

**MENSCHLINESS BEFORE GODLINESS II**  
**ROSH HASHANAH 2006**  
**By Rabbi Haskel Lookstein**

Are you religious? Are you a shomer mitzvot? Do you observe the Commandments?

If you wanted to answer those questions affirmatively and back it up with proof, what proofs would you offer?

What would your religious index consist of: Shabbat? Kashrut? Rosh Hashanah? Yom Kippur? Pesach? Tefila? Taharat HaMishpacha?

Do you know how I know the standards you would choose by which to measure your own religiosity? Because those are my automatic measuring rods, too. When I have a premarital conference with a couple and we discuss the qualifications for witnesses on the ketuba and under the chupah, one of the requirements is that they be shomrei mitzvot. When I am asked what does that entail, I answer: He has to be a shomer Shabbat, keep kosher, and daven with tefillin.

Why do I answer this way? Why don't I say - "Shomer mitzvot? He must be honest, generous, kind, visits the sick, helps at a funeral or a shiva?"

The Chafetz Chaim had these precise religious criteria in mind when evaluating witnesses. That's why he disqualified all office workers from being witnesses on the grounds of dishonesty and thievery, because almost every office worker is guilty of such misdeeds. He/she uses the phone for personal calls; he/she uses paper, erasers, clips, or stamps for personal purposes. This, said the Chafetz Chaim, is thievery - unintended perhaps, not malicious, maybe even unaware - but nonetheless using the boss' materials

without permission is a sin. Such a person is not a shomer mitzvot. Where the Chafetz Chaim found kosher witnesses for a wedding is quite another matter, but unquestionably he lived by a principle that we have forgotten: The ethical is the foundation of religion. To be religious means to be, first and foremost, honest, fair, kind, generous and, yes, shomer Shabbat, keep kosher, and observe Rosh Hashanah. But first be a mensch - and only then be a tzaddik!

Sounds familiar? Well, if you were in this synagogue 26 years ago on Rosh Hashanah, you heard perhaps the most important sermon I have ever given. It was titled: "Menschliness Before Godliness." It underlies a lot of what we all have done in the last two-and-a-half decades in KJ and in Ramaz. For example: Every morning the Headmaster of the Ramaz Lower School starts the day with an announcement over the intercom reminding the students to observe the 3-Rs - Respect, Responsibility, and Kindness. (The fact that kindness begins with a "K" and not an "R" is a trick to get the kids to remember it.)

But on this Rosh Hashanah, as we begin a process of cheshbon ha-nefesh - spiritual stocktaking - I confess to you and to myself that I need to hear this message about menschliness again. I have, unconsciously, forgotten it. Proof: my standards for kosher witnesses at a wedding. Another proof: I sat this week to begin studying with a candidate for conversion. What do you think I started with? Rosh Hashanah! And this week we will study Yom Kippur. And then Sukkot and Shabbat and kashrut. Why am I misleading her? More important: Why am I misleading myself? Are these the first concerns of Judaism? What happened to menschlichkeit?

So, excuse me if I review this principle again. I need it. Maybe, you need it too. Maybe, even if you were here 26 years ago you needed it right after the sermon, because many people came over to me after that sermon, gave me a yasher koach, and said: “Boy O' Boy, Rabbi, you really gave it to THEM!!”

To THEM? I was talking to myself and to all of us - not to any anonymous, one-sided, frum Jew out there. I wasn't talking to an allegedly kosher butcher in Monsey I need to internalize this message and to state again its relevance for us all.

I was reawakened to this theme by my friend and colleague, Rabbi Joseph Telushkin who will be our Shabbat Scholar on January 12th and 13th and who has just published the first volume of a projected three-volume work entitled: A Code of Jewish Ethics. (Everyone here should go out after Rosh Hashanah and buy the book.) He reminds us that when the First Century Sage, Hillel, was asked by a non-Jew to convert him while he stood on one foot, he didn't give him a list of the Ten Commandments or recite the Sh'ma; he said to him:

That which is hateful to you, don't do to another.

This is the whole Torah.

The rest is commentary.

- Go and learn - and he converted him on the spot (Tractate Shabbat, 31a).

From this exchange we learn several things:

First: The basis of Judaism is a supreme ethical principle.

Second: The rest is commentary - how the ethics work; what ethical rules tell us to do and not to do; how does our ritual action make us a more ethical, decent, humane, thoughtful, kind person, i.e., a mensch?

Third: The obligation to continue to study in order to become a more fully religious person.

As Rabbi Telushkin points out, Hillel's view was not idiosyncratic. It is mainstream Judaism. A century later, Rabbi Akiba, the gadol of his age - as was Hillel in his - said essentially the same thing -

Love thy neighbor as thyself;

- This is the major principle in the Torah. (Jerusalem Talmud, Nedarim 9:4).

They both were affirming that Judaism is first and foremost about being a mensch - and then growing into a tzaddik.

Our sages tell us:

Derekh Eretz precedes Torah (Vayika Rabbah, 9:13). As Rav Kook, zl, pointed out, if the order is reversed, if Torah precedes derekh erez - if one becomes a tzaddik without a foundation of menschlichkeit - one's Torah may come out "farkrumpt" - crooked. Example: Cain and Abel were sibling rivals for a long time, but it was only after they became "religious" and brought sacrifices that one killed the other. Cain's Torah, as it were, was not founded on derekh erez.

This principle, which we - myself included - forget so often, actually explains many Biblical passages.

Look at the Ten Commandments. There is no mention of sacrifices, circumcision, Passover or Yom Kippur. The bulk of the Commandments are ethical in nature, prompting Rabbi Shubert Spero, Professor of Philosophy at Bar Ilan University to conclude: "The testimony of the Decalogue seems overwhelming: Moral rules regulating

relations between human beings are primary. Morality is the essence of Judaism."

(Quoted in Telushkin, p. 13 and footnoted on p. 524).

This also explains why the Prophets overwhelmingly charge the Jewish people to be ethical, and they criticize them, not for chillul Shabbat or Yom Tov or kashrut, but for oppressing the poor, cheating in business, lying and not living just and ethical lives.

No one said it more clearly than Jeremiah when he proclaimed: Let not the wise man glory in his wisdom, nor the mighty man in his might, nor the wealthy in his riches. Rather, if one wants to glory in something let him glory in his understanding Me (God). For I am God who exercises kindness, justice and righteousness. For in these things I delight, says God (Jeremiah, 9:22-23).

Do you want to know how to apply this in our own lives? The next time we want to praise our children or grandchildren - whether to them or about them to others - try not to stress their intellectual achievements, their academic honors, their technological smarts, their financial success, their athletic prowess or even their beauty or handsomeness - all important, but secondary. Rather, praise them for their acts of chesed, their integrity, their respect for others, their fineness as human beings. Let them know that these ethical qualities come first in our minds and all the other important achievements or virtues come second.

A Middle School teacher tells me that when parents come in for a first parent-teacher conference, they invariably ask: "How's my child doing?" They mean: A, B or C. Is he/she doing work Is he/she at the top of the class or the middle or the bottom? What they should really be asking a sensitive teacher is: "What kind of child am I raising?" Is he/she kind, thoughtful, polite, respectful, caring? Such questions would

make Jeremiah proud - and God, pleased: "For in these things I delight, says God." And this explains a famous- and very unusual - passage from the Rambam's Code, cited most appropriately by Rabbi Telushkin:

We must be very careful about the mitzvah of tzedaka, more so than about any other positive command in the Torah. Because, tzedaka is a sign of righteousness and a sign that one is descended from our father, Abraham, of whom it is said "For I love him because he taught his descendants to do tzedaka (and justice)."

This explains why Avraham, and no one else, was chosen by God. The S'fas Emes asks: "Why wasn't anyone else chosen?" God, says the S'fas Emes had been calling to man since creation to live kindly and justly. Why wasn't someone else chosen before Abraham was even born? And he answered: Because no one listened until Avraham. That's why Avraham was chosen. He was the first to listen to the primary message of God, to live a life of justice and righteousness.

Are we listening today - you and I - to God's call, saying "For this is my desire" - Be a mensch and then go on to be a tzaddik. We must judge ourselves that way. We must encourage and praise our children that way. We must think of others that way. We must live our lives that way.

Rabbi Yisrael Salanter, the great Jewish, ethical tzaddik of the 19th Century once said: A sermon is worthwhile if it gets even one person to daven Ma'ariv with more kavannah - even if that person is the speaker himself. Dare I paraphrase Reb Yisrael and say: Today's sermon is worthwhile if it gets even one person to be more focused on being a mensch - even if that person is - I