

MENSCHLINESS BEFORE GODLINESS

[A sermon delivered on Rosh Hashanah 5741 - 1980]

by Rabbi Haskel Lookstein

(There were many enthusiastic reactions to Rabbi Haskel Lookstein's sermon delivered on Rosh Hashanah this past year (5741-1980). It was felt that the message contained in that sermon deserved the widest possible distribution. Toward that end we are happy to print a revised draft of the sermon. Ed.)

The sainted Boyaner Rebbe used to make a distinction between two experiences at this season of the year: *t'shuvah* and *cheshbon ha-nefesh*. The first represents repentance for specific sins while the second is a general, spiritual stock-taking unrelated to specific wrong-doing. It is the second on which I would like to focus this Rosh Hashanah.

In taking stock of ourselves, where can we improve? If we could choose an area in which we might be able to do better this year than last, what would that area be?

you would be surprised at my choice of area for this year. It isn't *Shabbat*—although I would hope to be more of a *shomer Shabbat* this year. It isn't *kashrut*—although I could try to be more careful in that area. It isn't prayer—although I will certainly strive for greater *kavanah* in my prayers. It isn't even Torah study—although I must do more of that.

This year, however, I would like to try to become more of a *mensch*—a more moral person religiously. That, too, is a Jewish priority.

TWO PARTS TO JUDAISM

In general, Judaism is divided into *moral* norms and laws of holiness. There is the realm of religious ethics, covering such things as respect for human life, property, dignity, needs and the like. Then there is the realm of *kedusha*, covering such things as *kashrut*, *Shabbat*, prayer, sexual legislation, *tsisit*, *sha'atnez* and many other laws.

There is no intention here to denigrate the *mitzvot* of *kedusha* in favor of the *mitzvot* of morality. Both categories are divine; both are equally binding; and both are essential for the full religious Jew.

But, from both the philosophic and pedagogic points of view, one ought to come

to morality before one comes to holiness. Or, to put it another way; one cannot be a *tsaddik* without being a *mensch* first.

The psalmist understood this well.

'O Lord, who is worthy to dwell in Thy tent? Who may ascend Thy Holy mountain? He who walks simply before Thee, who does righteousness and who speaks truth in his heart.' (Psalms, 15) The psalmist understood that these human, moral attributes are the essential qualities of the religious personality. *Menschliness* comes before Godliness.

Now, this is so obvious as to be almost superfluous—almost, but not really. The author of *Mesilat Yesharim*—Rabbi Moshe Chaim Luzzato—once cautioned that the obvious needs to be repeated most often, since, because it is obvious, it is often overlooked.

RELIGIOUS "SPECIALISTS"

O' how much we have overlooked the obvious in *menschliness* before holiness.

There are so many people in our religiously resurgent Jewish world who insist on *glatt kosher* but not necessarily *glatt yosher*—who demand perfectly smooth lungs in an animal but not perfectly straight behavior in people. There are so many who are scrupulous about what goes *into* their mouth but careless about what comes *out* of their mouth. There are yeshiva boys who would never dream of chewing gum because of a possibility of a *treife* stabilizer in the gum but who had no compunctions last June about selling Regents examinations to newspaper reporters disguised as students. The Ministry of Religions in Israel, which certifies the *kashrut* of *tephillin*, *mezuzot*, restaurants, synagogues and the rabbis of the country, is now under investigation for taking huge amounts of graft and for engaging in simple thievery. And the biggest tax evasion case in the history of Israel is now being prosecuted in B'nai B'rak, involving the most meticulously religious people.

What is wrong with our priorities? Do we not understand the psalmist's simple, rhetorical question? "Who may ascend the mountain of the Lord? And who may stand in His holy place? One who has clean hands and a pure heart, who has not set his desire upon vanity nor sworn deviously."

If we do not have clean hands how can we come into *shul*? If our mouth spews forth hate, gossip, nasty comments about people

and filthy language, how can that same mouth say *Sh'ma Yisrael*? If we do not love people, how can we love God Who created them?

RELIGIOUS PRIORITIES

This set of priorities is so fundamental that the great Rabbi Isaac Luria, before he began to *daven* each morning, would say:

"I am now preparing myself to fulfill the *mitzvah* of love thy neighbor as thyself."

He understood that *menschliness* must precede Godliness.

So did that great religious and ethical genius, Rabbi Israel Salanter. he once saw a man run into *shul* just in time "catch a *kedushah*." In his zeal not to miss this holy prayer, the man inadvertently stepped on the toes of a fellow worshipper.

After *kedushah*, Rabbi Israel took the man aside and said: "Do you expect to achieve *kedushah*—holiness—at the expense of the pain of your fellow man?"

On another occasion Rabbi Israel had *yahrzeit* for his father and he was entitled to *daven* before the *Amud*. Another man, however, had *yahrzeit* for a daughter and was very anxious for the *Amud*. I can just imagine the analysis and debate that would go on in *shul* over such a crisis. Not with Rabbi Israel. He gave up the *Amud* to the other man. And when asked, "Is this *kibbud av* for your father?" he answered: "The greatest honor I can pay my father is to make his memory the instrument for the happiness of another Jew."

Rabbi Israel understood that *menschliness* precedes Godliness.

But, of course, Rabbi Israel gained this understanding from the Talmud, which affirms this system of priorities in a Tanaitic passage familiar to many.

"These are the *mitzvot* for which a person earns a reward in this world and the principle remains for the world to come: love for parents, acts of kindness, coming to the house of study morning and night, visiting the sick, escorting the deceased, concentration in prayer, bringing *shalom* between people; and the study of Torah outweighs them all."

These are the religious priorities upon which we should concentrate this year as we engage in our *cheshbon ha-nefesh*, our spiritual accounting.