

"MAN'S DIGNITY vs THE THREE DEADLY DOGMAS"

The basic principle in the Torah's teaching about man is that he possesses dignity -- that is, special worth, unique value. Man is something new and something different in the ancient ~~unbroken~~ order of nature. He was created not only on the pattern of a biological organism, but also on the pattern of the spirit, in the "image of God." "To be invested with dignity," writes a contemporary thinker, "means to represent something more than oneself" (A.J. Heschel, The Earth Is the Lord's). It is man's dignity, his essential value, that he is more than just man; he is ~~a~~representative of God in the world.

It is that which makes man precious, loveable, and worth cherishing. "Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself, ani ha-Shem, I am the Lord." It is because both I and my fellow-man are creatures of God and created in His image -- with free will, moral conscience, creativity -- that we are worthy of love and esteem. Because our very creation is ^{the} be'tzellem Elokim, in the image of God, therefore/~~our~~ dignity of man is democratic, it is distributed to all men alike. It is a dignity that is inherent, natural, part of our constitution. It is one which we may fulfill or affirm or, if we wish, forfeit and defile. It is a "dignity that can be sold -- but not bought" (D. Runes). ~~It is in this awareness of his kinship with God that permits him to retain his self-respect even when he has failed in his earthly enterprises and lost all else -- home, possessions, family, friends.~~ "True dignity abides with him alone/Who, in the silent hour of inward thought,/ Can still suspect, and still revere himself,/ In lowliness of heart" (Wordsworth). On this holy day, and in this "silent hour of inward thought," let us discuss and reaffirm this true dignity which Judaism teaches and which enables man, though he suspect himself and though he be lowly of heart, to revere himself ^{for} ~~and~~ the Godly within him.

Dignity is not mere decorum, containing not propriety. On the contrary, it requires the ability to suspect the presence of artificiality within oneself, to discover one's own lowliness -- and yet, after all, to know that there is something within oneself to serve and to cherish. One's kinship with God, as with one's neighbor.

Never, indeed, was it more important to reaffirm this Jewish teaching of human dignity. ~~Never~~ Never before has man been so incessantly assailed with dehumanizing propaganda. Pseudo-science and a cynical sophistication have told him that the idea of human dignity is a piece of deceptive arrogance. They have denied that Man is Godly -- and that worse is/worse than denying God Himself. No wonder modern man is so miserable! No wonder his philosophers speak of angst, loneliness, anxiety; his thinkers complain of alienation; his children grow up in a self-conscious vacuity, an emptiness of the head and the heart. The assault on the idea of the dignity of man comes in the form of three deadly dogmas, three cynical slogans that the unthinking accept as "proven," and that poisons the atmosphere we breathe with a fall-out of immorality and irresponsibility.

The first of these is the mechanistic dogma: Man as a Machine. Because in some ways man performs mechanical functions, such as hammering, carrying, pulling, adding and subtracting, and machines can be built to do these things as well or better than men, therefore the mechanist concludes that man is nothing more than a machine. If indeed man is but a complicated machine, then his life is without purpose, his suffering without reason, his loves and hates futile, his ambitions a sour joke, and his destiny but dust and the eternal silence of the grave. Then self-respect is an impertinence, and man's value never more than the most expensive IBM machine.

This cruel and corrupting conception crops up in many unexpected ways. The common denominator of them is that they consider man only for what he can do, not for what he is. Thus, the cold and dispassionate "over-kill" (the study of how many millions can be destroyed in atomic war), and the callous game of nuclear brinksmanship. Thus the playing of politics as usual with the regard to the care and health of that part of the

population too old to work and "produce" -- as if work is the only thing a man is good for and that, like a machine, he grows obsolescent with the the introduction of newer and sleeker models!

But Judaism has ^{something quite} taught/different. Man is a divine image, not an outmoded machine. His mind is a marvelous, precious, sublime capacity for selfless greatness -- not merely an efficient self-programming computer for exploitation and conquest. He has purpose and meaning and worth and dignity and responsibility -- in other words, a neshamah, a soul which is as real as it is invisible. Heaven help him if he soils and sullies that soul; and Heaven will help him if he sustains it with sincerity and sanctity.

If some of our youngsters return from their first enchanting contact with smart but unwise college instructors who preach to them the pseudo-scientific dogma that man is a machine, only the sum of his individual parts, lacking in soul and spirit, and we fail to counter this notion, we can hardly blame them for aimlessness and shiftlessness throughout life. It is after all a convenient dogma. Machines cannot be blamed for failures of conscience, they can't be expected to be garcious in success or dignified in defeat, and especially can they not be held responsible for their actions. It is therefore our duty -- synagogue, school, and home -- to impress upon ^{our children} ~~them~~ that to be human is not an accident of biology, but a divine adventure; that man is not an irresponsible bunch of replaceable organs, but a responsible and irreplaceable and unique personality. It is our sacred ~~■~~ duty to educate them with pride and dignity of being human for, as R. Akiva taught, haviv adam SHE*NIVRA BE*TZELLEM, man is precious and worthy -- dignified -0 because he was created in the image of God. So that when some narrow-minded friend or instructor tells them, "I looked through the ~~■~~ entire anatomy and discovered no soul," or when a Russian atheistic cosmonaut exclaims, " I traveled through outer space and found no God," they will

be able to answer with equal ~~aplomb~~ aplomb, "I too took apart a violin -- and discovered no music!"

[for Rosh Hashanah] ^{that is} It is this teaching/implicit in the section of the Musaf service called malkhiot and in which we praise God as King of the world. Ein melekh beli am -- there is no King without a people. The sovereignty of God makes sense only if men are human. But if we are only machines, then God is only a mechanic, not a King. Thus we pray, melokh al kol ha-olam kulo, reign over the entire world; may all of us come to appreciate that we are invested with dignity. Then will God be King.

[for Yom Kippur] No wonder that Yom Kippur is called shabbat shabbaton, ^{it is} the Sabbath of Sabbaths, and/strictly forbidden to engage in labor or work on this day. It is as if the Torah wanted to stress that man's value goes beyond his productive capacity; his dignity exceeds his ability to work. On the holiest day of the year, the Jew refrains from labor, affirm ~~xxxxxxxx~~ and to ~~xxxxxxxx~~ his inner worth, his innate dignity, and to assert that what man is, is greater than what he can merely do.

This same dehumanizing dogma is often expressed in another way, the second slogan: Man as an Animal. It is Darwinism that, in the common understanding, confined/^{man's body} ~~xxxx~~ to the animal kingdom, and Freudianism that ~~xxxxxxxx~~ found in his mind instincts profoundly animalistic and bestial. Of course, in a large measure it is true that man is an animal. His anatomical structures are similar to certain animals, many of his physiological processes are identical to those of animals, and his mind certainly has shown a remarkable depravity, a sickness and bloodthirstiness compared with which even the beast of the jungle looks meek. But the mistake lied in saying that therefore man is nothing more than an animal. When we say that often enough, we come to believe it. And when we believe it, we begin to ^{behave} ~~live~~ like ~~an~~ animal.

This dogma too is prevalent in society. Just as the mechanistic dogma sees man only as a producer ^{and nothing more,} so the animalistic dogma sees him as a consumer and nothing more. The deluge of innane advertisements that cater to the very lowest taste, ^{and} the television commercials that insult the intelligence of a five-year old are based on the premise that man is but a bundle of ^{insatiable} ~~unappeasable~~ appetites and that his intelligence is just a thin veneer that can safely be ignored in the pitch for bigger and better sales. The sexual degeneracy, the legalization of pornography, the deterioration of the common taste, the newer and bolder standards of immodesty in dress -- all these are based ^{not only} on the assumption that man is an animal, but that he ought to be one. Thus is he stripped, both literally and figuratively, of all his human trappings. Even in politics we meet with this evil notion -- as when the segregationist argues that the races should not mix, just as nature ordains that the tiger and the monkey do not mate.

How damaging to the moral and intellectual fiber of the whole culture this foolish idea can be. George Bernard Shaw purports to find in our country this dangerous loss of human dignity: "I doubt if there has been a country in the world's history where men were ashamed of being decent, of being sober, of being well-spoken, of being educated, of being gentle, of being conscientious, as in America ... although it is quite certain that a majority of them are doing this on a false point of honor." Granted that the fiery playwright was exaggerating -- but there is an undeniable kernel of truth in it that we ignore at our own peril. When you believe long enough that man is an animal, you become ashamed of the ~~conventional~~ dignities that separate man from beast.

It is true, of course, that no less a sage than King Solomon, in a gray mood, declared, u-motar ha-adam min ha-behemah ayin, ^{the preminence of} "man has no ^{man} ~~superiority~~ over a beast" ^{is taught} (Eccl. 3:19). But the Reszher Rav interpreted

that verse in a most elegant manner: u-motar ha-adam min ha-behemah, the preeminence or superiority of man over animal lies in the one word ayin, "naught" or "no." A beast does what he desires, without thought or control or consideration for others -- he never says No to his base instincts or blind will. The superiority of man lies in that he can say ayin or No -- no to immorality, to drunkenness, to boorishness, to cruelty, to callousness. It is precisely in this preeminence of man over animal that there lies his immortal dignity, his image of God.

[for R.H.] Thus, the ~~XXXXXX~~ section of Musaf~~XXXX~~ called Shofarot, & which relates the giving of Torah at MT. Sinai, which was accompanied by the sounding of the shofar, is a rousing reaffirmation of man's humanity. For Shofar tells us that man was given a Torah; and only humans can respond to Torah. ^{Only man} ~~He~~/was given mitzvot -- and these civilize a man and bring out his inner dignity. An animal does not make a berakhah before eating, does not get up and daven first instead of prowling for food, does not spend his time building synagogues and yeshivahs and hospitals and old age homes.

[for Y.K.] It is perhaps for this very reason that Yom Kippur is a tzom, a fast-day. Man, unlike an animal, the Torah taught, is more than just an incessant consumer. There is more to man than eating and gouging ^{a bottomless stomach} ~~himself~~. By fasting he declares that he can say No to his hunger, and hence No to blind animal instincts that can prove far more dangerous. He thus reaffirms his mastery over himself, and thereby proclaims his dignity.

There is yet a third assault upon human dignity that must be met and countered if we are to retain our sanity and self-respect, and that is the notion of Man as a Number. The increasing automation of all society has imposed a tyranny of numbers upon human beings that threatens to erode our individuality and corrode our humanity. Man is now defined by a string of impersonal numbers: a direct-area dialing telephone number,

a zip-code, a social security number and Driver's license number and voter registration number. Our very names have yielded to the holes punched in computer cards. The thought of a population explosion is frightening not only because of the prospects of impossible crowding and famine, but also because with increasing numbers of people, each individual tends to become reduced in significance to a mere number. We are lost as sea- a sea of statistics and ciphers. Even the thrill and suspense of elections is destroyed by electronic calculators which tell me how I will vote, even before I have informed myself of the issues or had the opportunity to rearrange my prejudices.

The very concept of human dignity rebels against this reduction of man to a cipher. Each individual is unique and precious, no matter how many there are. If man was created in the image of God, as Judaism teaches, then he cannot be numbered impersonally -- for God is One and Unique, and so is man unique and not just part of a faceless mass. No wonder Jewish tradition has never looked favorably on counting people! It is not by any means a superstition; it is an assertion of the philosophy of human dignity and individuality.

[for RH] And it is this sacred theme that ~~is~~ forms the content of the Zikhrone section of the Musaf-- God knows, remembers, and considers the life of every man, woman, and child, from the beginning and until the end of time. No human being is just a figure in a heavenly ledger. There are times when statistics prevail -- kamah yaavrun ve'khamah yibare'yun, how many shall die and how many shall be born. But within the context of these numbers there is no randomness, no accident. The individual's fate is not decided by divine dice. It is ^{yibare'yun} mi be-yibare'yun, ^{yamut} who shall live -- not only how many; u-mi be-yamut, and who shall die, which specific, unique, irreplaceable, precious human being shall

return to the bosom of his divine Father.

[for Y.K.] And when we recite the Yizkor on this holiest day of the year, we reaffirm the sanctity of human dignity against the pernicious reduction of man to a number -- to a nobody. No one is forgotten by God, and our loved ones are not forgotten by us. As the years pass on and all else recedes from memory, the loving pictures of father and mother remain ever fresh in our minds. In remembering their lives and loves, in recalling the impressions of childhood, we declare that they, that we, that all humans are more than machines, more than animals, more than numbers. We are each of us endowed with transcendent dignity. We each represent something more than himself -- we represent the Almighty whose image we bear. Yizkor is far more than an exercise in sentimentality; it is the underscoring of the Jewish philosophy of man.

In this "silent hour of inward thought" that our tradition bids us use to examine our consciences and deeds, an hour in which we discover to our dismay our own failings and "lowliness of heart," we nevertheless recognize the Godly within us. This we salvage from the wreckage of character, and with this we appear before the Almighty King. Aseh le'maan kevodka, answer us, O God, for the sake of Thy dignity; for it is Thy image, impressed upon us at the moment of birth, that constitutes our true and abiding dignity.