

IF MENSCHLINESS BEFORE GODLINESS THEN WHY GODLINESS?

(Rosh Hashanah 1986)

On Rosh Hashana 5741 (1980) Rabbi Haskel Lookstein delivered a sermon entitled "Menschliness before Godliness." The sermon had wide impact in the community and was published in this Bulletin early in 1981. The question remained, however "If Menschliness before Godliness—then why Godliness?" Rabbi Lookstein sought to answer that question with his Rosh Hashana sermon this past year (5747) (1986) and we reprint that sermon below, along with the previous one on the next page.

Six years ago on Rosh Hashanah I delivered a sermon entitled, "*Menschliness Before Godliness*." In that sermon I argued that one must be a mensch before one can be a tzadik; one has to be ethical before becoming holy; goodness is a prerequisite for Godliness.

That sermon was probably the most impactful address I have ever delivered. It had an effect upon many of the listeners. It has been the stimulus for many policies and activities in KJ and Ramaz over the past six years. Most important, it has had an impact on the way I view myself as a Jew and as a teacher. I can see my own failings and therefore my own challenges and obligations more clearly and more compellingly.

The importance of this religious message has been confirmed again and again during the last few years by ethical and moral scandals that have rocked the religious community. Right wing yeshivot have been accused of practicing money laundering on a wide scale, something of which the late and sainted Rav Moshe Feinstein warned publicly five years ago. Every year some students from some yeshiva high schools participate in the sale and purchase of New York State Regents examinations. People engage in bitter and acrimonious struggles in synagogues in order to raise the height of the *mechitza* and then some of them are indicted for breaking down all the barriers when it comes to misappropriating other people's money. Sadly, it is clear that we must maintain the struggle to affirm that a religiously ethical life is a necessary prerequisite for a holy, Godly existence. Without that prerequisite we do not have a religious life; rather we have a continuous *chilul Ha-Shem*.

"Why do I need your sacrifices?" asks God, in the words of Isaiah. Your money is adulterated; your wine diluted; your leaders are crooked; everyone is on the take; the orphan and the widow are not protected." In effect, Isaiah says in his first chapter: Get your ethical house in order before you enter the house of God. Let your own table be set honestly before you offer sacrifices on my altar. *Menschliness* precedes Godliness.

But six years ago I left unanswered a question that is on everyone's mind. Why do we need Godliness? If the main thrust of Judaism is to be good, kind, caring, honest, respectful and decent then why do I need *Shabbat*, *kashrut*, *taharat ha-mishpacha*? Why must I be scrupulous about lighting Shabbat candles a few minutes before sunset rather than after sunset? Is this really what bothers God? Is whether I wear shoes or not next Sunday night (Yom Kippur) of any relevance to my becoming a *mensch* or a decent human being? If the goal of a religious life is to teach us

how to relate to other human beings what possible significance can there be in how we pick up a lulav and etrog on Sukkot—or whether we pick one up at all? What difference does it make whether I put a metal cover on my stove on Shabbat or not or even whether I keep two sets of dishes or not?

These are questions which are on everybody's mind. Some people think them overtly—and perhaps act out the question by discarding much of the Godliness part of Judaism. Others, do all the mitzvot they can, but entertain the question subliminally. They don't really know why they have to keep all these rules.

I would like to try to suggest some approaches to this question today. I have no magical answers; just some thoughts that we might think about together and perhaps we may understand why we need the Godliness, the totality of mitzvot, in addition to the *menschliness*.

II

The first reason is that without a sense of God and mitzvot we would have no clear criteria for what is ethical and good. We would not even know what a *mensch* is. As Dennis Prager argues in his wonderful quarterly *Ultimate Issues* (Spring-Summer, 1986). "If there is no God, there is no good and evil." There are only "subjective opinions" about desirable or undesirable behavior.

Well, you will argue, murder is certainly evil. And I will answer: how do you know? The Nazis did not agree. Listen to a book reviewer discussing Dr. Robert Lifton's explanation about how Nazi doctors practiced medical murder.

You begin with someone already dedicated to the collective ideology of National Socialism. Its central belief that to purify the "Volk" you had to rid Germany of its Jews was, in the words of Deputy Party Leader Rudolf Hess, "nothing but applied biology." If, as a doctor, you believe in the removal of diseased tissue from the individual organism, or in killing as healing, then, given a collective ideology, it is but a few short steps to the idea of removing "diseased" individuals from the society's organism—in short, genocide.

Thus Dr. Lifton explains how killing could be justified as "healing," the horrifying paradox of which is vividly symbolized by the act of doctors with hypodermic needles injecting patients with lethal phenol. And thus he tries to empathize, if not sympathize, with the sometimes "decent" men who allowed themselves to become part of the medical "bureaucracy of killing."

Are Communists much better? Have not millions of Russians simply vanished? Is what Schacharansky suffered explainable? It is by his captors. The simple point is that without God's commands about the sanctity of human life and property, and about the holiness of the world, how do we know that stamping out some undesirable people is any worse than exterminating bugs or rodents?

If ethics are human in origin they are undependable, because human perceptions change with needs. When Abraham went to Egypt he felt he had to hide his married status because "There is no fear of God here, and therefore they will kill me to get my wife." One of the contributions of Torah to the world is that ethics emanate from God. All the things that western society holds to be decent and good derive from that source. And when secularism takes over ethics are in peril.

Dateline Brussels, Oct. 1—"Special to the N.Y. Times." "More than 180 prostitutes and their supporters (sic!) assembled here today for the second conference on prostitutes' rights."

Today, everyone has rights; every form of behavior is kosher. There are no rules. And why should there be rules? If ethics are secular and man-made then why are certain forms of behavior unacceptable? And why must people get married rather than just live together? And why have children if they interfere with freedom—which they do!

If we believe in certain standards of right and good and fair and humane then we have to find our basis somewhere in a Divine ethic. And so, being a *mensch* is not enough. One needs God and mitzvot to define what a *mensch* is and how to be one.

III

A second reason for Godliness and mitzvot is that even Divine ethics need a force behind them to compel acceptance.

Let us take one area of *menschliness* as an example: *chesed* acts of kindness, *tzedaka*, visiting the sick, comforting the mourner, extending hospitality.

We all know from Torah that these are good. But for many people doing these things is optional. It depends on how one feels.

We give *tzedaka* when we feel like it, if it makes us feel good, if we receive appropriate recognition. Why should that be? If a person learns to be a *shomer Shabbat* and *shomer kashrut* whether he feels like it or not he—or she—should give *tzedaka* the same way. The *mitzvah* is just as compelling.

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Rabbi Lookstein

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The same is true of *bikur cholim*. (visiting the sick.) One visits a sick person because it is required, not because one has nothing else to do. Similarly in the matter of comforting the mourner, one attends a funeral, visits a house of *shiva* or answers a call for a *tahara*, not because one happens to have free time but rather because God commanded us to do these things. One invites people home not because there is ample room but because there is someone who needs an invitation. It isn't a question of whether we have extra food or not; it is only a question of whether there is someone around who needs an invitation. We respond to that need, not to our will. Rabbi Israel of Salant was always the last to leave shul on Shabbat. He wanted to make sure that no one was left without a place to go. If we insist on only acting out of feeling, then we are rejecting Judaism in favor of Pauline Christianity. It was Paul who decried legalism and law-enforced mitzvot. One must act out of love, he said. "The law killeth," was his motto; "the spirit giveth life."

Judaism says no! We act out of necessity because it is right, because God tells us to do it. We hope that the deed will stimulate the heart; we do not wait for the heart to promote the deed.

Essentially, Godliness and *mitzvot* are designed to create an instinctive response to do good in a given situation. Humans, unlike animals, have few instinctive responses. Godliness is designed to create instincts for good.

Rabbi Israel of Salant was giving a lecture on Talmud. One upstart student needled him with a question designed to refute his entire thesis. Reb Yisrael immediately thought of five possible answers to the student which would have been accepted; but he, Reb Yisrael, knew the answers were flawed. So he admitted his error and ended the lecture. His response was instinctive. *He did the right thing even though he was embarrassed.* That's what Godliness should do for a Jew.

A similar pattern was evident in the life of Reb Moshe Feinstein, of blessed memory, as described in a memorial tribute by his son-in-law Rabbi Moses D. Tendler.

When he arrived in the U.S., by some error his age was recorded on his naturalization papers as eleven years older (than he actually was). When he officially turned 65 years of age, he began receiving Social Security checks. Despite many letters to the agency, checks kept coming. Each month, he would void the check and return it to the Social Security Agency, until he reached his sixty-fifth birthday eleven years later.

His accountant was not permitted to deduct charitable contributions, despite his meticulous recording of *ma'aser kesafim* (tithing his income). He feared that some recipient might be found ineligible by government regulators and then his return would be challenged causing a *chilul Hashem*.

This was the instinctive, righteous response of a *tzaddik* who was imbued with Godliness and *mitzvot*.

IV

Finally, we need Godliness for a third reason; not only to define the ethical and not only to com-

pel the ethical, but also to help us transcend the ethical.

One must remember that as important as it is to be a *mensh*, that is not the ultimate goal of Judaism. The goal of Judaism is *k'dusha*—holiness. *Menschliness* is a necessary prerequisite. You can't be holy and unethical. That is a farce, a perversion of God's Torah. *But being ethical does not necessarily mean that one is holy.*

Holiness is a state in which we elevate ourselves from our animal nature to a human nature fashioned in the image of God. This requires going beyond goodness and decency. It means getting closer to God through prayer, study, *Shabbat*, *Yom Tov*, and repentance. It means sitting at a table and not eating everything (*kashrut*) and washing and making blessings and *benching* and discussing Torah, so that the act of eating is more than biological. It becomes spiritual through detailed limits and strict structure.

Menschliness is essential. And it is an achievement. But *k'dusha* is the ultimate goal of a Jewish life. One feels it in the synagogue on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. Isn't it remarkable how we celebrate the beginning of a new year. We do not do it by partying, drinking excessively and making all kinds of raucous sounds with noisemakers. Rather, we mark the beginning of the year by repentance, prayer and charity throughout an extended period in which we reexamine our lives and resolve to do better in the year ahead than we did last year, regardless of how well we may have done last year. This is a holy response.

Such a response can be found every *Shabbat* on Friday night and during the day following. We spend our day of rest in prayer, studying Torah, enjoying meals with our family, with *z'mirot* and other religious experiences. This is all part of a life that transcends the ethical and reaches for the holy.

Moreover, one does not have to be a saint in order to experience holiness. All that is required is that a commitment be made to Torah and *mitzvot*; even a partial commitment, even one step; perhaps a decision to make one's home kosher, or a determination to come to the synagogue a little more often, or a commitment to participate in a class for Torah study. Each step that we take elevates us from our animal nature and brings us closer to our *tzelem E-lokim*—our human potential in the image of God.

Rabbi Elazar Rokeach, in his late years, travelled to Israel by ship. It was the night of Rosh Hashanah and a terrible storm blew up which threatened to sink the ship. As water filled the hold, Rabbi Rokeach's two travelling companions warned him of the possible catastrophe that lay ahead. "If so," he said, "get the shofar ready so that at the first sign of dawn we can sound it and fulfill the mitzvah of the day."

And so they did and when Rabbi Elazar sounded the shofar the winds died down and the ship was saved.

Said Rabbi Bunim of Pshischa: "Don't think that the Rabbi sounded the *shofar* to stop the storm. He wasn't involved in miraculous in-

tervention. What happened was that when he realized the danger he simply wanted to fulfill this great *mitzvah* before his death. But because of his holiness the *mitzvah* saved the ship.

As we observe this Rosh Hashanah in a storm-tossed world, with waves of terror and winds of war, with clouds of nuclear fallout and the darkness of hatred, prejudice, oppression and bestial behavior, let us resolve to be both *menshly* and Godly, religiously ethical and piously holy. Perhaps our *mitzvah* will save the ship too!