

"GODLESS GOODNESS"

I address myself this morning to a problem that really requires much more than one sermon for adequate treatment, but which should be dealt with in at least one sermon. It is a theme about which the pulpit must not remain silent.

The problem is often expressed in the form of this question: can I not be good without being religious? Is it not possible to be decent without accepting all the minutiae of religion? Is not a good heart 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 spiritual father of Nazism -- that "God is dead." This means that God 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 propound a Godless goodness.

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

First, we cannot deny that there are good people who do not believe in God. 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 are but the residue of a religious reservoir which is rapidly drying up. We are living off the ethical interest from the quickly dwindling religious capital of two 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.

Second, secular ethics, Godless goodness, is inadequate. It simply is not inwardly compelling.

There comes a time when every man asks himself the ultimate question: why should I be honorable? All the rational answers provided by secular philosophy -- that it makes for smoother functioning of society, that it has utility in promoting civilization -- all irrelevant. Why should I be the one to risk my life for the lubrication of the society's machine? Why honesty when it is not the best policy? Why should I suffer humiliation for my principles? Why should I 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 God 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 Godless 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 by an elastic, and sooner or later this rubber band of religion will pull him back to the direction of decency.

A third reason for a Godly goodness, is that only a religious ethic can produce saintliness -- the highest and most intense expression, the very culmination, of goodness. A Godless goodness can at most produce a fairly 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 can bestow 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 the Jewish Sages! Can you imagine a Jew saying such things about such people as the "Hafetz Hayyim or the Tchebiner Rav or any other of our contemporary saints? 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 Godliness merge: saintliness.

A fourth reason for rejecting Godless goodness, is that it cannot guarantee reliability and the durability of morality. This point is best emphasized in an episode recorded in this morning's Sidra. Abraham and Sarah were driven out of their land by famine and forced to wander in order to find food. They were forced to go to Egypt, which they knew was a land of dreadful immorality and violence. Abraham was afraid lest the Egyptians, when they beheld Sarah, who was a beautiful woman, would kill him, as her husband, and abduct her into the harem of Pharaoh. In order to avoid this, he asked Sarah to cooperate with him in a ruse, and declare that she was his sister -- which, in a sense, she was -- in order that his life be spared. Interestingly, the identical episode is repeated in next week's Sidra, this time about Avimelech, the king of Gerar.

In this second story, the following dialogue occurs: Avimelech says to Abraham, after God had appeared in a dream to Avimelech and reproached him for taking Sarah: mah ra'ita ki asita et ha-davar

ha-zeh, what made you do this? To this, Abraham answered: ki amarti rak ein yirat Elohim ba-makom ha-zeh, because I said that there is no fear of God in this place.

What is the meaning of this exchange between them? According to some of the commentaries, such as Malbim and Netziv, Avimelech said to Abraham, I can understand your ruse with regard to the Egyptians. They are a dreadfully immoral people, and therefore you had to do what you did. However, we are a moral, good, and ethical people. Why did you feel it necessary to ensnare us with this ruse? Abraham then answers: It is true that you are a good and moral people. I admit it. However -- if there is no piety, if there is no yirat Elohim, no fear of God, 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, if there is no faith in a God 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 God, Godless

goodness may be present, but it is unreliable and no one ought to risk his life on it.

One can offer many examples from our modern society which support this insight. Take, for instance, the question of modesty, whether of dress, of speech, or the printed word. Now this is a moral question, about which both religious and non-religious people may agree. Even those who have no faith in God may be modest in their mode of dress. But, if their morality is secular, without a commitment to God, then it is essentially a matter of taste; and tastes change rapidly and often illogically, whereas a religious morality is as solid as a rock. Hence, in our times, the modes of dress and speech and printed word have become increasingly more vulgar and disgustingly immodest by Jewish religious standards. What modern society regards as morally acceptable, Judaism regards as unspeakably obscene. This, certainly, is a result of rak ein yirat Elokim ba-makom ha-zeh, for "there is no fear of God in this place." Unfortunately, that sometimes is true with astonishing literalness: there is no fear of God in this place -- too often immodesty in dress is revealed in this very place, in the very House of God! It is a sign of the

creeping secularism which strangles religion in our times.

There is a fifth reason why we cannot accept a Godless goodness. A non-religious morality is incomplete, it is 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. Velvete Brisker, we are struck by Abraham's strange suspicion: he is afraid that he will be murdered, yet he is completely unafraid that the Egyptians or Gerarites will abduct Sarah as a married woman. In other words, he has no reason to suspect them of adultery, whereas he does suspect them of murder in order to avoid adultery. Is it not strange that he should fear one and not fear the other?

Yet this is precisely what Abraham meant by "there is no fear of God in this place." If goodness is divorced from religion, then the morality that results is spotty and inconsistent and often characterized by upside-down values. People who espouse Godless 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!



Of course, that sounds terribly 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 God, we find that we are no better than the ancient pagans. We too have a spotty, incomplete morality, with our greatest values inverted! Thus, for instance, whereas for the pagans of antiquity adultery was out of the question whereas murder was commonplace, we modern pagans have reversed it: Murder is out and reprehensible, whereas adultery is in, acceptable in the highest levels of society! If there is no yirat Elokim, morality is nothing more than a crazy quilt of high moral purpose in one area and decadence in another. Only if it is Godly can goodness be complete.

If we wish to judge whether our Jewish community is fundamentally religious or secular, we might test it by checking whether its values are inverted and its morality spotty. Take, as an example, the charitable allocations of the great federations and community welfare funds of American Jews. There is no question that giving money to hospitals and old-age homes is a marvelous example of philanthropy. Yet in a question of priorities, the survival of an organism takes first

consideration. Now, we spend five times more on hospitals -- which can turn to the federal government for assistance -- than on Jewish schools which cannot. Education gets only six cents out of every Jewish community dollar -- as if securing the Jewish future for generations following is the business only of the immediate parents of the children. As much as Jewish education and culture, of all denominations, receives, more is given to fight anti-Semitism -- which is constantly acknowledged as diminishing -- and to support various Community Centers, which emphasize social groups, entertainment, and athletic facilities. These, indeed, are signs of creeping secularism, of a lack of Yirat Elokim, the fear of God.

These examples can be multiplied. For instance, the highest religious rite for many parents is, to use the American colloquialism, that one's son "be Bar-Mitzvahed," even to the point of parents going into serious debt because of the party. Yet most of the youngsters forget to lay the tefillin the day after the party, and some never buy it in the first place. Many people will make a great issue out of the unveiling, which is only a local custom and has no source in Jewish law, and yet willingly accept every disgusting pagan ritual at the funeral, though the laws of the funeral

have much more solid foundation in Halakhah. Or, to cite another example, we all rise in reverence before the Sefer Torah , and we are horrified when it is desecrated, as we were when we read of the burning of several such scrolls in Brooklyn and Bridgeport this past week. This reaction is as it should be. Yet we react with complete indifference when we learn that this community, one of the wealthiest and most intensely Orthodox Jewish communities in the country, has been without a Mikvah for several months now! To our everlasting shame and disgrace, the reason for the fact that the new Mikvah has not yet been constructed, and that we have remained without one for such a long time, is the dreadful unresponsiveness of our own people to our constant appeals for financial assistance. So that we reverence the Sefer Torah, and we ignore the Mikvah -- which is a complete reversal of values; for according to Jewish law we must even sell a Sefer Torah, even the last one remaining in the Ark, if that is necessary in order to provide for the construction of a Mikvah!

For these reasons mentioned above -- because a Godless goodness cannot long last by itself; because it is not compelling; because it is fundamentally unreliable; and because it is incomplete and often shows

inverted values -- and for many more reasons, we Jews can never accept as genuine and authentic a secular morality or a Godless goodness. To reduce the idea to a simple mnemonic and rather plain formula: if we subtract the three letters G - O - D from the word GOOD, we are left with "O" (a zero); take the Godliness out of goodness and nothing is left.

Does this mean that every pious person is good, a saint? No, of course not. But a pious person ought to strive for that ideal, and the striving for the ideal leads him more directly to its realization. Unfortunately, in our experience 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 so mistakes occur in physical 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, not much less erratic than Jewish boys who join the KKK or the American Nazis.

No, a Jew must be both Godly and goodly -- and wise, too! The great Rabbi of Kotzk once said the

following. There are three great qualities: "gutt", goodness; "frum", piety or Godliness; and "klug", intelligence or wisdom. But each one by itself can be extremely dangerous. "Gutt ken zein niuf" -- goodness sometimes leads to lasciviousness; an over-abundance of the desire to please, an extension of the libido, can sometimes lead a person astray, for love becomes ugly when it is applied to the wrong object. So, "frum ken zein shlecht" -- piety can sometimes lead to cruelty, for a pious person can sometimes be self-righteous and arrogant and think that because he is observant therefore he has the right to be unfeeling and malicious. In the same manner, "klug ken zein krum" -- 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 result with a wonderful product: "uber gutt un klug un frum -- dos iz a yid!" -- goodness and piety and intelligence -- that is a Jew!

It is that philosophy which we confirm today when we read of the origins of Abraham, the founder of

Judaism. Let us always affirm, in our creed and in our deed, that we are worthy descendants of Abraham the wise thinker who found God; of Abraham the pious friend and lover of God; of Abraham, the man of hesed and goodness who prayed even for the sinners of Sodom, and whose luminous example remains as a beacon to us today and to our descendants after us.