

"ENLIGHTENED SELF-INTEREST"

Historians tell us that when they find a law in a document, they assume that the mode of conduct which this law prohibits is the one that generally prevailed before the law was passed.

With this in mind, let us turn to a Talmudic law enunciated as a commentary on one of the verses in this morning's Sidra. We read, as part of the Torah's civil legislation,

הנהגת הנהלת המוסד

"If you lend money to any of My people, even to the poor with you..." (Ex. 22:24). It is this verse which, in addition to the prohibition of usury, is the source of the commandment that we must lend our money to those in need. The Rabbis, troubled by the queer construction of the verse -- "My people, the poor, with you" -- deduced the following order of priority as to who shall be the beneficiary of our generosity in lending money:

אין אונזערע קאדס אין וועלכע פארשטאנדן זיך אלץ "אויף אויף"
אויך קודמין אלץ אויך אלץ איז אחרת אלץ אויך קודמין.
B.M. 71a). If two people solicit your loan, and one is a fellow

Jew and one a gentile, then, all other things being equal, if you have sufficient to lend only one of them, the Jew takes precedence over the non-Jew. If the two people appearing before you are otherwise equal, but one is a poor man and one a rich man, the poor

man comes first. If you are approached for a loan by a poor man who is a relative and a poor man who is a neighbor, the relative is to be preferred over the neighbor. If one of them is a poor man who lives in your town, and the second is a poor man who lives in another town, the poor man who is your neighbor takes precedence over the poor man from afar.

Note well that the Talmud does not bid us neglect the gentile, the non-relative, or the stranger. It does give us a list of priorities. What the Talmud is telling us is that a totally altruistic ethic, which does not recognize intimate human bonds and affiliations, is unnatural, unrealistic, and impractical -- and hence, ultimately morally valueless. An ethic which does consider and which affirms such human associations as nation, people, family, neighborhoods, is realistic and hence morally invaluable.

That would seem to be an acceptable and self-evident principle. Yet the need the Talmud saw for legislating this rule indicates, according to the historian's device we mentioned earlier, that this principle was often violated. There were and are, apparently, many people who would rather assist the stranger than the acquaintance, would rather benefit the non-relative than the relative.

Indeed, I would diagnose this phenomenon as an American Jewish disease! Western Jews, since the Emancipation, have grown up on the myth of "Universal Man," a universalism which negates ethnic identity

and national-religious uniqueness. It is the kind of myth which, for many years, fed anti-Zionist classical Reform and the American Council for Judaism from which, thank Heavens, we hear less and less as time goes on.

I recall a passage in the notorious "Symposium of Intellectuals," which appeared several years ago in Commentary magazine. One writer, who apparently came from a warm, ethnic Jewish home against which he had been leading a decades-long adolescent rebellion, complained that in his family people would, upon reading in the newspapers the casualty list of some airplane disaster, scan the names for those which were Jewish-sounding and express their horror at finding such names. I confess that for many years thereafter I was embarrassed when I found myself doing the same thing. The embarrassment, however, was short lived, because I soon noticed that this nefarious, tribalistic habit was not unique to Jews. When an airplane disaster occurred overseas, the American press would list the names only of American passengers. And in the listing of Vietnam War casualties, the New York newspapers would list only New York names, the Chicago newspapers only Chicago names, etc... It dawned upon me, as it never dawned upon the pretentious intellectual of Commentary who had liberated himself from his parents' Jewish provincialism, that it is quite rational and natural for people to give emotional and practical priority to those who are closest to them, either in flesh

or faith or geography. I realized that one can feel greater attachment to his fellow Jews in reading of such unfortunate events, without in the least detracting from his fundamental human compassion for all his fellow men. To give priority to Jews does not imply disdain for gentiles. To give precedence to the poor of your city does not compel you to an attitude of cruelty to those who live afar. To love your family does not imply to hate your friends.

The New Left, whether here or in Israel or in Europe, seems to be guilty of that same perversion of the human spirit. The Jewish members of the New Left apparently believe that every people has the right to its own national expression, but that only Jews must be "universal!" When Jews assert their national or ethnic individuality, then that same attractive spirit of nationalism undergoes a traumatic change from glorious self-determination to an ethnocentric jingoism that is beneath contempt. The same nationalistic consciousness which, when practiced by Castro or El Fatah, is described as a healthy, struggling, emerging liberation movement, is referred to by the New Left when it appears as Zionism -- as an "oppressive, neo-colonialist imperialism." They have reversed the Talmudic formulation and believe that: your people and the stranger, the stranger comes first; the poor of your city and the poor of another city, those of the other city come first.

But of course, the parents of the New Left -- if not biologically, then ideologically -- were not much different. The immediate predecessors of today's interreligious dialogues were the little lamented "interfaith" meetings, which assimilated and semi-assimilated American Jews approached with so much solemnity, and which was really so empty and vacuous. A famous anecdote about such events expressed a great deal of truth in its wit: After one such meeting, a Jew who attended was asked by another Jew how many people were present, and he replied, "There were two 'goyyim' and ten 'interfaiths'!"

The time has long passed for us to get away from the pretense of supposedly non-sectarian bodies with all-Jewish membership. We should by now have sufficient dignity to do away with that colossal make-believe that when defending Jewish interests we are doing so only because they are primarily universal interests. That is nonsense! There is nothing wrong with defending your own interests and those closest to you. Show me a man who does not love his own children, and I will show you a man whose love for other children I do not trust. If there is a person who has no feeling for his own people, his feeling for other people is meaningless. There is no reason to be embarrassed by asserting clearly and unequivocally the principle of "the poor of your city come first." There is no need to excuse American Jewish support of Israel by the old U.J.A. slogan that, "Israel is the only bastion of democracy in the

Middle East." It is true that it is the only fortress of democracy in the Middle East. But what if Lebanon were similarly democratic, would that call for the U.J.A. to divide its funds equally between Israel and Lebanon?

There is nothing undemocratic, non-humanitarian, or unenlightened about Jewish solidarity. It is natural, proper, understandable. On the contrary, for Jews to pretend and dissimulate and apologize is unnatural, degrading, undignified, and humiliating.

For too long have we allowed the apostles of extravagant universalism to lay exclusive claim to the prophetic tradition, as if the Prophets of Israel demanded that the Children of Israel abandon all claims to their self-interest and think first and foremost, if not altogether, only about the welfare of the Egyptians and Babylonians and Hittites. That, of course, is nonsensical. The Prophets' universalism grew out of their nationalism, and was not at all in conflict with it. Remember the famous words of Isaiah (58:7) which roll down at us with the force of a thunderclap every Yom Kippur afternoon when we read them as part of the Haftorah --

בְּכַל עֲרֵב חֲסִידְךָ לִפְנֵי פָנֶיךָ יִשְׂרָאֵל וְעַל הָאֲרָצוֹת הָאֵלֶּה יִשְׁלַח אֶת הָאֲרָצוֹת הָאֵלֶּה וְעַל הָאֲרָצוֹת הָאֵלֶּה יִשְׁלַח אֶת הָאֲרָצוֹת הָאֵלֶּה

The prophet tells us that the true fast must result in a genuine moral transformation of man, so that he will break his bread and share it with the hungry; and bring into his own home the abandoned poor; and offer clothing to cover the nakedness of those who can

afford no garments. But the climax comes in the last three words,
עלך לא תכסה -- "From thine own flesh hide not thyself!"
Do not imagine that charity to all means neglect of those closest
to you! Of course you must break bread with all the hungry and
offer shelter to all the poor and give clothing to all the naked,
but without this last reminder not to ignore your own flesh and
blood, what came before is simply universalistic preachment that
makes good copy for a liberal press but it is otherwise ineffective
and meaningless; with it, you have true prophecy, the kind that can
become actualized as a real ethic of life. The prophets did not
preach love of Man, but the love of men, beginning with your own.
Only if "the poor of your city take precedence," will we learn to
care as well "for the poor of another city."

It is in this sense that I take ^{an} especially dim view of the
opposition by the majority of American Jewish organizations to the
Speno-Lerner bill currently being debated in Albany. According to
this bill, the government will subsidize by a certain amount the
secular education of those children who attend private religious
schools. I am not at this time referring to any particulars of
the bill, but rather to the principle that informs the American
Jewish opposition. I do not by any means suspect their motives,
but I question their rightness and their relevance in their almost
intuitive, Pavlovian reaction to any suggestion of Federal or State

aid to parochial schools.

Let us be honest. For a long time, and even now, such opposition to government aid for religious schools came from an unadmitted fear of control of education in New York by the Catholic Church. But this is an unworthy element. First, if the law results in an unjust and onerous burden of double taxation on parents of children whose consciences cause them to choose a private religious school, then it is unfair to deny them government aid for the secular portion of their studies. Furthermore, from a practical point of view, there is no danger today of the Church taking control of the government or the educational system of New York; the Church today is not even in control of the Church! Such elements therefore are completely irrelevant to the issue at hand.

But most important, even if we should assume that such government aid would not accord with the strictest and most rigorous application of the principle of separation of Church and State -- and I seriously doubt whether there was any time in the history of this country that this principle was maintained in its pristine purity -- and even if such federal aid were to be considered in the minus column of the equation that determines the welfare of the public schools system, do not the American Jewish organizations have any obligation to Jewish parents whose

children attend day schools -- the only real guarantee of survival of Jewish life in this country? Must these organizations persist in their knee-jerk reactions without ever reconsidering their policies on the basis of an enlightened self-interest? Are not "Jewish Jews" also a part of their constituencies?

All of life, all of law, all of politics revolves around the question of conflicting interests and competing claims. There is little in these areas that is all black or all white. It is true that we must not always prefer our own individual interests over the overriding interests of the general welfare. But must the American Jewish Congress and the Federation of Jewish Philanthropies make it a rule that "the poor of the other city come first?" Have we not pushed the universalistic myth to the point of self-denigration and self-harm?

I have spoken in day schools around the country, and have met with parents and principals and lay leaders of these schools. Our day schools are in trouble. No matter how much tuition they charge the parents, they are tottering on bankruptcy. And parents are groaning under the burden. I am not referring primarily to parents of the upper middle class or even the lower middle class, although they find the task very difficult and for young parents it is often staggering, but especially to parents of the lower economic

class, who have to deny themselves not only luxuries that others enjoy, but the basic needs of life, in order to give their children a Jewish education. Why do these claims find no resonance in the lofty, liberal, and universalistic proclamations and exhortations of many of the organizations of our Establishment? "And from thine own flesh do not hide thineself!"

Yet, having said all this, I would not want us to lose our sense of balance. I would not want to see our communities slip into the opposite kind of one-sidedness: an extravagant ethnic retrenchment that throws off responsibility to the poor of another city, to the poor of the non-Jew. It is true that we can no longer afford to indulge in this polite and unhealthy collective masochism that gives precedence to all other causes over the Jewish interests. But neither is it desirable for us to encourage a wave of reaction whereby we neglect other needs and general humanitarian causes, whether civil rights or ecology, whether politics or world peace or economic justice.

The Talmud (Hul. 63) asks why in the Bible the stork is called אֲדוֹן, a word derived from the root אָדָן, which means love or charity or kindness. The Talmud says:

וְהָאֲדוֹן הַזֶּה מֵעוֹלָם וָעוֹלָם אֵינוֹ מְשַׁלֵּם לְעוֹלָם וָעוֹלָם
it is called אֲדוֹן because the stork performs acts of אָדָן or

"If I am not for myself, who will be for me? And if I am for myself alone, what -- or who -- am I?"

Jewish moods are notoriously volatile, often gyrating from one extreme to the other without going through the transitions.

It is best that we always remember and practice both principles:

אדם נאדם *אדם נאדם* *אדם נאדם*, the priority of our own needs; and
אדם נאדם *אדם נאדם* *אדם נאדם*, to proceed therefrom to service to all other human beings.

Both together are the Golden Mean that of enlightened self-interest.

Now, above all, is the time to reassert this authentically Jewish doctrine, for *אדם נאדם* *אדם נאדם* *אדם נאדם*, "if now now, when then?"