

"THE FAILURE OF CONSCIENCE"

There are many ways of classifying the mitzvot of the Torah. The most popular one is to divide them into two categories: those for which the reason is apparent, and which we would think of even without a specific command in the Torah; and those for which there is no obvious reason, and which we perform only because of God willed it. In the Talmud, these two classes are known as hukim and mishpatim. Saadia refers to them by the name of shimiyot and sikhliyot. The rational commandments are almost all ethical in nature. They include such mitzvot as charity, love of neighbor, prohibition of stealing, and so forth. The second category is the ritual law: these include tefilling, shofar, kashrut, and so on.

It is in reference to these two categories, the ritual and the ethical commandments, that a great Talmudist who died about 40 years ago, Rabbi Meir Simḥah of Dvinsk, in his Meshekh Hōkhmah, has made a profound observation that is of great significance to all of us.

As we read the Torah, especially the portions of last week and this week, we notice the recurrence of such phrases as Ani ha-Shem, "I am the Lord," or Ani ha-Shem Elokekhem, "I am the Lord your God." Rabbi Meir Simḥah points out that this phrase usually follows the ritual commandments. The Torah means to tell us that although we may not understand the reason for the observance of this individual commandment, although we would never think of performing this kind of act on our own, nevertheless we must follow this precept because Ani ha-Shem, "I am the Lord," and as our Creator He may command us to do even that which is beyond our comprehension and understanding. The words "I am the Lord" are, in effect, the authority behind the commands. They are what authenticate the mitzvot. When man begins to question the Torah, when he begins to doubt whether he is obligated to observe that which his mind cannot grasp, then the Torah reminds him that there is a God

in the world, and that faith and love and reverence for God require obedience to His law. His authority transcends that of our limited intellects.

This is a cornerstone of all religion, especially Judaism. The words Ani ha-Shem lay the basis for an intelligent, devout Jew or Jewess observing even that for which no complete and satisfactory explanation can be found.

However, upon closer examination we discover that the same phrase, Ani ha-Shem, is often used to conclude an ethical commandment, a mitzvah which is perfectly rational and intelligible. Thus, Rabbi Meir Simḥah points to this morning's Sidra in which we read that noble commandment that during the harvest the farmer is obligated to leave peiah, a corner of his field, for the poor.

We read, lo tekholeh pe'at sadekha... le'ani ve'la-ger taazov otam, ani ha-Shem Elokekhem - "when you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not completely reap the corner of your field... You shall leave them for the poor and for the stranger; I am the Lord your God." Here, then, is a perfectly rational law, rising to sublime ethical heights, and yet it is concluded with the same formula, "I am the Lord your God," which normally is associated with the ritual law for which no reason is apparent. Is this phrase not superfluous? Can not any normal, sensitive human being appreciate the beauty and need for this kind of law even without the authority of religion, without the reminder that it is revealed by God?

The answer of Rabbi Meir Simḥah touches upon one of the most important points not only in the philosophy of Judaism, but in the daily lives of ordinary Jews. He maintains that it is true that rational people can devise laws that are ethical and by which society can survive. Even without religion, men can conclude that it is good to give charity, to love your neighbor, and not to steal. But nevertheless there is a vast difference between a commitment to a law and a principle because you thought it out by yourself and your heart tells you to do it and your conscience affirms it, and doing it because of a deep

and abiding faith in the Creator of the world <sup>who</sup> declares this way of life to be preferable to any other. There is a great and significant difference between ethics based on the Torah, the good life conducted because of Ani ha-Shem, and that which is pursued merely because of mind and conscience.

You have heard, as have I, many of our co-religionists saying, "I am not religious but nevertheless I am a good Jew because I am a good person." We are accustomed to this refrain. It is a ritualistic proclamation which has in our times almost become a secularist litany. Now, we do not deny that one may be a good person even though he is not a religious, just as some so-called observant Jews are not good people -- sometimes they are scoundrels, which, in fact, makes them bad Jews. And yet we maintain that there is no comparison between a person who is good because he is by nature soft-hearted or because that is the way his parents brought him up, and one who is good because he has staked his life on the words Ani ha-Shem, because from the deepest recesses of his soul he is committed to the Torah and to the revelation of God's will.

What are some of the differences between ethics based on religion, and ethics without religion?

First, an autonomous ethics, a life of righteousness not based on religion, does not stand up <sup>e</sup> w~~ill~~ under stress and frustration. Whereas a heteronomous ethics, based on the knowledge of ani ha-Shem, give you the feeling of confidence, even when the world is in a shambles all about you, that the good life, honor, and decency are not in vain.

Let us admit it: as practical men and women we realize that honest is not <sup>always</sup> the best policy. We all know it from our personal lives, when we observe how dishonest people are often praised and popular, while honorable individuals are neglected and treated with contempt.

You may recall the story that occurred two years ago when Douglas Johnson, an unemployed Negro refuse-hauler, found almost a quarter of a million dollars in cash. He could have helped himself to a good part of it, if not all of it. Instead he informed the F.B.I. and had the money returned to the owner. We were all shocked by the national reaction to this good deed: instead of being praised, he received letters filled with all kinds of jeering epithets, deriding him for his foolishness in returning the money. His wife and children were insulted in the streets. He and they were harassed and villified wherever they went. Honesty was not the best policy.

Why, then, on logical grounds, continue to be honest? If there is no religious answer, then there is no answer at all. He should have kept the money. But if you believe that there is a God in the world; if you know that your ethical action is the will of the Lord; then you are able to endure the apparent failure of honesty, and you know deep in your heart that in the end truth and right will prevail. It is a matter of fact that the same man had another such incident occur to him only very recently. He sent a check for a \$36 money order, and by mistake the company sent him \$9,036. He immediately returned all the extra money. He is not a rationalist, an intellectual, a philosopher -- only an ignorant, marginal refuse-hauler. But his decency is not contrived; it is based on a simple and naive but powerful and unshakeable belief in "I am the Lord"!

So it is with all of us. Honesty <sup>often</sup> may not be the best policy; but <sup>always</sup> it <sup>is</sup> the will of God, ani ha-Shem, and therefore that is what we shall do. For us, honesty never has been a matter of policy, but a matter of principle and of piety.

There is another, mightier difference between a secularist and religious ethics. If you are ethical without being religious then you lack any compelling force, any inner will to do that which you recognize is good. Your knowledge of what is right is abstract; it never penetrates to the innermost core of your being as it does if it is a religious principle. The late Dr. Isidore Epstein wrote

as follows (the Faith of Judaism, p.p. 24-25):

Belsen, Buchenwald, Auschwitz, and all the rest of the death-camps and gas-chambers, have indeed given practical demonstrations, on a wider scale than any man has ever seen before, of the vital connection between creed and conduct, belief and practice. They have helped a great number of people to realize that what men or nations think and believe makes an immense difference to the way they live and the things they do.

It makes indeed all the difference in the world whether we believe that the world is a machine, without intelligence and without purpose, or whether we affirm that it is the creation of God. A man who believes in God will act on that faith, and will seek moral perfection. Once, However, the world is conceived as without God, life begins to be conceived as without honour, and acting on that assumption, as humanity has learnt to its cost, men will live selfishly, live brutally, live badly.

I am certain that many Germans who were not themselves murderers, but who nevertheless refused to stand up to their murderous countrymen, also knew theoretically and abstractly that they were wrong in their passive acquiescence to their fellow-Germans. But the Germans, even those who went to Church, had long lost real faith. And when the words "I am the Lord" are abandoned, they are bound ultimately to be replaced by the blasphemous "I am the Fuehrer" and even before then there is no longer any compelling force for man to stand up and be counted on behalf of right, honorable, decent living.

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"Without faith in God, man's reason can become like a wild beast, without pity and without acknowledging its own father. Therefore did the princes of earth thank Thee when they heard from Thy mouth the law of honoring parents; for concerning this too is it necessary to have faith in God and in His commandment,



because without such faith there must come a generation which will curse its fathers and forbears."

Therefore, teaches Rabbi Meir Simḥah, is the noble, rational, ethical commandment of peiah, to leave a corner of the field for the poor, followed by the words Ani ha-Shem, "I am the Lord your God." It lends authority, grace force, will, charm, sanctity, and confidence in the rightness of action, to any noble deed. It teaches you to give charity even when the poor man is obnoxious and your "heart" doesn't let you. It instructs you to respect and love father and mother even when father isn't respectable and mother isn't loveable; and even on days other than those designated to remember father and mother. For the believing Jew, even a simple act of human goodness is done not only because it is humanly good, but also because it is divinely revealed.

And perhaps this is a deeper meaning of the Mishnah which we read this afternoon as part of the Perek (Chapter IV): kol ha-mekayem et ha-Torah me'oni sofo le'kaimah me'osher - "whoever observes the Torah in poverty, in the end he will observe it in wealth." Of course, this means, in the literal sense, that if one observes the Torah despite difficult economic circumstances, in the end God will reward him and he will be able to observe the Torah in comfort. But I believe that the words oni and osher, poverty and wealth, also have a metaphorical meaning. The Talmud often uses these words to indicate only economic conditions, but rational understanding. Thus, divrei Torah aniyim be'makom zeh ve'ashirim be'makom asher, the words of the Torah are poor -- meaning not easily comprehensible -- in one place, but they are wealthy -- meaning that it is easy to understand them -- in another place. I would therefore interpret this Mishnah as follows: whoever observes the Torah in oni, even when he does not understand the commandment, even when the reason for the observance for the commandment escapes his searching, but impoverished intellect, when he feels rationally inadequate, nevertheless he follows the Torah because Ani ha-Shem, because he believes with all his heart and soul that this is the will of God; then in the end, God will reward him with new

insight and new understanding, and he will observe it in osher, in a wealth  
of intellect, in an abundance <sup>and richness</sup> of understanding, and with clear and adequate  
vision.

The Torah, then, in today's Sidra summons us to ever higher levels: It is not  
enough to be right; one must be right for the right reasons. May God grant  
that this spiritual wealth of Torah be ours forevermore.