

THE question is often posed to us, sometimes by ourselves: can I not be good without being religious? Is it not possible to be decent without accepting all the minutiae of religion? Is not good behaviour sufficient without observance of all the rituals?

That question has recently been answered, in a sophisticated fashion, by a number of theologians who have declared — borrowing a phrase from Nietzsche, the German philosopher — that "G-d is dead." This means that G-d has no relations with our world. He is unconcerned with man, and that therefore He is irrelevant and meaningless. Hence, they conclude, we must construct a morality in human terms, without reference to traditional religion; we must devise a secular ethic and profound a G-dless goodness.

How shall we respond, we who are believing and observing Jews, we who deny that — Heaven forbid — "G-d is dead," but who insist instead, on affirming undying faith in the Torah's *Elohim hayyim*, the living G-d of the Bible?

First, we cannot deny that there are good people who do not believe in G-d. We have all met such people in our own personal experience. However, Judaism maintains that such goodness cannot last forever. The moral instincts that prevail today among the non-religious are but the residue of a religious reservoir which is rapidly drying up. They are living off the ethical interest from the quickly dwindling religious capital of two or three generations ago.

For ethical living is the branch of a tree of life, of which the roots are religion. When you cut off the root, the branch does not wither immediately, but eventually it must die. So, ethics is a natural consequence of religion. Reject religion, and within a few generations ethical living and moral instincts must die as well.

Why Good... and to what extent?

Secular ethics, G-dless goodness, is inadequate for yet another reason, as the late Dr. Isidor Epstein has pointed out. It simply is not inwardly compelling. There comes a time when every man asks himself the ultimate

G-dless Goodness

question why should I be honourable?

All the rational answers provided by secular philosophy — that it makes for smoother functioning of society, that it has utility in promoting civilisation — are unconvincing. Why should I be the one to risk my life for the lubrication of society's machine? Why honesty when it is not the best policy? Why suffer humiliation for my principles?

Why act with courtesy and generosity, when it is flung back in my face and my sacrifice goes unappreciated? There is only one answer: that there is a G-d Who cares, Who is concerned, Who notices and observes and is, as it were, worried for us.

A corollary of this idea is that of *teshuvah*, repentance. If one is good in a G-dless manner he may indeed stay on the straight and narrow path. But should he stray and deviate from the path of righteousness, he usually goes all the way in the wrong direction; there is nothing to impel him to return.

When one's goodness, however, is founded upon a religious commitment, then he too may stray from the right path; but he is, as it were, bound to the ways of righteousness, and sooner or later this rubber band of faith will pull him back to the direction of decency.

A third reason for a G-dly goodness this too suggested by Dr. Epstein, is that only a religious ethic can produce saintliness — the highest and most intense expression, the very culmination, of goodness. A G-dless goodness can at most produce a decent person; never will it give birth to a saint.

Consider, for instance, the difference between the pagan Greeks and us Jews. Plato was one of the most distinguished of all the pagan philosophers. In his "Symposium," he speaks glowingly of his master Socrates. The highest encomium that he bestows upon Socrates is that he was not, as were so many other Greeks of that period, a sexual degenerate!

What an abyss separates this kind of thinking from that of our Jewish Sages! Can one imagine a Jew saying such things about

our *tzaddikim* or *gedolim*? It would be an insult to them to say that their goodness is expressed in the absence of perversion. Their goodness is expressed in the pinnacle of human development where goodness and G-dliness merge: saintliness.

From the First Jew

A fourth reason for rejecting G-dless goodness, is that it cannot guarantee reliability and the durability of morality. This point is best emphasised by an episode in the lives of the founders of our faith. Abraham and Sarah were driven out of their land by famine and forced to wander to Egypt in order to find food. Abraham was afraid lest the Egyptians, notorious for their immorality, would kill him in order to abduct his beautiful wife into the harem of Pharaoh.

In order to avoid this, he asked Sarah to co-operate with him in a ruse, and declare that she was his sister — which, in a sense she was — in order that his life

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be spared. The almost identical episode is repeated with regard to Avimelech, the King of Gerar.

In this second story, after G-d had appeared in a dream to Avimelech and reproached him for taking Sarah, the pagan king rebuked Abraham for deceiving him. The response of the first Jew is: *ki amarti rak ein yirat Elohim ba-m'kom ha-zeh*, I thought there is no fear of G-d in this place.

What is the meaning of this exchange? According to some of the commentaries (Malbim, Netziv), Avimelech said to Abraham: I can understand your deception with regard to the Egyptians; they are immoral. However, we are a decent, ethical people. Why did you ensnare us with this ruse? Abraham then answered: It is true that you are a good, moral people. However — if there is no piety, no *yirat Elohim*, then I cannot trust that you will remain decent, for your ethics may well prove

unreliable in the face of overwhelming passion and temptation.

If there is no religion, no faith in a G-d above, what is to prevent you from making up your own laws and moral code as you go along, simply to fit the situation? In such a case, what yesterday was a reprehensible evil will become today a tolerable foible, and tomorrow the privilege of every tax-payer. Where there is no fear of G-d, G-dless goodness may be present, but it is unreliable and no one ought to risk his life on it.

Healthy Values

There is a fifth reason why we cannot accept a G-dless goodness. A non-religious morality is incomplete, full of gaps, and the values are sometimes amazingly inverted and reversed. Again referring to the same two Biblical episodes, in an interpretation indirectly suggested by R. Velvel Brisker, of blessed memory, we are struck by Abraham's strange suspicion: he is afraid that he will be killed, yet he is confident that the Egyptians or Gerarites will not abduct Sarah, a married woman. He does not suspect them of adultery; he does fear murder in order to avoid adultery. Strange!

This is precisely what Abraham meant by "there is no fear of G-d in this place." If goodness is divorced from religion, then the morality that results is spotty and inconsistent and often characterised by upside-down values. People who espouse G-dless goodness will feel that they may kill a man in order to take his wife, but they will never take his wife while he is alive! There is respect for the marital bond, but no respect for human life!

That sounds grotesque, and grates on the ears of us moderns. But is our society much more rational? As we move away from our traditional religious beliefs in

G-d, we find that our morality too, like that of the ancient pagans, is spotty and incomplete, with our greatest values inverted. Whereas for the pagans of antiquity, adultery was abominable but murder commonplace, we modern pagans have simply reversed it: Murder is "out" and adultery is "in," acceptable in the highest levels of society!

If there is no *yirat Elohim*, morality is nothing more than a crazy quilt of high moral purpose in one area and decadence in another. Only if it is G-dly can goodness be complete.

'Good' - 'G-d' = 'O'

Whether our Jewish community is fundamentally religious or secular, whether it possesses *yirat Elohim* or only a G-dless goodness, may be determined by checking whether its values are inverted and its morality spotty.

Thus, we must ask: what are the priorities of our federations and welfare funds — Jewish education or community centres; the advancement of Jewish culture or the sponsorship of causes better served by the Government? Do we concentrate our gift-giving on Purim — where it belongs, or Hanukkah — where it is sheer assimilationist mimicry?

Are our children "Bar-mitzvah'd" in an orgy of lavishness, or solemnly initiated into a life of *mitzvot*? Is modesty of dress and speech a matter of popular taste, or of Jewish law? The health of a Jewish community — religious and moral — depends upon the answer to these questions. A G-dly goodness will yield a healthy moral consistency; a goodness without religion will not.

For the reasons already mentioned and for many more compelling reasons, we Jews can never accept as genuine and authentic a secular morality, a G-dless goodness.

This does not mean that every pious person is good. But a pious person ought to strive for that ideal, and this striving will lead him more towards its realisation. Unfortunately, in our experience

Continued on page 15



we do sometimes meet people who are outwardly observant and yet are unethical or immoral.

But piety without goodness is essentially a contradiction in terms. It happens; but then so do mistakes occur in physical or biological nature, and yet they are not the normal. A person who is pious and yet malicious or disreputable is a mutation of the spirit, an ugly monstrosity, a horrible aberration.

Three Qualities

A Jew must be both G-dly and goodly — and merge both with wisdom. The great Rabbi of Kotzk once said the following: There are three great qualities: goodness; piety or G-dliness; and intelligence or wisdom. Each one by itself can be extremely dangerous. Goodness may lead to promiscuity; an over-abundance of the desire to please, an extension of the libido, can sometimes lead a person morally astray. Piety can sometimes lead to cruelty, for it may induce self-righteousness and arrogance, and cause one to think that he has the right to be unfeeling and malicious.

Similarly, wisdom can sometimes lead to crookedness; a person can misapply intelligence, and emerge merely with craftiness or smartness. These three great qualities can become three sources of evil. However, when you take all three together, you emerge with a wonderful product: "gutt un klug un frum — dos iz a yid!" Goodness and piety and intelligence — that is a Jew!

It is that wise philosophy of G-dly goodness which has guided our faith and our people from the days of Abraham until today — and into tomorrow.