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"ORTHODOXY AND CHARACTER"

The question to which this essay is addressed -- the ethical practice of committed, religious Jews -- is one of the most urgent of the complex of problems which afflict Jews and Judaism in modern times. I seriously doubt whether it is within the competence of any essay to propose an adequate solution and the effective means of dealing with the issue. Nevertheless, in the hope that some insights may be gained even if by inadvertency from this kind of impressionistic analysis, I am pleased to contribute whatever I can to the discussion.

That there is a painful discrepancy between the theory and practice of Orthodox Judaism, that too many Jews who are observant of the "ritual" law are flawed ethically -- needs, unfortunately, no confirmation. It is obvious to any one who lives in the Orthodox community, and has eyes to see, that all is not well with us.

However, this self-evident fact must not be exaggerated, lest we befoul the problem with our own guilt feelings, and confound an already complex issue with an even more complicated collective masochism. Any attempt, for instance, to read a propensity for corruption into the essential character of the Jewish people, to locate the source of ethical weakness in "some basic trait" in our people, is the kind of extravagance which, in addition to revealing a racist bias, befuddles any attempt at clear under-

standing. Furthermore, it should not be blithely assumed that Orthodox Jews are any worse in their social ethics than any other Jews or any other human beings. It is possible, of course, that independent research will corroborate as an objective fact what is now merely a suspicion that observant Jews possess less integrity than others. But unless and until such "proof" is forthcoming, what is but an assumption should not be elevated to the status of a fact. My personal impression is that this is certainly not the case.

Moreover, the focusing of our concerns on the social and personal dimensions of Judaism should not be interpreted as presupposing an axiological preference for these over the exclusively religious dimensions of Judaism, the relations between man and God. True, a case can be made for this superiority, or at least for the idea that the purpose of the sacred regimen of halakhic living is the refinement of character and the ennoblement of man in his relations to his fellow men. Nevertheless, it is just as possible to declare for an integrated view which refuses to acknowledge any substantive bifurcation of Judaism into two distinct areas, and yet to be troubled by the problem at hand.

All these disclaimers and precautions having been stated, the magnitude of our problem stubbornly refuses to be reduced. Whether lack of honor is greater amongst observant Jews than among others, or just the same as theirs, is not really of major conse-

quence. What matters -- enough to shake our own confidence in the value of a Torah life, and to hold us up to public ridicule -- is the fact that we are not better than others. Even were we to grant that social ethics is not more important than halakhic performance in the perspective of an integrated Judaism, yet certainly we ought to expect that a Jew committed to Judaism should prove superior to others in the quality of his human relations even as he is superior in the fulfillment of his purely ritual obligations. That this is not so, or even if it is, the fact that it is not obvious to everyone, is the problem of problems: the efficacy of the Jewish life in matters of character.

What are the causes of this ethical failure? I believe the following constitutes at least a partial diagnosis:

1. The Unnaturalness of a Full Jewish Life in the Contemporary World. Whether the Orthodox Jew retreats into a self-contained ghetto or believes in remaining relevant to contemporary life and culture, there can be little doubt that he suffers from an unavoidable split between himself and his larger environment. Neither the village limits of Squaretown nor the ideological web spun by the exponents of a "synthesis" of Judaism and Western culture can disguise this fissure between a normal, normative Jewish-halakhic existence and the realities of the world in which we live. These realities are so foreign to our life-style as Jews, they make demands upon us which are so alien to the context of

Judaism, that we are left, willy nilly, with the profound feeling of our differentness, our strangeness, and our inability to survive unless this differentness is preserved. We are, in other words, in galut. This is certainly true for Jews in America and, to a lesser extent but at least in some significant measure, for the Orthodox Jew in Israel. Now this need for maintaining our identity by highlighting our differentness results in an imbalance in our religious life. Since the non-Jew and the non-Orthodox Jew also advocate integrity, our otherness cannot be achieved in this area as easily as it can in the area of strictly religious actions. Hence, what begins as a sociological necessity soon becomes encrusted as a fact of Jewish experience which ostensibly reflects certain theological infirmities. Whether this theory is correct or not may be tested historically. I believe, though I may certainly be wrong, that ethicist movements arose in Jewish life generally at times of, and in response to, social displacement, when Jews were newly confronted by hostile and unassimilable environments. If this should prove accurate, then there is no real "solution" to our problem (short of the complete Messianic redemption), although much can certainly be done to mitigate it.

2. The Arrogance of Distinctiveness. This point in a way resembles the first, except that the first speaks of historical circumstances, and here I intend the very nature of distinctiveness as such. There is a quite natural, human tendency to glory in

ones area of prominence. As an instructive analogy, we may cite the examples provided for us by the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century Hasidim and Mitnagdim. The former emphasized the experiential aspects of religious existence: piety, ecstasy, feeling. The latter gave major prominence to the study of the Torah and, consequently, to the virtues of the intellect. Both movements discovered that spiritual accomplishments are accompanied by spiritual dangers, especially that of arrogance. Thus, the early Mitnagdic polemicists were quick to point to the haughtiness of Hasidim who imagined that their achievement of devekut distinguished them as closer to God than others. Hasidic writers -- especially R. Jacob Joseph of Polonne -- were almost vitriolic in their denunciation of Talmudic scholars who so gloried in their intellectual attainments that they treated all the rest of mankind with disdain. But this exposé of the dangers to character indigenous to spiritual or intellectual excellence was more than another weapon in the armory of polemics. The leaders of both movements acknowledged the existence of these problems in their own camps. Thus, the Baal Shem Tov himself (especially in the Tzavaat ha-Rivash) frequently warns his followers against turning supercilious because they had succeeded in attaining devekut, and the leader of the Mitnagdim, R. Hayyim of Volozhin (especially in his Ruah Hayyim), repeatedly reminds his students at the great academy of Volozhin that they must not submit to the ubiquitous threat of haughtiness which haunts the scholar at every

step.

The same problem, mutatis mutandis, affects the Orthodox Jew today. It is not that we are self-conscious of extraordinary scholarship or that we possess an unusually rich spiritual life; unfortunately we are blessed with neither in sufficient measure -- and we know it. But we are set off from others by our observance of Jewish law, particularly the purely ritual commandments which are the most obviously "different" aspect of our existence. Our loyalty to the ritual mitzvot often costs us much in terms of convenience, time, effort, social acceptance, money. It is not easy to be an observant Jew in the second third of twentieth century America. Our Shabbat, Kashrut, Tefillin, therefore become for us a badge of pride -- and this last word ^{is} taken by us in both its commendable and unattractive senses. In return for our self-sacrifice, we have become something special. We expect the world to acknowledge this. And if it doesn't, why we in turn shall ignore this heinous and indifferent world which is really undeserving of our attentions. From this sin of arrogance, all else flows. Once we are superior, it follows that the rest of the world is inferior, and if so there are two standards of conduct, one towards "our kind" and the other towards "the others." Of course, this is only an ephemeral, transitory stage, for soon the circle of "the others" is enlarged to include everyone outside of myself.

3. The Beleaguered Fortress Psychology. The psychological abyss that we Orthodox Jews introduce to separate ourselves from all others, and which to a large extent is responsible for our ethical shortcomings (even as it has certain happy consequences in fortifying our separate identity in a society which seeks to enforce sameness), is a complicated one that is full of ambivalencies. We mentioned, above, the factor of arrogance towards others as a result of our Jewish distinctiveness. But of much greater import is an exactly opposite attitude which results in creating the very same distance between "us" and "them" and, in turn, in producing undesirable character traits. What I refer to is not arrogance but apprehension. Orthodox Jews are a minority within a minority. The terrible attrition to which we have been subjected in modern times has eroded our self-confidence and aroused within us a hostile defensiveness towards the outer world. Not only have Jews historically been tormented by non-Jews, but Orthodox Jews have been, and are occasionally at the present, shabbily treated by secular and non-conforming Jews. The Orthodox Jew therefore begins to feel hemmed in, attacked, beleaguered. His natural, spontaneous reaction, is to man the ramparts and protect his fortress against the interlopers. This fear of being overwhelmed, this anger at having our credentials as authentic Jews questioned when we know we represent the legitimate continuity of the people of Torah, this rage at being dismissed as obsolete, this apprehensiveness about our future in a world and

community being split apart by the centrifugal forces -- all this leaves us with a feeling of isolation in which our only way to survive is to protect what we have against everyone else. It does not matter that this reasoning contains logical or spiritual flaws; it is psychologically valid. Our heroic posture may look ridiculous from the perspective of history, but it is a fact, and one which is largely responsible for the quality of our conduct towards our fellow men.

4. Failures in our Educational System. The typical curriculum of our Yeshivot, so wanting in many other respects, is no less a failure in the inculcation of ethical values. The subject matter in our schools only tangentially concerns character training. Our faculties are largely manned by people who carry over the patronizing attitude towards ethical studies by halakhtic scholars that was already out of date in nineteenth century Eastern Europe. The emphases of our schools are two: virtuosity in intellectual academics and punctilious observance of the commandments. Ethical issues are considered too simple for the halakhtic intellectual to concern himself with, and too vague for the observant Jew to be finicky about. The circumscribed victim of these twin emphases is any subject which is neither intellectually demanding nor easily translatable in practice in terms of specific, quantifiable acts. Thus, for instance, the inexcusable neglect of the study of *Midot* and *Agada* in our Yeshivot. Any simplification,

we have been taught to feel intuitively, can follow Isaiah, and there is not much practical value in it as regards ritual performance anyway. Whatever little is taught of it reduces, generally, to questions of translation. If the teacher is so inclined, the teaching of Prophets becomes largely an exercise in tracing verb roots and grammatical constructions. If a Rosh Yeshivah condescends to teach Navi, it frequently becomes a stimulating -- but ethically unrewarding -- pursuit of subtle halakhic elements that no one ever suspected lay hidden beneath an otherwise innocent text.

Of course, there are reasons why this situation obtains in our schools. We are still reacting to the noxious attempts of the early Maskillim and Reformers to rend asunder the body of Judaism into the ethical and the ritual and to insert a "versus" in between them. When these groups opted for the Prophets over the Talmud, we countered by correcting the imbalance, little suspecting that by so doing we were freezing ourselves in an opposite imbalance. To the Maskil, everything was Bible; for us, therefore, the Oral Law is supreme, and our major concern with the Written Law is to discover in it the themes of the Halakhah. To the Reformer, ethics is all that counts, except for some public ceremonies; we, therefore, concentrate on the exclusively ritual and, what is more, react with disdain to any decorous public ceremonial. Now this reaction is an understandable one, and even a correct one

(thus the Pharisees often legislated le'hotzi mi-libban shel tzedukim, to emphasize their differences with the Saducees) -- provided we later learn to return to the fullness of Jewish life and experience. Thus it happens that the works of the Prophets, mankind's major examples of the Word of God as applied to concrete historical circumstances, the realization of the sublimest ethical values of the Torah, is ignored in the very schools dedicated to their perpetuation.

It would be unfair, however, to leave the impression that no effort was ever made to correct the situation. Throughout Jewish history there were endeavors to focus the attention of our people on "the duties of the heart." An entire literature is available for our use, and indeed most of the great Lithuanian Yeshivot eventually taught Musar as part of their curriculum. The question that is unanswered, however, is whether this special study resulted in significant improvement of character. This is a research problem for a historian, although I do not know what kind of methodology can be employed to discover the effects of a specific kind of education on the character of people no longer with us. Perhaps the remaining few Musar Yeshivot can be investigated. My own prejudice is that the results were largely negative, i.e., that the study of Musar as a course does not significantly affect character.

I believe this is so for two reasons. First, there is a

considerable distance between the head and the heart. What is approached in an intellectual manner does not necessarily translate itself into a way of acting and feeling. Many a Musar discourse that I have read is esthetically appealing, intellectually gratifying, and homiletically stimulating. The whole subject of the discourse is, of course, related to questions of ethics and character. Yet the demands it places on cleverness and originality tend to overwhelm the fact that its purpose is clearly practical: the improvement of character. My feeling is that ethical conduct, like happiness, is rarely achieved through direct pursuit. The way to attain it is usually by indirection. To use the old but ever-valid cliché, it must be caught, not taught. Our primary emphasis, therefore, ought to be not on devising a new course as part of an already overcrowded curriculum, but an educationally effective means of discovering the ethical elements in the rest of the courses. Here our major requirement is not a text book (although that too is important, as I shall explain shortly) but a teacher: how to impress upon the student the ethical dimensions of what he studies in Humash and Rashi, in Talmud, in Siddur, in Codes, in Jewish history.

The second reason for what I believe is the failure of text-study of ethics in inculcating ethical values, is that we no longer have a relevant ethical literature. I know that there are those who will consider this assertion overly bold and disrespectful. It is neither. I have nothing but the most profound reverence for those giants of the Jewish spirit who were the teachers of Torah and

Jewish character in their generations. But it would be an injustice to them to interpret their works as a kind of abstract philosophy of Jewish ethics. Nothing was further from their mind than the construction of a system of abstract principles of behavior. They were eminently practical men, teachers of human beings, not theoreticians who flourished in ivory towers spinning out their irrelevant hypotheses. The business of Musar was to relate the timeless teachings of Torah to the daily exigencies of a specific generation with its own strengths and weaknesses. But if that is so, then works of Musar tend to be dated (unlike halak-hic works), for what is relevant to one set of conditions is no longer germane to a completely different set. This means that when a generation's problems change, that new works of Musar must be written for it. Yet this principle has been discounted in those Yeshivot where Musar is studied -- as if Hovot Ha-levavot is as applicable and as relevant today as it was in eleventh-century Spain, or as if Mesillat Yesharim appeals to today's Jew as it did to the Italian Jew of the nineteenth century or his compatriots in Eastern Europe. Bahya was able to preach a pure faith so strong that the pious Jew gives no thought to where he will find his food on the morrow. Are we prepared to follow this policy to the bitter end in capitalistic America today? Shall we all forthwith cancel our life insurance policies? I use this rather extreme, yet not untypical, example to illustrate my point that we very much need a

new Musar literature for the atomic age, even if such a literature will not, by itself, solve the ethical crisis both within and without our schools. To continue to insist on an exclusive diet of the old classics of Musar is not only to fail to teach ethical living, but to impart to our young, unconsciously, the impression that Judaism has nothing of importance to say to the contemporary Jew in his own situation.

A solution to the educational problem would therefore call for indirect teaching of ethics and for the development of a new corpus of Musar writings when such direct study is called for. To this I would add a third element: the motivation for ethical conduct should be religious, not humanistic. Our appeal must be not to reason or to conscience as such, but to piety or the pious conscience. The prohibition of lashon hara, for instance, is certainly related to social harmony; the theme crops up throughout the Hafetz Hayyim as an halakhic principle. Yet the ultimate validation of the prohibition is purely religious: the mitzvah. The philosophic issues are too subtle and too complex to enter into at this occasion; a good argument can be made for the idea that Judaism grants far greater autonomy to man-man relations than does any other Western theistic religion. But no one can deny that whether or not Jewish ethics can be rationally constructed without recourse to revelation, it certainly has profound religious consequences and is essentially unseparable from the totality of Jewish

teachings. Moreover, and more significant for our purposes, it is pedagogically preferable that our Yeshivot teach ethics the way they teach Shabbat: as Halakhah, and as issuing from divine revelation. (R. Nachman Bratzlaver interpreted the verse from Psalms, derekh mitzvotekha arutzah, in this manner. Derekh refers to ethics, as in derekh eretz; hence we must pursue the ethical life with the same passion and zeal we bring to the performance of the ritual mitzvot.) Not only does the ethical moment then benefit from the same powerful religious impulses we normally bring to the ritual core of Judaism, but we then in effect have integrated the ethical and the ritual, the social-humanistic and the spiritual-religious, not only theologically but existentially.

This essay has been too brief to require summarization; whatever practical steps have been suggested, whether of a research or of an educational nature, are clear enough, hopefully, in the text of my remarks.

I am grateful for this opportunity to discuss the problem, not only because it is personally stimulating, but because it is high time that we Orthodox Jews emerged from our protective shield of self-righteousness and openly confronted our failings. Public self-criticism is always embarrassing -- but always therapeutic.