

TO BE A JEW

It was never easy to be a Jew. But it was never as hard as it is today. I do not refer to the restrictions and prohibitions that limit the activities of the observant Jew. For the Jew who believes, these practical regulations are a joy, an expression of love. Nor do I mean the exposed political position of the Jew in modern society, a role that has, to some extent, become even more difficult for him/ⁱⁿthe Diapora because of the State of Israel. For the Jew who chooses to identify himself with his people, these obstacles are all part of the unfolding of the great and long-awaited drama of redemption.

I mean, rather, that it is hard to feel like a Jew, to experience the depth of Jewish religious emotion that scans the spectrum from fear and awe to love and joy. It becomes more and more difficult seriously to engage G-d in a dialogue which will lift us above the commonplace and the pedestrian to a new level of vision and purity. Our hearts have run dry. The spirit is parched. The soul is overladen with the dreaded dust of despair.

Our society and culture are composed of many elements, and all of them conspire against us. Protestantism tells us to look into ourselves first for the source of religion. And so we look and we find nothing. The psychologists tell us to consider only the experience of religion, rather than its practice or creed. But we experience nothing. Scientists present us with a cold, depersonalized world, in which man's eyes turn heavenward only to follow the orbit of the newest satellite. And so it is not worth looking at all. G-d seems to have vanished from His world, to have packed a suitcase filled with all the pleasures and agonies, the awe and the ecstasy, formerly reserved for Him by His people, and to have left without so much as saying "Goodbye."

What, then, are we to say to the Jew, enstranged from the sources of

the Jewish tradition, ~~one~~ who feels himself awkward in the milieu of maximal Jewishness but yet pines for some sensation of piety, for at least a trace of the fervor that informed the lives of his ancestors -- and even some of his devout contemporaries?

We have heard time and again the heart-rending complaint of so many of the non-religious: "I would like to believe -- but I can't." These words are sincere, and they are not the result of laziness or the cult of convenience. For the modern Jew is caught in a seemingly inescapable dilemma: he cannot practice Judaism, for he does not feel it within, and he cannot feel it within for he does not live it.

And here indeed, in this formulation of the question, is the beginning of the answer. The logical order directs us first to experience religion subjectively and only then to practice its objective precepts. It is this "logical" order which has kept man outside the realm of a living faith, suspended in a limbo of meaninglessness. But the natural order proceeds in the opposite direction: first practice, then experience; first live, then feel; first naaseh, then nishma. The experience of love is something all humans are capable of, but unless it is intelligently directed at the proper object, the love is a failure and a disgrace. More than that, ^{it} is pointless and hence empty. A child is born with an a priori capacity for loving a mother. But until he suckles and is fondled by her, he will not love her, and his love will thus be a source of frustration for him.

The way out of the dilemma, then, is to reverse the order to which we have become conditioned by modern life. First live like a Jew, so that later you may love like a Jew. Begin with a full life of Toran and Mitzvot, so that afterwards you may experience the mighty range of feeling that is reserved for the truly devout. One cannot possibly be uplifted by the majesty and mystery of the Shabbat until he has first fully observed its regulations. The pleasures and the wonders are incommunicable; we can only talk about

them, we cannot transmit them themselves. Only a personal participation can accomplish that. So, he who waits for inspiration to pray, will not pray. He who prays anyway may yet rise to full inspiration. The Halakhah does not demand full kavvanah before one begins his prayer (except for the beginning of the Shema and the first blessing of the Amidah); it demands only that nothing be present which will hinder kavvanah should it arise.

But we must go one step further. In order to be a Jew, one must not only act like a Jew in practice. One must also act as if he is experiencing the emotional wealth of Judaism. In other words, what is recommended is a bit of conscious self-delusion. We must emulate the outward manifestations of religious experience in order to arrive at the experience itself. We must convince ourselves that we have kavvanah so that we may indeed ultimately gain it. We must, in good conscience, tell ourselves that we love G-d and fear Him, that our hearts are filled with awe and joy, so that in the end they really will be.

This is what R. Shneur Zalman, the founder of Habad, taught in his Tanya. The difference between the Tzaddik (completely righteous person) and the Benoni (the man of average character) is that the Benoni has learned to master the evil within him, whereas the Tzaddik not only has mastered it, but so despises it that he has utterly extirpated it from his heart and being. It would seem that the difference is one of kind, not degree; that the two types differ in their very nature, not only in the exercise of their free wills. One is born either a Tzaddik or not a Tzaddik, and our freedom is thus confined to the limits of these areas: if a Tzaddik, you can be a greater one or lesser one, if not a Tzaddik you can be a Benoni or a Rasha (wicked). And yet this is not the end of the story. "Nevertheless, one (i.e. the Benoni) must set aside regular times and consciously plan for detesting evil...and although he knows in his heart that he will not truly reach this stage, that he will only imagine it, still he must do it in order

to fulfill the oath (administered to every man at birth) ⁵Be a Tzaddik and not a Rasha. ... Furthermore, habit becomes dominant and develops into a second nature. Therefore, if a man will train himself to utterly hate evil, it will in truth become detestable to him in some measure. And if he will accustom himself to make his soul happy in the service of G-d by the contemplation of the greatness of G-d, then the impulse-from-below (i.e. his initiative) will evoke an impulse-from-above, and perhaps a spirit will devolve upon him from on high, and he will be blessed with the spirit from the root of some Tzaddik which will grow within him, leading him to serve G-d with true joy.." (Tanya, Ch. 14). Divested from its Hassidic terminology, ^{the}psycho-spiritual truth in this passage speaks out to modern man as clearly and convincingly as it did to the Jew of 100 years ago: in the realm of religious experience, imagination can create reality. Imitation can be transformed into genuineness.

In yet other passages (see, for instance, Introduction to Shaar ha-Yihud ve'he-Emunah, R. Shneour Zalman speaks more directly of the love of G-d in the same manner. For contemporary men this seems especially remote. They cannot bring themselves to love each other, not even themselves, how then shall they love G-d? The answer here too is that one can learn to love G-d, both by searching for those things the contemplation of which leads to an appreciation of His greatness, and hence to love of Him, and by acting as if one loves Him.

But is this not going against the very nature of an emotion, which is self-generated and not subservient to the command of the will? And is it not an act of hypocrisy to play the lover when we feel no love in our hearts?

The second question is no question at all. The Jew striving for religious experience in this manner intends to fool no one. He does not seek at all to dissemble or deceive another. What he does he does in the privacy of his heart and soul. He creates an illusion for himself in the full know-

ledge that it is an illusion, but with the hope that the itra'uta di'le'eila, the Impulse-from-Above will respond to his human initiative and create fact out of ~~the~~ fiction and reality out of illusion.

The answer to the first question leads us to one of the great principles of Judaism (articulated most clearly and expressly in Hasidism) and to the key to our problem. And that is, that when we thus "act" religious, we are not setting up an illusion at all. We are not trying to create an emotion or a relationship which does not already exist. For deep within man there already lies the response to the divine. In every Jew there preexists an ahavah tiv'it u-mesuteret, a natural, concealed love. Often this natural love is so ignored, so overgrown with the moss of neglect and indifference, that the Jew no longer is aware of its existence. But it is there nevertheless. The problem, then, is not to create that love, but to awaken it. Man is by nature a homo religiosus. His course must be to arouse his inner goodness and piety, not to produce it. Every Jew -- even the most estranged -- already has within him the love for G-d, for Torah, for Yiddishkeit; some have it in greater measure, some in lesser measure, but all have some of it. The issue, then, is: how to release that concealed passion.

Understood in this manner, the "fiction" is no fiction at all, and the "illusion" is more real than what we normally consider "reality." For when we "act as if" we are possessed of religious passion, we are doing no more than carrying out an inner yearning that issues from sources of our very selfhood far more profound than the superficial layers that insulate them with apathy and void. By setting up the "image" of an experiential relationship with G-d, we arouse the inner, dormant capacity for such orientation to its full, majestic stature, and the inner yearning joins the outer image, infusing it with vitality and investing it with reality.

If we shall have the confidence that this hidden and natural love still moves within man, that even in that confused and pitiful cynic known as

Modern Man there still stirs the Image of G-d, then our burden of despair will be removed. Then we shall have the courage of knowing that our goal can be reached. What greater source of optimum than this!

To the Jew who is enstranged -- and which of us is not, in some degree, enstranged from the Source? -- we must address our invitation: act out the Jewish role, in both practice and feeling, and then the practice will become meaningful and the feeling genuine. Not believing and not experiencing is the real fiction, the cosmic lie. Create the image of the true Torah-experience, and you will release it from withing you. Live it, and you will love it.

To be a Jew, you must first act like a Jew. And to feel Jewishness, you must first act as if you feel it. In these days of Repentance, there is no greater teshuvah than this; for by "returning" to our real, inner selves, we are in fact returning to G-d.