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THE JEWISH CENTER

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"WHERE ANGELS FEAR TO TREAD"

One of the greatest difficulties for and challenges to Orthodox Judaism, is modern man's lack of appreciation of the value of tradition for its own sake. Indeed, modern man often seems to be antagonistic to the past, and anxious to disassociate from it. He worships change, which he often regards as synonymous with progress. Why not, he asks, discard the old and substitue the new for it?

Moreover, contemporary man is anxious to take new notions and put them into practice immediately. Theory should not remain theoretical, but should at once be converted into action. After all, that is the secret of the success of technology which has done so much to transform our lives and make life more liveable: a pure scientist formulates an idea, and immediately the engineers and the inventors begin to develop it into practical gadgets or medicines or equipment. A secularized world, for whom the category of the holy is alien, would like to do the same with religion. It sees nothing wrong with experimentation, innovation, and constant change in the realm of religion and the spirit.

This, indeed, is the spirit of the age, the zeitgeist. Hence, it is common for people to consider tradition dated and ready to be jettisoned in favor of anything that is new either in content or in form. Morality? -- out with the old "code-morality" and in with the New Morality. Services? -- we are bored with the traditional services and the cadences and rhythms of the ages. Let us, rather, write our own poetry, and worship to the tune of "rock-'n-roll."

And yet, this is so dangerous -- and, even worse, so foolish! A great Anglican thinker, Dean Inge, once said: "A man who marries the

age will soon find himself a widower."

The kernel of this idea may be found in symbolic form in the Haftorah we read this morning, from the Book of Amos. The Prophet tells us that one of the sins for which God will not forgive Israel is

-- מכרי בכסף צדיק ואביון בעבור נעלים

selling the righteous man for silver and the poor man for shoes. In general, the Prophet is referring to a kind of treachery which allows us to subordinate human values to commercial values. More specifically, the Rabbis saw in this prophetic metaphor a reference in the selling of Joseph by his brothers -- a theme which, together with the eating of the fruit of Tree of Knowledge and the dancing about the Golden Calf, is one of the archetypical sins in the Jewish historical consciousness. The brothers sold Joseph, who was a צדיק, a righteous, for silver. What of the reference to shoes? Here they tell us that the brothers took the 20 silver pieces which they received for Joseph and with them bought shoes for themselves. Hence, the prophet's warning against repeating the sin of "selling the righteous for silver and the oppressed for shoes."

But what is the significance of shoes, such that the prophet thought it necessary to recall this ancient crime? My grandfather זצ"ל explains the symbol as follows: in the days of old, when poverty was almost universal, people would use shoes only rarely, only for special occasions, such as walking long distances or, more important, for going places quickly. Otherwise, they would go barefoot. Hence, shoes are the symbol of quickness and impulsiveness. To go barefoot, to expose your feet to the pebbles and rocks and splinters, is a symbol of the sensitive, the slow, and the deliberate. Shoes signify impetuousity,

heavy-handedness as well as heavy-footedness, the mind following the body, thought trailing action. Thus, the brothers of Joseph may have been right in condemning Joseph, but they acted too speedily, too impatiently, they were peremptory and not deliberate when dealing with the survival and destiny of a human being, of their brother. The shoe is thus the emblem of those who rush in where angels fear to tread.

This symbol seems to be consistent throughout the Torah. Thus, when giving the Jews the commandment to observe the Passover while they were yet in Egypt, God tells them to wear their shoes -- to spur them on, to get them out quickly, חפזון. Even more important, when Moses receives his revelation at the burning bush, the message of God to him is: של נעליך מעל רגליך כי המקום אשר אתה עומד עליו אדמת קדש הוא.

"Remove your shoes from your feet, because the place on which you are standing is hallowed ground." Don't trample the sacred. When approaching the holy, take your shoes off, exercise sensitivity and reverence, care and caution.

This was the fatal error of the Greeks which caused the rebellion which we celebrate on Hanukkhah. The revolution was not primarily a nationalistic assertion of Jewish independence as much as it was a reaction against the gross and stupid insensitivity of the Greeks in violating the religious feelings of the Judeans. We have learned to live without independence for a long time, but when the Greek-Syrians and the Hellinists insisted upon sacrificing to a pagan idol on the spot of the sacred Temple, at that time they were trampling with vulgar boots where angels fear to tread. The result was revolution and the

rest of the Hanukkhah story.

Historically, Reform has commited the same unpardonable offense. They marched with their shoes on, on what is hallowed ground. Critical of the existing establishment, as it were, in Jewish religion, they mindlessly cut and excised, truncated and removed from Judaism whatever was not in accord with the spirit of the age in their eyes. And so they abolished Shabbat and loyalty to the Holy Land, the Holy Tongue, and the head-covering and the tallit. I mention specifically only some of the items which contemporary Reform is trying so hard to recapture in our times, in the hope that, unlike Humpty-Dumpty, they can put it all together again. Had they only exercised patience and deliberateness, had they only removed their shoes some 100 years ago, who knows how many more generation of Jews would have remained Jewish this day!

In the same vein, I hope that the authorities in Israel will step even more gingerly and proceed with even more caution on the volatile and touchy "Who is a Jew?" topic. This important question has not been satisfactorily resolved. The government of Israel must realize that it is here dealing with the very identity of Jewishness, that it is not merely a matter of political decision-making and party bargaining. This is hallowed ground and shoes must be removed before deciding on such issues.

I wish to make it clear that in advocating caution and deliberateness when dealing with matters of the greatest moment, I do not recommend paralysis or institutional inertia. I am pleading to remove shoes, not to plant one's feet in concrete. I am saying that

with regard to the sacred, and only with regard to the sacred, we should adopt a responsible conservatism and not a stultifying and strangling reaction. Where Halakhah cannot be changed, it should not and must not. But even where it can, and when changed, even then -- only when we are barefoot, with the greatest sensitivity towards the sancta and concerns of the past and keeping in mind the possible consequences for the future. Even sacred customs, important traditions, albeit that they do not have the sanction of Halakhah, must be approached with reverence and sensitivity. However, where we are not dealing with the sacred, with Halakhah, with important tradition and custom, but where we are dealing with habits and institutional customs and techniques, or what the tradition itself has called מנהג הדיוט -- ordinary or sometimes meaningless custom -- no such conservatism can lay claim to religious sanction. Human institutions can always improve -- even synagogues. It is simply wrong to worship blindly on the altar of the past. A mistake is no less a mistake because it is repeated unquestioningly for 20 or 30 or 50 or 100 years. Error does not become truth because it has the sanction of long usage. Techniques, habits, matters of style all must be subject to intelligent criticism, rational analysis, and constant revision.

The same responsible, moderate conservatism holds true not only with matters directly dealing with religion and religious law, but also with what Judaism considers supremely sacred in another realm: human destiny and the human mind.

For some time now, biologists have been undertaking great and

promising research in genetics and have developed what they refer to as "genetic engineering," by which they mean the ability to effect changes in a man's or the race's genetic structure. By means of such genetic surgery they hope to weed out defects and thus improve the race. Similarly, psychologists, through the use of behavioral conditioning and psycho-pharmaceuticals, hope to control man's mind and passions and direct them towards more creative ends. All of them intend the best for humanity. All those who make such proposals are unquestionably benevolent.

Now, I agree that it is sometimes necessary to poke around in man's chromosomes or his mind, and thus cure heretofor incureable hereditary illnesses or psychoses. But there must be moral limits, codified in law, on scientific attempts to manipulate human destiny and the human mind. I admire the good intentions of a leading psychologist who, in the daily press, has recently been arguing for pills to be given to heads of state in order to calm them and prevent them from making rash decisions. But I do not trust that psychologist, and not only because of his obvious naiveté. I do not trust <u>anyone</u> who has such enormous power in his hands, because such power corrupts and destroys. The human mind, human chromosomes -- these are sacred, they are repositories of the צלם אלקים, the divine image of man. I do not even place my trust in Nobel Laureates. The techniques of the laboratory which they have mastered with such great eminence, does not qualify them to make momentous moral decisions for all the ages. Let them and let us remove our shoes: humankind is hallowed ground.

I find it necessary to refer to one more issue in this connection. In the <u>New York Times</u> of yesterday, Friday, December 10th,

we New York Jews were treated to a bumper crop of ads concerning matters of interest to our community. We read of the Arabs who insist that Palestinians want to return to their home country -- with no mention of the fact that this means the dismemberment of the State of Israel. We read an inane and stupid ad by a Christian mission to the Jews inviting all Jews to embrace the Christian faith, showing us a picture of some idiotically happy Jewish faces who claim to have found "happiness" because of their new religious affiliations. Incidentally, in looking at those smiling faces, I felt as if the paper could be peeled off and underneath it I would see the agonized expression on the faces two thousand years of Jewish victims of the Religion of Love.

But what was most disturbing to me was the "Orthodox" ad attacking Golda Meir, and announcing a demonstration of "Orthodox Synagogues and Rabbis" protesting the גיוס בנות or what they call "conscription of girls."

Now let me say a number of things in order that this congregation shall have a clear idea of what is occurring.

First, these people do not -- I emphasize, do not -- represent all Orthodox synagogues and Rabbis. Certainly they do not represent this synagogue and this rabbi. I have serious doubt whether they represent any more than a very small fraction of Orthodox Judaism in this country.

Second, it is simply untrue that the government wants to "coscript all girls" to the Israeli army. What is in question is not the

army, but national service; not conscription, but a form of voluntary service. Now, one may disagree with the government proposal and have every right to fight it; indeed, I would say that those religious groups that feel that this violates Jewish tradition and Jewish modesty, have not only the right but the moral duty to protest it.

But, and this is my third and most important point -- it must never be done in a manner grossly calculated to effect a חלול השם, a desecration of the Name of God and Torah and Judaism in the eyes of all other Jews and all the world! This technique of embarrassing Mrs. Meir at a time of such crucial decisions for world Jewry; at a time when the future of the State of Israel hangs in the balance, and when the best friend of Israel seems to be Secretary of State Rogers who delights in choice bits of gossip about internal dissension in Israel in order to prove that without American Israel could never survive internally -- at a time of this sort, such ads are nothing less than loathsome and repulsive!

I do not agree with all the policies of the State of Israel, certainly not with the ruling Labor Party, and not even with the National Religious Party. But to expose such inner tensions within the Jewish people in a manner calculated to humiliate that great Jewess who is our guest, and to gladden the heart of every anti-Semite of the United States, this is trampling with boots on the sacred, and it is unforgiveable --

על מכונם בכסף כדוק לאיתן בעבור לאום

To summarize, then, the Prophet Amos -- according to our interpretation -- teaches us what Jewish history in the Hanukkhah

incident confirms: that the sacred must not be dealt with cavalierly and light-heartedly and impusively. Rather, we ought to approach it with reverence, with sensitivity, with deliberateness.

Perhaps for that reason, the wearing of leather shoes is forbidden on Yom Kippur: as if we, by our practice, ask forgiveness for having been insensitive throughout the ye ar.

So, let us now be sensitivie before it is necessary to ask forgiveness.

For to be sensitive is to be human.

And to be human is to enhance and exemplify the holy.