyone must be moderate. And so Koheleth is a revelation - a challenging and astonishing assertion that moderation is not always the best thing in life, that you can go to extremes in moderation too.

4. But certainly we must be charitable with ourselves. Moderation is, after all, a virtue, and an important one. This world has suffered enough from hot-headed extremists. Between the extreme left and the extreme right, the middle of the road is the most livable - in politics and in economics. Common sense tells us that it is right not to be too miserly or too extravagant in wasting our substance. Our Rabbis of the Mishna told us HEVU MESSUNIM BA'DIN, be moderate in judgment. And Maimonides taught us that Jewish ethics is basically a matter of the SHEVIL HA'ZAHAV, the golden mean - not to be too morose, nor too frivolous, not too emotional nor too insensitive, not too patient nor too impatient. So that there is much to say for Moderation, and it should not be dismissed too lightly.
5. However, what we are concerned with today is something far more important, and that is not a matter of technique or emotions. It is whether, as so many believe and practice today, Moderation is the cure-all, the panacea, the answer to every problem under the sun and the absolute guide to how to live and how to order your life and how to behave. What we are concerned with is whether or not we of 1956 have not gone to extremes in our moderation, and especially insofar as our morals and morality are concerned.
6. For one thing, moderation is sometimes the excuse for befuddled thinking. If you can't think a problem through to its logical conclusion, or if you haven't the courage of your convictions, then the road of least resistance is to be moderate - and try to make everybody happy. This past August, the N.Y. Times ran a series of articles by one of its brilliant columnists who maintains that "The Age of Giants" has come to a close. The great leaders, the inspired thinkers, the bold men of action, are gone, and in their place we have small men. Giants like Roosevelt, Churchill, Stalin, De Gaulle, Einstein - they have passed from the scene, and the little men, who do not have the courage and boldness and inspiration of the Giants cling to moderation as a result. They fear the extremes because they are not sure of themselves. And while this business of being moderate may make for less controversy, it is something which leads to stagnation and stunted growth. So much so that one young but brilliant political scientist has written, "that we need some force in America today to shove everyone off dead center so that the national business can go forward" (Lubell, "The Revolt of the Moderates"). Moderation, then, is not always a virtue. It can be caused by smallness and result in stalemate and stagnation.
7. Intelligent thinking should, rather, confirm what Koheleth taught: that Moderation is not a magical formula that can answer all questions and solve all problems. Moderation is not always a virtue, and the middle of the road is sometimes the most dangerous place in the world. The surgeon who must decide whether to save the life of the child or the mother had better not be moderate - otherwise he loses both. The merchant who must decide whether to commit a dishonest act or remain honest cannot take a middle of the road; his sentence may be lighter, but he will have a jail-record. The young man or woman hesitating about whether or not to marry so-and-so can simply not take a middle-of-the road position; it doesn't exist. In the 1930s while the Allied Powers took a moderately hostile attitude to Hitler, millions were being killed and half of Europe lost. And in 1956, America's middle of the road position in the Arab-Israeli crisis has made enemies of the Arabs and has alienated the friendship of the Israelis. There are times when we cannot be moderate, when life forces clear choices upon us. EIZ LAKOL UZMAN LECHOL CHEIFETZ. There are times when we must choose between life or death, love or hate, building or destroying, and when moderation means surrender and defeat and that is all.
8. And when you come to morality, to ethics, to the choice between right and wrong, between good and evil, truth and falsehood, G-d or an idol, Judaism or an imitation of it - there you cannot be middle-of-the-roadish. There moderation is an evil. Half-truth remains a lie. And a believer in G-d who also worships idols somewhat is a complete pagan. Remember Lot's wife? She couldn't make up her mind whether to go with the angels or remain in the wicked city of Sodom. VATEHI NETZIV MELECH, so she turned into a pillar of salt. Moderation between angels and devils, between morality and immorality, between goodness and wickedness, is in itself an extreme choice - a choice and a decision for lifelessness, for the surrender of all in us that is human, for turning into a stagnating, stale, lifeless pillar of salt. Moderation in matters of the spirit is a sin.



9. I believe that this matter of Moderation in Religion, of choosing the Middle-Road in Judaism, is basically a result of that inability to think things through, the lack of boldness to act once it is thought through; it is caused by a chronic state of indecision and a fear of being clearly committed to a definite, well-defined way of life. I speak frankly, therefore, when I say that I am most critical of Conservative Judaism not so much because of what it says or does not say, but because its main attraction is that it is midway between Reform and ~~Conservatism~~ Orthodoxy, that its spirit of moderation smacks of spinelessness, that it is just midway between two points that others have set, that it is become the seuge-of refuge of the confused and a sanction for indecision. We have all met people who have told us that they have identified themselves with ~~th-~~ a Conservative Temple because they couldn't make up their minds as between Orthodoxy and Reform. The sociologist Marshall Sklare in his recent ~~work-on~~ book called "Conservative Judaism" tells of having canvassed many members of various Conservative Temples, asking them the reasons for their affiliations. One of the classical answers he received from a Temple President is one that I shall never forget because to me it is so highly indicative of the spirit behind this so-called moderation or middle-of-the road in Judaism. He answered, "I belong to the Conservative because they are midway bewteen something and n othing." That is what what has happened to us: we have decided to be moderate in living alife of Torah, to choose between accepting the Jewish traditon or rejecting by taking the middle of the road - so we have ended up somewhere imbetween "something and nothing". That is Conservatism - moderation as applied to Torah. Be moderate in Shabbos - so the Conservative movement tells you to observe it by coming to Temple, and violate it by driving there. It is "midway between something and nothing". You must take the middle-of-road in Kashruth. So you eat Kosher at home and Treifah away from home - or else kosher-style" everywhere. That is "midway between something and nothing". You cannot decide between Orthodox "davenning" or the Reform ritual of service. So you ask your worshippers tp put on the "yarmelke" and then play the organ for them. Oh no, Mr.President, that is not "midway between something and nothing". That is just plain "nothing" - or as Solomon would have said it, HEVEL UR'EUS RUACH - vanity and chasing after wind. That is not principle and conviction; that is stagnation and confusion. That is why as one Conservative Rabbi admitted in a recent issue of "Conservative Judaism", theology is an embarrassment to their movement. When you use Moderation and the Middle of the Road as between right and wrong, or between good and evil, or between Torah and not-Torah - then Moderation ceases to be avirtue and becomes a vice. Then it means surrendering your critical functions, your right of choice, your whole spiritual orientation, your very soul. Then, like Lot's wife who couldn't chose between Sodom or the angels, you become as lifeless and soul-less and spiritless as a pillar of salt.
10. Solomon once said: VDERECH CHAYIM TOCHACHASS MUSSAR, the way of life is moral instruction. And our Rabbis told the following parable concerning the "way of life". They said MASHALL L'ADAM SHE'HAYAH MEHALECH B'ISHON LAYLAH, a man was once lost in a forest in tye middle of the night, and he was terribly frightened. He was afraid of the thorns, of lightning, of ditches, of beasts, of theives. But above all, EINO YODEIA B'EIZEH DERECH MEHALEICH - he didn't know which way to choose, he didn't know how to find his way out of the forest. So he found an AVUKAH SHEL OR, a torch, and lit it. He then no longer feared the ditches and thorns. Then morning came and the sun rose. That dispelled his fear of wild beasts and theives. But only one great fear remained; EINO YODEIA BEIZEH DERECH MEHALEICH - he did not know what road to chose. Finally, however, he found a PARASHAS DRACHIM, a crossroads - and was saved.
11. My dear friends, those words are directed to us: we so often feel lost in the forest of life in the dark of a long, long night. We are terribly afraid - afraid of the thorns and ditches, of the pitfalls of disease and premature death. But we have kindled the AVUKAH SHEL OR, the Torach of Enlightenment, the Light of Science - and we no longer are so frightened of disease and early death. Then we try to hasten the dawn of a new era - we look for world peace and a United Nations. That begins slowly to dispel our fear of tye mad beasts of war and invasion and the terror of inetrnational theives. But the one great fear that neither Science nor Peace can help pacify is the greatest of all: BEIZEH DERECH MEHALEICH - what is way of life we must follow, how do we get out of this jungle, how do we know which of the many competing ways of life to follow? There are signs leading in all directions; which do we take, BEIZEH DERECH MEHALTECH? We are confused, and we try to be moderate, which means we

stay where we are - right in the middle of the forest, lost forever. When we are in such a predicament, when we find that moderation means "midway between something and nothing", that it means stagnation and remaining irretrievably lost and never getting a real answer to the question of BEIZEH DERECH MEHALECH, what clear road do we take, where do we go, what way of life do we adopt - then the ~~same Solomon tells us~~ DERECH CHAYYIM TOCHACHAS MUSSAR, the way of life is moral instruction Rabbis call out to us: you have reached the PARASHASS DRACHIM, the crossroads - you must begin to take a road - one road. You cannot stay where you are. You must make a clear and unequivocal choice - one road or the other. Stop looking for empty compromises. Stop looking for a middle-road when there are only two before you. Don't talk about Moderation when the time has come to start walking and walking fast if you are ever to get someplace. You are at the crossroads, my friendd, with one road leading deeper into the forest and one leading back to civilization, back to G-d, back to your dignity as a Jew, back to the genuine tradition of Israel, back to Torah. There are only two roads - one to affirmation of Torah and one to assimilation. Between these two you must chose. And Solomon's advice is: DERECH CHAYYIM TOEHAHCAS MUSSAR - the way of life is moral instruction. The way home is through Torah. The way to civilization is through G-d. The way to survival is through traditonal Judaism.

12. This, friends, is the gist of the significance of this Shabbos Chöl <sup>am</sup>moed Sukkos. Moderation is often a virtue. But you can push it to an extremes and make it worthless. Moderation is often the right thing. But in matters of right and wrong, of G-d or rebellion, of Torah and Halachah or thinly veiled assimilation, in these matters Moderation is that which leaves you stranded in the dark forests of life, suspended between something and nothing, and as lively and as spiritual as a pillar of salt.

13. That thought friends has been put to us a long time ago when the word of G-d came to Israel: you have before you life and death, good and evil. UVACHARTA BACHAYYIM, and thou shalt choose life. May that ever be our choice, moderate or not. Amen.