

"ALTRUISM AS A NECESSITY"

In modern times we have ^{come}_A to realize that self-interest, or plain egotism and selfishness, constitutes one of the most powerful forces in the universe. Thoughtful people conclude, therefore, that we ought to harness this immense reservoir of energy for constructive purposes.

Certainly, skyscrapers are built, and schools founded, and hospitals established, books are written, and elections won, and business increased, not primarily because the people who do these things are concerned with the general weal or social health or science or esthetics or national economic growth. They are done because people want to make more money, or build a reputation, or simply have the satisfaction of doing things bigger and better than anyone else.

Cynical though that sounds, all of us recognize the truth in it. It is a fact. The nail in your shoe hurts more than the fatal accident on the next street. And one flattering remark, one little compliment, buoys your spirit more than the news that ten people were saved from disaster.

Religion nowadays also tends to capitalize on that insight. Thus such phenomena as Christian Science to something called "Jewish Science," and the Power of Positive Thinking to the promises given by leaders of every religion that what they have to offer will bring more happiness and psychological well-being.

Popular morality, too, exploits this idea. We are told to practice honesty, not because it is right, but because "honesty is the best policy." We are discouraged from committing a crime, not because crime is wrong, but because "crime doesn't pay."

Perhaps there is something to all this. Perhaps to some kinds of mentality, or even to all kinds of mentality, this appeal to self-interest yields results and makes the world a better place to live in. But if this is all there is to

it; if we work on the premise that man is only a self-seeking, egotistical animal, out only for himself -- than we are in a sorry mess, and religions which accept such a view without protest are unworthy of the name. To be religious only because you have an angle, to be decent only because there is a kick-back to it, is to worship yourself, not the Almighty.

"Selfishness," writes Israel Zangwill, in his Children of the Ghetto, "is the only real atheism; aspiration, unselfishness - the only real religion." Or, to quote a far greater authority on religion, R. Hayyim of Volozhin, used to say: כ"י ז"ה

הכלית כל האדם, להועיל לאחרים -- "The whole purpose of man is to help others, to be of service to other human beings." Self-respect and self-worth thrive only in the presence of self-disregard and self-forgetfulness.

This teaching is implicit in today's Sidra. Abraham, the man of righteousness and peace and gentleness, observed the war of the five Kings and the four Kings. He noticed the cruel oppression and the suffering, and so he decided to abandon his ways of peace, and in an act of great courage he proceeded to liberate the victims of this cruelty. When he succeeded, the King of Sodom, who had been emancipated by Abraham, offered him the spoils of war. Certainly this was a legitimate compensation for Abraham. Yet Abraham refused to accept it: אם מחוט ועד שרוך נעל ואם אקה

-- מכל אשר לך ולא האמר אני העשרתי את אברם

"I will not take anything from a thread to a shoelace ... and you shall not say that you made Abraham rich." Abraham even takes an oath to affirm his refusal to accept any reward. He wants his noble act to remain unspoiled and untainted by selfish interest!

It is important to recognize that this is a high level in the development of character. You cannot attain such altruism or selflessness at once. Thus, when we first meet Abraham in today's Sidra, we find a figure who, despite his refreshing dedication to righteousness, is not quite as selfless as we have described. When the Lord first revealed Himself to Abraham, and commanded him: לך לך מארצך וממולדתך

, leave your country and birthplace and family, Abraham was apparently

reluctant to follow the divine command until God assured him that he would derive some personal benefit from his obedience. Thus the extra word לך -- "get thee," -- i.e., for your own sake; or, as the Rabbis put it: להנאתך ולטובתך , for your own benefit and your own good. Abraham is willing to go to all costs to perform a good deed, but he still wants his actions to benefit him in some way. It is only later that Abraham's character blossoms in its full sublimity, and Abraham achieves the height of altruism, when he replies to the King of Sodom: אם מהות וער שרון אמ ... I can accept nothing from you for having performed a courageous act of decency.

It is interesting to compare the development of the character of Abraham to the degeneration of the character of Laban, the man who was the brother of the young lady who was to become Abraham's daughter-in-law. When Laban hears that a stranger has come into town -- Eliezer, the messenger of Abraham who was looking for a wife for Isaac -- we read that Laban apparently reacted nobly: וירץ לבן אל האיש , Laban ran to greet him. Certainly, we have here revealed a bright aspect of the personality of Laban. But then something happens: ויהי כראותה , he noticed that Eliezer is laden with all kinds of jewelry and gems, and then -- only then -- does he say to Eliezer: בוא , come into my home, why do you stay outside? Laban's sudden exhuberance, his expansive hospitality, is occasioned not by a disinterested goodness, but by an opportunity he detected for self-aggrandizement. Laban confounded business with hospitality. He had a nose for profit, he smelled a deal -- and that corrupted what might have been a heartfelt act of pure generosity. The well known Hasidic teacher, the Radomsker Rabbi, once commented about the confessions we recite on Yom Kippur: one of the list of sins to which we confess is על חטא שחטאנו לפניך ביצר הרע , for the sin which we committed by means of the Evil Urge. Why, asks the rabbi, a special confession for יצר הרע , the Evil Urge? Are not all sins committed because of the fact that we are victimized by the יצר הרע ? Why, then, set aside a special confession for this lack of

resistance to the Evil Urge? The answer is, that this particular confession refers not to the sins that we have committed, but, ^{on} ~~to~~ the contrary, to the good deeds and mitzvot which we ^{have} performed -- but without purity and selflessness! We confess to the noble deeds which we performed only because we were impelled by the נרץ , by the opportunity for self-interest and self-advancement. We confess to having performed acts of decency only because we were motivated by selfish interest.

Do we ^{not} recognize it? Is it not a universal failing? This is a confession which includes those who give charity -- only because they want to build a reputation. It includes those who pray with apparent fervor, not because one ought to pray fervently, but -- because they want to impress others. It includes people who become active in religious and philanthropic organizations, not because they want to strengthen them, but -- because they need them politically.

Allow ^{me} to make myself clear: I do not mean that one must always be selfless and altruistic. I do not mean that we are to become angels all of a sudden. I wish to be thoroughly realistic. But I do believe that at least something in life must be sealed off from our ubiquitous egotism. I believe that one deed during the day, one mitzvah, one little area of life, ought to be reserved for that which is unselfish and לשם שמים , for the sake of Heaven.

You may say that that is unnatural and superhuman. Granted -- but it still is a necessity! To be natural is not always a virtue; the cow munching on the pasture, the elephant drinking from a brook, and the monkey stealing bananas, are all being natural. And insofar as humanity is concerned, I am convinced that in order to be human most of the time, we must be superhuman some of the time.

(The Talmud indicates this in a most interesting way. The study of Torah is one of the greatest commandments known to Judaism. Torah study is desirable no matter what the motive: whether we study Torah for its own sake, למנוחה , without any selfish motives; or whether we study it לשם , not for its own sake, but because we have a personal benefit such as the prestige we desire, or

we want to become teachers or Rabbis. What is the difference between studying Torah לשמה and שלא לשמה, with or without a selfish interest?

The Talmud assigns these two motives to two different verses in the Psalms.

One verse reads: כִּי גָדוֹל עַד שָׁמַיִם חֶסֶדְךָ, that God's love (i.e. His Torah and our study of it) is high unto Heaven. The second verse reads כִּי

גָּדוֹל מֵעַל שָׁמַיִם חֶסֶדְךָ, that God's love is great beyond or above the Heavens.

How do you reconcile these two apparently contradictory verses? ~~and~~ The

Talmud answers: the first verse refers to Torah study for a selfish reason,

שלא לשמה; whereas the second verse refers to תורה לשמה, Torah

study for unselfish reasons.

(What the Talmud means that as long as we study Torah, even if there is a personal element involved, we reach the highest limits of human conduct and aspirations. Then our love for God and our study of Torah lead us to be great unto the Heavens. But if we study תורה לשמה, Torah for its own sake, selflessly, then our love and our relationship to God magnifies our personality even beyond the Heavens; for then, indeed, we humans become super-human.)

A charming and most relevant story is told about some of the giants of Jewish history who lived in Safed in the 16th century. Rabbi Mosheh Elshikh, the great mystic and Talmudist, was also known as a great teacher of Torah and preacher. Once, as he was about to begin a derashah or sermon, the audience was thrilled to notice that there appeared, in order to listen to him, the renowned Rabbi Isaac Luria, known as the Ari ha-kadosh, one of the greatest mystics of Kabbalists in Jewish history, accompanied by numerous disciples.

In the middle of the sermon, however, the Ari and his disciples picked themselves up and left the synagogue! Later, when they were asked for the explanation for their strange behavior, the Ari explained: Initially we came because in my mystic visitations, when my soul soared into the Heavens, I noticed that all the angels were preparing to come to listen to the sermon of Rabbi Mosheh Elshikh. But then, in the middle of his talk, the Rabbi evidently began to

feel self-satisfied and smug; he noticed the wonderful impression he was making on the congregation, and there arose in his mind a thought of conceit, At that moment he intended not so much to teach Torah as to impress others with his own competence and importance. Therefore, since his teaching of Torah no longer was pure, the angels departed. And when I saw that the angels had left, then I too left with my students... ”

Whether it is teaching of Torah or doing of good deeds or simply being a decent human being -- the finer are our characters, the more are we expected to be selfless!

I can think of many acts of kindness and generosity, undiminished by any selfish interest, acts done with dignity and sensitivity, by people here this morning; even by some who never have realized and appreciated the nobility of what they are doing! We meet it all around us, though perhaps not as often as we should. Only recently we all became aware of a dramatic example, when earlier this week Rev. Martin Luther King was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize, which he so richly deserved -- and he immediately announced that he would give the entire amount to the Civil Rights Movement! A spark of Abraham's teaching -- אִם מְחֻם

! וְעַר שְׂרָךְ נֶעַל

Certainly we who are the descendents of Abraham ought to re-learn this lesson. Charity is usually given in full view of the public. Very often that is as it should be -- because when we give with publicity, that inspires others to do the same, and it is more important that charity be given than that our motives be pure. Nevertheless, at least sometimes we ought to try to introduce into our lives the principle taught to us by what the Talmud tells of the days of the Temple, that there was in the Temple the לְשַׁנַּת חֶשֶׁא' , the "Chamber of Silence," where people would leave their donations and poor men would take them without ever meeting each other -- acts of pure selflessness.

That is why membership in the Hebrah Kadisha is so significant -- because the people who devote themselves and dedicate their energies to this difficult and

demanding work, perform a חסד של אמת, an act of goodness which has truth in it, i.e. they never can expect compensation from the people who are their beneficiaries.

Or, to take another example: people who work for a Yeshiva or Day School which their children ~~attend~~ are without question and without doubt performing wonderful work. But when such people continue their labors and efforts on behalf of the school in an undiminished manner even after their children have left that school -- they are proving themselves utterly altruistic and selfless in the finest traditions of our Father Abraham!

Abraham's example therefore inspires us not to give up any and all or even the major part of our self-interest and our striving for self-advancement. It does inspire us just occasionally, and with some regularity, to do something in our lives that is utterly unselfish, completely לשהם שמים .

And whereas this selflessness demands, by its very nature, that we expect no reward or compensation, nevertheless it is a fact: that life is so much sweeter when we emulate this example of Abraham! No wonder that every morning we pray:

. והערב נא ה' אלקינו את דברי תורתך בפינו ונפי עמך בית ישראל

Make sweet, O Lord, the words of Your Torah in our mouths, ונהיה אנהנו

-- וצאצאינו וצאצאי עמך בית ישראל כולנו יורעי שמך ולומדי תורתך לשהם

so that we and our children may learn Torah for its own sake, without any selfish interest. Only that way, by studying Torah and putting it into practice in all our lives lishmah, without any selfish angle, can life become as sweet as possible.

. ברוך אתה ה' המלמד תורה לעמו ישראל

Blessed is the Lord who teaches such a Torah to his people Israel.