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*A Quarterly Survey on
The Family*

The New Morality and the Tradition of Periodic Abstinence in Jewish Law

LET ME BEGIN by acquainting you with my bias. I am an Orthodox Jewish Rabbi and a teacher of Jewish philosophy. But while my frame of reference is quite particular, it is not, at least for the purposes of this lecture, going to be particularistic. Our problem, in this first lecture on the New Morality, is one of universal concern and especially the concern of those whose consciences and professional commitments inspire in them a feeling of responsibility towards society and its future. I will, therefore, attempt to keep theological issues to a minimum, whereas the same will not necessarily be true for the second lecture. In talking about my bias, I would like, meanwhile, to explain why I am late. Leaving on the American Airlines jet from LaGuardia, we were delayed 15 minutes because radar failed. Coming into Chicago, we had to wait ten minutes because the Delta plane before us blew its tires and had to be towed away. As a pulpit Rabbi, I naturally thought, in these two events, a symbol of a sort. The first one indicated that if you don't have a fixed point by which to measure other events that

are in flux, if you have no absolute values by which to judge the transient moves and ephemeral fashions of the day, you are in trouble, and you are open to disaster. The second delay meant to me that if you're so rigid that there is no "give," no feel, no flexibility, no air in your tires, then you have to be towed away because you cannot compete in life. These are the limits or poles of my bias and with this I begin.

Bachelor morality

The term, *New Morality*, generally covers two attitudes. The first one is identified with the name of the High Priest of this particular movement, Hugh Hefner—with his bible, *Playboy*, his new dispensation, his temples and priestesses and all the rest. It is fundamentally an exploitative view, one which regards women as essentially sexual objects. It demands of its communicants that they be "cool," form no profound relationships, no involvements. I cannot accept it as anything other than a bachelor morality. It is essentially anti-sexual—just the other side of asceticism. I

refer you to Professor Hans Jonas, and his epic-making research on Gnosticism. This ancient movement negates sex, and it expresses its abhorrence of sexual love by one of two means, both contrary to each other: either by the *abuse* of sex, or the *non-use* of sex. In viewing man as caught in a predicament where This World and the Other World were locked in combat, where body and soul were inalterably antagonistic to each other, it saw sex as a device of the devil to keep man chained to this world, locked up in the material universe. Therefore, in order to liberate man, it adopted an antagonistic attitude toward sex. This can be done either by having nothing to do with it, or else by abusing it by throwing yourself into it without allowing your soul and emotions to be engaged. So that the Hefner attitude is nothing, really, but the old Gnosticism in a new dress—and maybe without it.

Antinomian

The second version of the New Morality is a kind of a personalistic subjectivism which strives for personal autonomy, for self-fulfillment, for relatedness, and is nonexploitative. It is this which we will refer to from now on as the New Morality and which will be the subject of our concern. It has in common with the Hefner variety only the acceptance

of the hedonistic ethos—the striving for immediate pleasure fulfillment—and the rejection of normative ethics or laws, and, thus, the abandonment of the inherited moral codes of Western Civilization. Otherwise, it diverges from Hefner in its view of man and the relations between the sexes. Historically, the success of the New Morality is part of the general revolutionary spirit of our times which is antinomian, anti-traditional, secularistic, relativistic, anti-authoritarian, and which has been a long time in developing. Depending upon what one thinks of the New Morality, one may view it as a progressive development in man's evolution in self-liberation, or as the penultimate stage of the disintegration of Western Civilization and a return to primordial chaos and void.

From a narrower perspective (in addition to its general anti-establishment gesture, the main symbol of which is obscenity), this rejection of the traditional moral codes focuses on three elements. First, is its complaint that many inhibiting rules appear unnecessary, and hamper the full and free development of the human personality. Second, there are ethical imperfections in the traditional code. Frequently cited is the double standard—one rule for men and one rule for women, one for the old and one for the young. (Often this ethical criticism of the traditional moral code is simply a question of decision as to which of two conflicting moral imperatives to favor. The abortion issue is an example. The rights of

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the mother conflict with the rights of the unborn, and we can choose one or the other. Those who choose one solution usually accuse the others of being ethically imperfect.) Third, is the charge of factual hypocrisy in the implementation or non-implementation of the moral norms. The young New Moralists claim that the Old Moralists, so-called, verbalizes a code of morality but observes it more in the breach than in active practice.

Moral effervescence

Now, the New Morality is a moral movement in the sense that it posits the centrality of a moral value—namely, the dignity of the personality and its irreducibility to a mere object. It is part of the reaction against the depersonalization of man in industrial society—a movement which began with Marx in his protests against the “reification” of man, the reducing of man to a thing, an object, and “it” rather than a full human being. The ethical component of the new permissiveness thus has one positive rule—self-fulfillment. It also has a negative rule—you mustn’t hurt anyone. Even those who reject the New Morality, as I do, should not fail to acknowledge the correctness and the pertinence of this dimension of the New Morality in its implied critique of the establishment. Nor should the moral force of the New Morality be underrated. Whoever has been in contact with sincere young people cannot but be impressed by their righteous indignation and genuine revulsion with the

pervasive hypocrisy that creeps into every crevice and crack of our social structure. In fact, I believe it is an act of moral perfectionism which is responsible for the New Moralists’ recoil from society’s hypocrisy, and it is this perfectionism that gives the advocates of the New Morality a sense of cleanliness and a kind of pioneering honesty, in exposing the shortcomings and the phoniness of traditional, established society. Moreover, this moral perfectionism is paradoxically the source of its immoralism. Its unwillingness to suffer anything less than the perfect, leads the New Morality to throw out the baby with the bath water. If the Judeo-Christian morality is avowed verbally and ignored practically, then away with all of it. The tremendous moral fervor of the young—expressed in numerous peace marches, civil rights demonstrations, and protests against rigid college administrations—is directed as well at our sex code. With the same tendency to go too far in the right direction, this moral effervescence turns nihilistic—it nullifies all sex morality, and concludes on the amoral note of no code at all. Such moral excess, which in practice turns into immorality, is clearly pathological.

At this point, I would like to outline six broad categories of criticism of the New Morality as it has come to the fore in society. First, an intellectual objection. The New Morality is highly subjectivistic. As one aspect of the *doing-your-own-thing* syndrome, it denies the validity of any heteronomous norms, any

laws of standards set by anyone outside the self. It attempts to earn for itself intellectual respectability by borrowing fashionable terms from existentialism and pop psychoanalysis. More often than not, however, this is accompanied by a great deal of fuzzy and imprecise thinking. You will surely recognize these popular terms: *Autonomy, authenticity, spontaneity, meaningful personal relations*—these are words ruined by success and spoiled by popularity. They are meant to charm us with their virtue, but I do not believe that they can survive more than superficial investigation. For instance, it is possible to steal—*autonomously*. You can kill—*spontaneously*. A general can—*authentically*—press the button that will rain intercontinental ballistic missiles on an enemy country. As for that last phrase, *meaningful personal relations*, which has become a kind of litany, a ritualistic incantation of the New Morality's new permissiveness, I believe it possible for a tormentor to establish *meaningful personal relations* with his victim.

Second, a psychological criticism. Much as I dislike arguing *ad hominem* and questioning motives, I cannot help but feel that, at least on the unconscious level, the advocacy of the New Morality, specifically by the young, as a legitimate moral rival of the inherited code of our society, is to an extent the rationalization of normal, primitive, libidinal desires which seek to cast away all inhibiting factors. The Talmud tells us that in ancient Israel, an Israelite whose superego was too powerful to

permit him to indulge in passion without control, would solve his problem very easily—he simply would profess belief in the local idol, join its cult, and then that became his accepted religion. Without guilt or without shame, he could, therefore, participate in a religiously sanctioned orgy, which now turned into a virtue instead of a vice, because he was fulfilling the religious demands of his new cult. Just as the ancient Israelite changed theologies in order to satisfy his libido, without encumbrance of guilt, so have the New Moralists changed morality, and in both cases paganism proves to be the way out.

Negative and shortsighted

My third criticism is an ethical one. It is true that the New Morality seeks to avoid all injury to any third party, certainly to one's partner, but this assertion is based upon the self-confident supposition that it is possible to dismiss a major part of society's moral code, developed after centuries of experiment in the laboratory of history, and still to contain the incipient lawlessness that instinctively comes to the fore. But this is negative and shortsighted. Sooner or later, the self-centeredness — *doing-your-own thing* — of the New Morality and the borderline narcissism of the new permissiveness expands outward by sheer force of inertia and overwhelms the single, remaining "thou shalt not" of the New Morality, namely, thou shalt not hurt anyone else. The New Morality permits all sexual relations, all forms of sexual

itineracy, provided that no one is hurt and no social ills follow. But it is foolish to assume that this vague guideline can be observed in concrete moral situations. The whole attitude breeds social irresponsibility—about the only thing in this age of The Pill that does breed. All laws and norms tend to fall before the primacy of the primitive urge. What begins as an idealistic gesture to hurt no one ends up as a danger to society as such. I might mention an unusual letter I received from a young man at a leading, enlightened and distinguished Catholic university in the East. He was, and is now, a senior and a dormitory supervisor. Last year, he writes, he was one of the revolutionaries who demanded and won intervisitation rights. The students solemnly agreed and faithfully promised to the administration that if they were granted these rights the student community on each floor would operate as the conscience of the floor following the general norms of society. (I am not quite sure what that means, but that is what he told me.) In these days of confrontation, that is about the best a college administration can get. Now, four months later, the same students have overwhelmingly decided that what anyone does in his own room is his own business and no one else's, so long as no one is hurt. They are now demanding the abolition of all rules and full parietal programs. The young man, who is obviously very perceptive and highly ethical, writes to me: "I now feel that I have fathered an immoral and irresponsible child." It should be

clear that total benevolent permissiveness cannot be contained in the bedroom; it must ultimately rend apart the entire social fabric—beginning with the failing, in four short months, to keep a word solemnly given, to honor an agreement or oath. We cannot break the laws of morality and expect the laws of social ethics to continue undiminished.

Legalizing immorality

Fourth is a moral criticism. The New Morality's antinomian or rejection of norms or laws must sooner or later cover the whole scope of sexual conduct, and not only premarital relationships. Unfortunately, a number of churches have, for reasons I prefer not to go into here, offered ecclesiastical endorsement to the immoral consequences of the New Morality. I have written about this, and I do not want to go into it in too great detail. Let me merely mention an illustration of the fact that the New Morality contains implications that will gradually be spelled out in the future. About two years ago, 90 Episcopalian priests in New York City concluded that homosexual acts should not be dismissed as wrong *per se*, and that bugging should be judged by the same criteria as heterosexual marriage; namely, genuine love. The report of the British Council of Churches in October, 1966, came close to approving certain instances of adultery when none of the three parties is injured—specifically discussing the kind of case which became famous in Lawrence's *Lady*

Chatterly's Lover. Now it did not specifically say that they approve of it. The whole report, which in many ways is highly intelligent, when it comes to the practical conclusion becomes rather vague. But one does not overread if one infers these conclusions. So we find here, the legalization of classical immorality. This is most disturbing because it is the Christian churches who through the last two millenia have been the guardians of Western morality. If these acts are now going to become legal in our society, if we are going to legalize homosexuality or take the laws against adultery off the books because they aren't enforced anyway, then we are in real trouble—because what becomes legally permissible in society tends to become morally acceptable. The law has an educative, pedagogic function. The question is where you draw the line in legislating morality. How do you balance between the conflicting good of holding the moral line on one side and the protection of personal privacy on the other? How do you safeguard privacy in a pluralistic society without abandoning morality? My own suggestion is that these restrictive laws should generally remain on the law books but that government wisely refrain from enforcement and prosecution where non-observance is widespread, thus avoiding intolerable intrusion into our personal lives in violation of the social consensus and yet retaining the pedagogic influence and the moral suasion of established law. To give you an example of some of my own background from Talmudic

law, the Bible contains a number of cases for which it prescribes the death punishment. Actually, the number isn't so large—only about a third of the list of death penalties prescribed by British law less than 100 years ago. Nevertheless, in practice, even when the courts of ancient Israel had the right to impose capital punishment, it was extremely rare. The law was on the books, but it was rarely enforced. One of the greatest sages of all Jewish history, Rabbi Akiva, said, about 1800 years ago, that had he lived in the time of the Sanhedrin (Supreme Jewish Court), no man would ever have suffered capital punishment. So the law is on the books but it need not be applied.

Family writ large

Fifth is a social point. The New Morality poses a very real threat to society, namely, the family. We are already suffering enormously from the disintegration of families, from marital discords and divorce to whole populations where the major social and psychological problem is homes without fathers. If we spell out the implications of the New Morality, society will be left largely family-less, with no basic family structure for the children who come into being (except for selective breeding if the genetic engineers have their way). It is extremely doubtful if society can survive any further weakening of the family, for in many ways society is nothing but the family writ large.

Finally, and very important, politically the new permissiveness is

self-defeating. Moral moods, like fashions in dress, seem to follow the principle of the pendulum—the “new look” was followed by the “mini-skirts,” and, though I have no expertise in the area, I suspect that next will come veils from head to toe. Overpermissiveness, if unchecked, must be followed by a cruelly repressive political reaction and by a moralistic conservatism so totalitarian as to make the most severe Victorians and Puritans seem like libertines. If we go to an excess in one direction, we invite the extreme in the other direction. One of my favorite poets, Ogden Nash, once said, “O liberty, how many liberties are taken in thy name!” Now, if I oppose the excesses of the New Morality, it is as much because of my fear of a repressive future as because of my dislike of a permissive present. In an important play, *Tango*—it had a rather successful off-Broadway run and just recently closed—the Polish playwright, Slawomir Mrozhak, portrays the frightening consequences, the mindless and heartless tyranny, that must fill the void created by a generation that sets no rules, presents no structures, offers no standards, gives no guidance, teaches no law, and knows no discipline. Those who love liberty must therefore join in the protest against contemporary license. Those who cherish freedom will not condone its falsification by this foolish free-for-all that has become fashionable on our campuses.

To summarize, we have talked of the two levels of the New Morality, and examined in detail the second—

the one powered by moral perfectionism which, in the process of application to reality, turns nihilistic and remains with almost nothing. We have found its concern for personality, dignity, and self-fulfillment admirable, but we have taken exceptions to the permissiveness on six counts: intellectual, psychological, ethical, moral, social, and political.

Within and of society

Now to my second lecture: from the New Morality to the Old Morality. I shall now speak of Judaism and of a specifically Jewish observance which I suspect most of you or all of you are unaware of. I do so with a feeling that its insights have some universal relevance. For as the New Morality and modern secular man generally accord centrality to pleasure, to *hedone*, Judaism—without denying pleasure and its fulfillment, without decrying the striving for *hedone*—places *kedushah*, the Hebrew word for holiness or sanctity, as the core, the heart of man's value system. Holiness, which for the Jew is an act of the imitation of God, is not an outward but an upward movement. By that I mean, it demands of man not his removal from society in order to become holy, but the act of sublimation and self-transformation within and of society: not suppression of the sex drive and the absence of instinct, but rather their guidance, their direction, and their discipline, which is the act of consecration—making it holy. It is thus an act of human transcendence.

Now, this actualization of *kedushah*, of holiness, is primarily concerned with man's sexual self-control. The Rabbis saw the whole process of personal striving for holiness, which is the highest religious ideal for Judaism, as concerned to the largest extent with man's sexual self-discipline. The revealed moral law for Judaism represents judgment by God, the Transcendent One, of man's moral and, particularly, his sexual life. Its major effect, practically speaking, is not on extra-marital relations, because there the answer is very simple: "No." The transcendent will, the initiative for holiness, insinuates itself particularly into that realm of life in which "yes" and "no" commingle, in which man is bidden to learn a selected discipline, rather than outright denial or uninhibited fulfillment. In other words, Judaism's sexological code is mostly concerned with marital relations between husband and wife.

Now, Judaism recognizes two functions of marriage, and they correspond to the concepts of marital concord in the two accounts of creation. The first two chapters of *Genesis* have two differing, but not different, accounts of the creation of man. In the first chapter, man is created as part of the natural order: first inorganic nature, then the vegetable kingdom, then the animal kingdom, and finally man. He is part of the whole evolutionary pattern. When man is created, according to the Bible, he is commanded, "be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and conquer it," this means

that man, at one and the same time, is commanded concerning his sexual drive and his love for power. These are his creative instincts. Perpetuation of the species is part of the fulfillment of the natural scheme of creation. This, in Judaism, becomes codified as law, for Judaism demands, as a minimal fulfillment of the commandment to "be fruitful and multiply," which is fully one-half of the reason for marriage, the reproduction of the husband and wife, that is—at least one boy and one girl.

Not incompatible

The second chapter of *Genesis* gives us a different insight into man and woman. Here man is seen as separate from nature, as constituting a distinctive human order. Man looks about him and he suffers the pangs of solitude, and then the Bible says, "it is not good that man should be alone." He needs companionship for his self-fulfillment, both because he craves company and because he cannot be a good being, he cannot express or actualize his goodness, unless he has another human being upon whom to shower his love and affection. Hence his social and his existential natures are fulfilled by marriage. Judaism, thus, does not regard sexuality, *per se*, as evil or sinful. In Judaism marriage is neither a concession nor a sacrament. The blessings that are recited at the wedding ceremony include one in which we bless God for creating man and woman as He did. Judaism accepts sex and sexuality, but acknowledges its unusual power

and potential both for good and evil. Perhaps most characteristic of the Biblical view of sexuality, in this sense, is *Genesis* 1:27: "and God created man in His image, in the image of God created He him, man and woman created He them." Man, created in the image of God, is created as male and female; sexuality and God-likeness are not considered incompatible. Male-female and the image of God are not antonyms. This reconciliation, or compatibility, between the *homo imago Dei*, man created in the image of God, and *homo sexualis*, man as a sexual being, and the full effect of Judaism's moral imperative and the quest for holiness, find expression in an institution which is euphemistically called Family Purity.

A religious desideratum

What is this? It is the Jewish tradition of periodic abstinence. Briefly, this is the system that is to this day followed by Orthodox Jews. During the approximately five days of the menstrual flow and for a period of seven days thereafter, which are called seven "clean days," no cohabitation or physical contact between husband and wife is permitted. At the end of this 12 day period, five days of the menses and seven days of so-called cleanliness, the woman immerses in a pool of naturally gathered water called a *mikvah*, which means the gathering of water, and which is the origin of baptism—the original baptismal immersion. Upon immersing herself in this pool, she recites a blessing praising God who has sanctified us

with His commandments, and commanded us concerning the immersion. That evening, husband and wife are reunited. Similarly, a bride before marriage will count the seven clean days, undergo her immersion and in that way prepare herself for marriage. During the so-called unclean days, cohabitation is considered the violation of a most serious religious commandment, and reunion after these seven days is not simply permitted, but is *mitzvah*—it is a virtue, the fulfillment of a religious desideratum. The system might be thought of as the "Jewish rhythm," except that it is geared more to reproduction than contraception.

Now, permit me to clarify one semantic confusion—"Purity" as in "Family Purity," or "cleanliness" and "clean days" and "unclean days"—are not to be taken as hygienic terms. As a matter of fact, Jewish law requires thorough sanitation and cleansing *before* immersion. The immersion has nothing to do with keeping clean. It is not to be construed as a taboo. I don't know what it was 5,000 years ago, if it may have been practiced by some primitive tribes. But not being an anthropologist, and not really overly concerned, all I can do is speak from the point of view of Jewish practice and habit as it has been known. It has never been accepted as a taboo. Only marital relations are forbidden to the menstruant. She otherwise functions completely normally. It is not meant to be morally abhorrent—there simply is no hint of this. The term is simply a metaphor

for permissibility or impermissibility of conjugal congress.

Constantly quantifies

What are the values Judaism saw and sought to inculcate through this periodic abstinence? The institution is a purely Jewish one but I think that the insights are universal. It often happens with purely parochial religious institutions: the practice may be particular, but the moral is frequently of much broader interest. First, there is a purely religious dimension. Judaism, characteristically, considered a profession of faith and abstract dogma as inadequate. Throughout its whole domain, Judaism constantly quantifies. It brings concepts from the abstract into the concrete and insists that great metaphysical notions begin in actual practice and then can be read large. It, therefore, insists upon practical implementation of the faith commitment and demands the awareness of the Transcendent One, God, in daily life. In every aspect of life, especially in the most intimate aspect of life, in the living with the most powerful urge of humanity, there, too, man and woman must be aware of the presence of God. That is why the Rabbis said, in a rather quaint way, that a blessed marriage is a triangle—the partners being man, woman, and God. The awareness of God is brought into married life through the awareness of His will: in this case, abstinence and reunion. Second, Rabbi Meir, a Roman convert to Judaism, of about 18- or 1900 years ago, says as follows: because a

man may become over-acquainted with his wife and therefore repelled by her, the Torah, (the Bible, or the whole Jewish religion or Jewish tradition) says that she should be considered a *niddah* (menstruant) for seven days in addition to the five days of her period so that she might become beloved of her husband on the day of her purification, even as she was on the day of her marriage. What he means is that the whole institution of periodic abstinence protects conjugal love and sexual freshness against the peril of routinization and prosaic dullness. Unrestricted approachability may lead to overindulgence with the resulting satiety and boredom—and boredom, more than anything else, threatens love between husband and wife.

In addition, the Jewish Sages saw that periodic abstinence allows for a relaxed replenishment of the libidinal reservoir, which in the absence of religious restraint often cannot be obtained because of complicating psychological factors; such as, obviously, the fear of inadequacy, or being accused of inadequacy. Therefore, under an outside, heteronomous transcendent commandment to husband and wife that they can have no relations, husband and wife can separate from each other and replenish in a relaxed fashion without feeling guilty, or without feeling inadequate.

Family Purity for the observing couple also becomes the re-enactment of the honeymoon drama. A young Jewish engaged couple ideally—and among Orthodox couples it is the rule rather than the exception—will

not indulge in sexual relations. In preparation for her marriage, the bride observes the separation, immerses herself on the eve of her wedding, and then they unite. This pattern, that of separation and fulfillment, continues throughout their active life. They separate, yearn for each other, long for each other, but abstain until they come together for the remaining part of the month.

"Thingification"

The third element is the question of the personal dignity of the wife. I mention, *en passant*, that if the Jewish family has been held up as more or less a model of stability until the Emancipation, it was mostly due to practice of Family Purity. More than anything else, more than cultural factors, sociological factors, purely religious factors, what kept husband and wife together was the practice of this periodic abstinence and the keeping of a sense of freshness in their most intimate life. The third element in periodic abstinence that contributed to this domestic stability and tranquillity concerns the personal dignity of the wife. It is, I suppose, an unavoidable aspect of sexual life that the husband approaches his wife with a subject-object attitude. Note the English euphemism for cohabitation—"he possessed her." In the Bible, too, one of the words for cohabitation is *be'ilah* which means possession. The word for husband, in modern Hebrew, too, is *baal* which also means "owner." There is an element of ownership where the wife becomes

objectified, reified, an "object" in the eyes of the man. Well, even if we accept this as an integral and unavoidable part of the whole psychology of sex, yet there is always a danger that this "thingification," this reification, gets out of hand—that the attitude grows within the man whereby he reduces his wife or woman to a kind of sexual chattel—to a thing, an "it" instead of a "thou." Therefore, Judaism insists that the husband can have no unrestricted rights of approach to his wife. He cannot even try to persuade her, for they both have a mutual religious commitment which is overriding and overarching, so that no matter how great his desire or her desire, he may not approach his wife, and, therefore, he learns in practice, without necessarily saying so, that his wife retains a dignity that goes beyond himself and even transcends her will. She is a human being, even as he is a human being, and she is created in the image of God even as he is. Incidentally, this carries over into Jewish law. Even in many modern codes, the conjugal act is seen as the *right* of the husband and the *duty* of the wife—the husband will frequently sue for divorce because his conjugal rights were denied to him by his wife. Curiously, in Jewish law it is reversed. In Jewish law, *onah*, which is the technical term for conjugal act between husband and wife, is regarded as a *duty* of the husband and the *right* of the wife. It is she who can sue for divorce if he denies her *onah*.

Of immanent value

A Biblical illustration of the dignity of woman, inherent to periodic abstinence, was suggested by a medieval scholar, Rabbi Isaac Arama, an exile from Spain. Of the three Patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the great lover, the most sensitive one, the most romantic one, was Jacob. It was he who fell in love with Rachel, and wanted to marry her. But he had in-law troubles, and his father-in-law, skillfully substituted her older sister, Leah. Thereupon Jacob worked for another seven years in order to obtain his first love, Rachel. The relations between them throughout are extremely tender. Now the Patriarchs of Israel, the wives of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, had difficulty in conceiving. So Rachel could not conceive. She was barren. She comes to her husband and she says to him, "give me children, pray for me that I have a child; otherwise, I'm as good as dead." Now one would imagine, considering the personality of Jacob as delineated in the Bible, that a man of his sensitivity would react tenderly to this cry of anguish and pain by a beloved wife. He probably should have reassured her, and been pleasing and sympathetic. Instead, his answer is totally out of character. He reproaches her and says, "am I God that you should ask me for such a thing?" Now, the answer is totally mysterious in the context of their whole relationship. If the Bible tells it to us there must be a reason for it. And this medieval Jew, living in

the "Dark Ages," gives us an explanation which accords with the whole philosophy of the periodic abstinence. He says that woman in the Bible is called by two names—one of them is *ishah*, woman, the feminine form of *ish*, man, and the other is *chavvah*, Eve, because she was *em kolchai*, the mother of all living beings. These two names define two aspects of womanhood. One, *chavvah*, is motherhood, the fulfillment of a woman as a mother. The other, *ishah*, is simply a female human being, but a human being not in any other way different from a man. Both of us are the children of God—he the son of God, she the daughter of God. What Rachel did, according to Arama, was to indulge in a fundamental error. She revealed her feeling that she was primarily a mother, that the value of a woman was expressed in being a mother, which means that she is fundamentally a function-bearer. "I've got to produce, and if I can't produce, I have no value." She forgot that she is also a being possessed of immanent value, inherent and integral value, simply as a human being. She misread herself as having value only as a function-bearer, and a function-bearer is one who can be exchanged for another function-bearer, like a farmer can change one cow for another, one horse for another, or an employer can exchange one employee for another, or a computer operator can change one component for another component. She saw herself as a producer and that is all, as a *chavvah*, as a mother.

She felt, therefore, that since her maternal role was frustrated, she was totally devoid of value—she had no dignity. That is why she said, “give me children; otherwise I am dead, without being a mother, I have no value, I am lost, empty, void.” Jacob’s response was, therefore, harsh. “With all compassion for and understanding of your desire for a child, your assumption is false, it is a lie that you have no value other than that of being a mother. You have your own dignity.” A woman is not only a mother, not only a nurse, not only a bottle washer, not only the object of the sexual lust of a man. A woman is herself, a being who has metaphysical value that is irreducible and undiminished, and it cannot be taken away from her. This value of woman as retaining personal dignity, even in sexual relations where it tends to be diminished, is part of the teaching of the Jewish tradition on periodic abstinence.

Finally, a symbolic significance which Jewish Sages and thinkers found in Family Purity. Family Purity, the whole Jewish rhythm method, in the context of the other laws of levitical purity, yields certain fascinating insights upon symbolic interpretation. There are a number of instances which the Bible considers as causing levitical impurity. For instance, if a man or woman came in contact with a corpse, or a portion of a corpse, he or she was regarded as “unclean,” (again, not a sanitary or hygienic or taboo term). This uncleanness meant that this person was forbidden to enter the

Holy Temple in Jerusalem or in any of its sacred precincts until that person became “pure” or “clean.” This was done by counting a number of days, usually seven, sometimes one, and then immersing in the pool of natural water, the *mikvah*. So the general laws of levitical purity refer to both men and women and had a wide range of applicability. Today, there being no Holy Temple in Jerusalem, the only kind of levitical impurity that remains is that of menstrual impurity—that of periodic abstinence. Now, if we investigate all these forms of impurity, legislated by the Bible in *Leviticus*, we find something unexpected. All of them share one pattern. Somehow they reflect death or the intimation of death by the loss of life or the apparent loss of life. For instance: a corpse or the carcass of certain animals, or leprosy. (I really don’t think it’s leprosy, some medical historians tell me it’s really a kind of ancient fungus. But whatever its categorization, it is characterized by the falling off of limbs.) According to Jewish tradition, the leper is considered as one who is dead because his limbs shrivel: it is, therefore, a symbol of death. So, too, the loss of sperm confers upon a man the status category of “impure,” requiring him to go through the same process of purification. And menstruation is, after all, the loss of potential life. So that all of the forms of levitical impurity are occasioned by death or the intimation of death, the loss of life.

Now, this state of impurity is neutralized, according to the Bible,

by immersion in a pool of water. Water is universally the symbol of life. Human life begins in the embryonic fluid. The ocean is always considered the source of life. In Biblical Hebrew, we refer to a well as living waters. Running water is called life, living water, and water is generally the symbol of life.

Celebration of life

Judaism through the institution of periodic abstinence, called Family Purity, thus offers a rousing affir-

mation of life and reverence for life. In an age progressively committed to selective killing and to declaring as the greatest virtue the prevention of life so as to improve and make more convenient the lot of those in power—the establishment—who are alive first, such powerful declarations of the value of life and the disdain for and abhorrence of death deserve to be heard. This is essentially what Family Purity is all about. It is a celebration of life, a fundamental symbolic reproach against death and against the loss of life.

DISCUSSION

MODERATOR: You have just heard a beautiful exposition of the dynamics of rhythm. Quite obviously, periodic abstinence has had a past. Those of us who teach rhythm are sure that it has a present, and hopefully it's going to have a future. We have ten minutes for questions, before Rabbi Lamm departs for New York.

QUESTION: In the light of mutual conviction and absolutes, could you tell us how an orthodox church handles the situation of leading rabbis developing opposing interpretations of either scripture or absolutes. Is it done by a majority vote of counsel or on a personal conscience basis, or what?

RABBI LAMM: That's a rough question, because I don't think we, ourselves, know how we handle it. Furthermore, Jewish life in America is highly abnormal. We suffer from a long process of decentralization that has taken place for 2000 years. On fundamental moral absolutes, I don't think we have much disagreement in

the Orthodox community. We don't call it a church because the church has certain sociologic connotations. Anyone who disputes them simply has himself read out of the consensus. At this point, we are very much accustomed to non-Orthodox rabbis having all kinds of points of view. We've long been done with denouncing them because it doesn't help, and because we wasted too much energy doing it. However, the problem becomes very real in Orthodoxy. How do we decide between differing opinions where there are two points of view—a minority point of view and a majority? We don't have an hierarchical structure. We don't have an established or formal procedure for decision-making. We haven't had one since forty years before the destruction of The Temple when the Sanhedrin—the supreme religious court—went out of business. What has happened throughout the years is that scholars will offer opinions. Now, in order for a man's opinion to be heard

by the public, he has to have two qualifications: scholarship and piety. In other words he has to know what he is talking about, and he has to believe in what he is saying. One without the other disqualifies him. Despite these two qualifications, there still has been a tremendous variety of opinion. So what has happened is that the person who asks the question, who is most concerned, simply follows his rabbi. We discourage shopping for rabbis. We declare it a rule that a man must choose his rabbi and abide by that decision. If he doesn't like him, choose another rabbi but he can't switch back later.

In general practice a kind of social mechanism, a kind of religious consensus began to operate whereby certain opinions fell by the wayside until before long one opinion prevailed, and that became precedent, and that became established law. There is no push-button IBM method of coming to decisions, and there is no hierarchical method of decision-making today. It is a matter of free debate, and in the course of time the debate somehow becomes resolved by popular acceptance—the word *popular* meaning by the committed faith community rather than the secular Jewish community. The latter has no juridical standing in the eyes of the religious viewer.

QUESTION: Rabbi, in line with what you said about the basic sexual morality being intramarital rather than extramarital, what is the Jewish theology concerning the depiction in the first book of Genesis by the Jews of the sin in the Garden? When total investigation of the picture is made, not merely that of produce and serpents, are there not sexual overtones?

RABBI LAMM: Well, in the history of Jewish exegesis, there was one tendency

to give this a sexual interpretation, or rather two. Both of them are mythical. In the mythical tradition the serpent was regarded not only as a tempter but as a successful tempter. He seduced Eve. But in the major the mainstream interpretation of the event, it does not have the same sexual overtones as it had, I believe, for the early church fathers. It does not have a sexual connotation, primarily.

QUESTION: Rabbi, would you comment on the emotional and psychological impact of the degree of abstinence imposed by orthodox Jewish tradition? This is our big roadblock in teaching rhythm to the suffering males who have to abstain.

RABBI LAMM: Yes. The male suffers. But the male learns in the course of a very few short years that, to put it in the bluntest terms, his purely emotional satisfaction as a result of enforced abstinence is more than worth it. The feeling of the routine and the prosaic which is avoided through periodic abstinence makes the suffering worthwhile.

QUESTION: But don't you regard the orthodox Jew as suffering a neurotic conscience over thousands of years?

RABBI LAMM: Neurotic, no! Suffering, yes! The idea of neuroticism is malarkey, if you will excuse the expression. Every time I get a college student who's afraid that he's going to become a psychotic—heaven forbid a neurotic if he's not going to indulge his every whim—I think that's just the heart of the over-popularization of misinterpreted and destroyed Freudianism. I just can't take it seriously. Suffering, yes, but no permanent damage. Otherwise, I'd be here shaking right now before you. I think some arguments are best laughed out of existence. ◇

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