

"ON BEING CONSISTENT TO A FAULT"

The drama of Joseph and his brothers, which draws to a climax in this morning's Sidra, is a source of endless fascination. One significant aspect of this strange narrative is that Joseph's actions towards his brothers are incomprehensible, both to the brothers who do not recognize him and to us who already know who he is. To the very end, both they the brothers and we the readers are perplexed: they, by the Egyptian prince who seems irrationally bent upon tormenting them, and we by the anomolous and mysterious motives of Joseph in continuing to conceal his identity from them and carrying out this elaborate spiel. Then, suddenly, all becomes clear. Joseph's revelation of his identity is also the revelation of a master plan, conceived by a master-mind, a marvelous and beautifully consistent course of action. The purpose of this program is to help them to achieve teshuvah, repentance or rehabilitation, to regain their sense of dignity and purge themselves of their shame. For this is the grand goal of Joseph, to which all his actions are inclined and aimed.

Their sin was that of hatred for their half-brother Joseph, the son of Rachel, a hatred which resulted in endangering his life. Now, Judah was willing to endanger his own life for the remaining half-brother, the other son of Rachel, Benjamin. The brothers thus fulfilled the requirements of teshuvah. How beautifully everything

falls into place and pattern! How symmetrical, how apropos! And how aptly does all this mesh with Joseph's earlier plan, which came to the fore in the two great dreams about their sheaves bowing to his sheaves, and about the sun and the moon and the stars bowing to him, Joseph. No wonder that Pharoah was so impressed by this young Hebrew lad. He is indeed wise beyond words, the tzophnat paaneiah, the one who has all the answers and solves all the problems. Moreover, his plan for his brothers' teshuvah is right, it is moral. That is why the Rabbis were moved to declare that hanun ve'rahum, zeh Yosef ha-tzaddik, the expression, "merciful and gracious," refers to the righteous Joseph.

And yet, the Sages found cracks and chips in this picture of Joseph. Joseph was wise, and his heart was in the right place; but something was amiss. Perhaps one might say that he was just a bit too clever, the plan was too smooth, the operation too consistent.

For instance, when testing his brothers, he gave Benjamin a far greater portion. Did he not take too much of a chance in arousing those old and latent jealousies? Did he not realize that they are, after all, but human? And then when he arrested Simon before their very eyes -- was that not too cruel, though perhaps necessary? And when he demanded of them that they surrender to him Benjamin as a slave because of the theft of the cup, he caused them so much grief that va-yikre'u simlotam, they tore their garments as a sign of anguish. It is true that this act on his part was one aspect of

a consistent plan; but it was pitiless and harsh, he might have yielded to human emotions, he might have somehow softened the blow. In fact, the Rabbis tell us that Joseph was repaid generations later for this act of agony that he caused his brothers: Joseph's descendant Joshua, who had otherwise experienced an unbroken string of successes in leading Israel in the conquest of Canaan, had one difficult setback in the war against the city of Ai, and so grief-stricken was Joshua that -- he tore his clothing in anguish!

Finally, and most important, Joseph heard, no less than ten times, his brothers referring to their father Jacob as avdekha avinu, "thy servant our father." Ten times he permitted them to refer to his own father as his servant! It is true, that this was part of his consistent fulfillment of the dream whereby the sun too, symbolizing Jacob, will bow down to Joseph. But the Rabbis were terribly angry with Joseph for allowing this piece of disrespect ten times over again. In punishment, they declare, Joseph lost ten years of his own life which he would have been permitted to live out had he not countenanced this discourtesy to his own father.

In a word, Joseph was consistent to a fault! He hewed too closely to his original plan. When a plan is overly consistent, when it leaves no room for contingencies, then it becomes a machine -- the kind of machine that grinds up human hearts and emotions, that leads brothers to grief, that makes servants of parents, and that ultimately diminishes the life of the master-mind himself. It is here that Joseph erred. He was too consistent and not sufficiently

compassionate; too calculating and not sufficiently kindly.

Does this mean that we must make a virtue of inconsistency, that it is good to be illogical and self-contradictory? Of course not! One ought always to have a framework, a philosophy, some solid criteria by which to judge men and events and oneself. But never should the framework be so massive that you have to cut down the picture of life in order to fit it into the frame. Never should consistency be so rigid that you become callous to the cause of compassion. Never should a theory thwart the truth. In the general organization of one's Weltanschauung, one ought always to strive for consistency, for otherwise life is haphazard and even hazardous. But, an overall consistent philosophy of life does not necessitate a stifling and petty consistency in every small segment of experience. For then, consistency becomes nothing more than the excuse for a closed mind.

What is it that is wrong with over-consistency?

First, over-consistency makes one inhuman. If I believe in the plan above all else, then I will follow it to the bitter end even if I must steamroller over people and feelings. This was the error of Joseph who had a marvelous and even generous plan, but followed it to its logical conclusion without compassion.

Second, it is simply unscientific. It involves too much trust in reason, and therefore out of concern for a consistent rational pattern I may fail to respect newly discovered facts and new situations. A theory that ignores facts, that twists logic instead of revising itself, that wards off unpleasant challenges by ignoring

them -- is simply wrong.

It is interesting that in the history of Talmudic methodology, the protest against extravagant dialectics, called pilpul, was largely a reaction against over-consistency. The protest against pilpul, from fifteenth century Prague to sixteenth century Poland to eighteenth century Lithuania, was a reaction against consistency so strong and theory so powerful that they would not be prejudiced by mere facts.

Indeed, there is a similar movement in contemporary American philosophy, which expresses itself in contempt for "ideology." The word "ideology" is taken as a synonym for the enthronement of the theory beyond any revision because of encounter with new facts.

An example of this disdain for facts in favor of a consistent theory is the matter of dialogues between Jews and Christians. One would have thought that after the Six Day War and the terrible betrayal of the Jewish community by those who had expressed such desires for dialogues with us, that we would be done with the whole business. Indeed, some honorable and honest proponents of dialogue issued retractions soon after the Six Day War and announced that they were finished with them. Yet, too many Jews have preferred to go their old way and have refused to abandon the dialogue movement and all that it implies. It is a pity that only a week or two ago an official of the Conservative movement authoritatively declared that his movement is in favor of more dialogues, not less. Apparently, a

"line" once taken, must be continued to infinity even if it leads -- no place... How wise was Ralph Waldo Emerson when he declared that "a foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds."

Third, over-consistency is religiously sinful. It is a sign of a lack of humility before God. It assumes that humans have complete control over the future, that we can avoid surprise and novelty and contingency by exercising our own wisdom and shrewdness. It means that we have over-confidence in our own reason and ability, and therefore that we really read God out of the world, that we substitute our plans for His, or, at best, we presume to know His plans to the last iota. Even religious folk, perhaps especially religious folk, ought never dare such presumptions. It is an act of arrogance against God: ein hokhmah v'ein eitzah v'ein tevunah negged ha-Shem, there is no wisdom and no counsel and no understanding against the Lord. The religious objection to over-consistency is in the form of a plea for humility, of an acknowledgement of our own limited visibility in the skies of history and our willingness to be guided by divine instruments too.

But finally, and perhaps the most serious objection to consistency-to-a-fault is that it is self-defeating and sometimes suicidal.

The best and most painful example of such over-consistency is the harsh and unwarranted criticism now being levelled against the forthcoming World Conference of Ashkenazi and Sephardic Synagogues in

Jerusalem, which I hope to address later this week, and for which I leave tonight with the rest of The Jewish Center delegation. This Conference is to be the first international meeting of Orthodox Synagogue leadership in our times, in order to consult with each other, to benefit from each other's experiences, and help the less developed Orthodox communities, as well as to demonstrate our interest in world-wide problems and perhaps provide for the first time an address for Orthodox Judaism in the world. That is all we have in mind -- it is rather modest, perhaps too modest.

Yet we have sustained relentless criticism and a barrage of charges against us by the extreme right wing of Orthodoxy. I do not intend to analyze here all that is involved in the World Conference, nor to go into all the details of the opposition. I do think that we ought to ponder what our critics say, and that it ought to be a concern of ours. In doing so, let it be said to their credit that they are consistent; and to their discredit and our dismay, that they are consistent to a fault -- suicidally so!

The issue, to put it clearly, is: the reconstitution of the Sanhedrin. The late Rabbi Maimon, the first Minister of Religions of Israel, had long advocated the reconstitution of this supreme judicial body of Jewish Law. Many other rabbis were opposed, fearing that this would be the opening for unwarranted reforms. In addition, they dislike the idea of Jewish legal decisions being proclaimed by a hierarchy, and preferred that such verdicts be issued by those recognized by the consensus of world Jewish opinion as qualified



authorities. Furthermore, they had halakhic doubts as to whether a Sanhedrin could be legally reconvened in our day.

Now this is a debatable issue about which men of good will can differ. Without any comments on the issue itself, let us for the sake of argument grant a point: it is wrong, for whatever reasons one may choose, to reconstitute the Sanhedrin today.

From this point on, however, reason is slowly abandoned, till nothing is left that makes much sense except in psychological terms of fear, retrenchment, and introversion.

After the movement for a Sanhedrin waned and was all but forgotten, the opposition to it kept on as a matter of general principle. When Religious Zionists wanted to build a headquarters for the Chief Rabbinate in Israel, the Hechal Shelomoh, the same right wing groups suspected that it was a cloak for a Sanhedrin -- and banned entrance to the building. To this day, the ban stands though it is largely ignored. Are they consistent? Certainly!

Then, every time we spoke of Orthodox leadership of different countries and communities meeting together, immediately the threat was raised of a ban against the Sanhedrin directed against such a meeting. Consistent? By all means.

And now that we have scheduled this world-wide meeting of synagogues, mostly of laymen, not one of whom, laymen or rabbis, particularly intends to convoke a Sanhedrin sub rosa and become the first member, the same extreme group here and in Israel accuses



us of doing just that, and in a series of newspaper ads declares that Orthodox Jews may not attend this Conference. Consistent? No doubt; but consistent to a fault -- an irrational, wrong-headed, misplaced, extravagant, and dangerous consistency that is destructive of the interests of all Orthodox Jews, those on the right as well as those in the center and on the left.

We live in a time of disintegration -- of the home and the family, of religions and nations, of man himself. Assimilation is eating away at the fringes of the Jewish communities of the entire world. This is a time to seek out unity, not to snuff it out before it begins; a time to consolidate, not condemn; a time to ban futile issues, not to issue futile bans; a time for realistic construction, not unrealistic consistency.

As The Jewish Center delegation joins our fellow-American Jews in meeting with fellow-Orthodox Jews throughout the world, we do so in the knowledge and conviction that kol kavvanotenu le'Shem shamayim, all our intentions are for the sake of Heaven. We are sad that others do not understand us and do not join us.

Our main prayer is that our modest goals be achieved and that they inspire us to yet greater goals; that those who are now suspicious be convinced of our integrity and join us, lending us of their piety and their passion, their scholarship and their commitment, so that all together we may fulfill the great verse of the prophet Malachi: az nidberu yir'ei ha-Shem ish el re'ehu, then will

those who fear the Lord speak each man to his friend. When will we prove the authenticity of our status as yir'ei ha-Shem, those who fear the Lord? When we will converse with each other, when az nidberu, not condemn; when we will talk, not vituperate; in other words, when we will fear God and not the times in which we live, when we will revere Heaven and not be frightened by lurking suspicions; and above all, when we will relate each of us to his fellow Jew as ish el re'ehu, a man to his friend.