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LIFE - A GIFT OF GOD

Rabbi Marc H. Tanenbaum

I. MORAL AND ETHICAL VALUES AND IDEALS IN JUDAISM

The Jewish 'way of life' has its origins in the experience of the Divine Presence in the midst of the decisive events of the Exodus and of Sinai, events which have altered the entire course of human history. The children of Israel experienced the reality of the Lord of history through His involvement in their liberation from physical oppression, persecution, massacre, and injustices as 'slaves unto Pharaoh in Egypt'. To Pharaoh, who was worshipped as a divine emperor and who was the source of law, never its servant, the Israelite slaves were regarded as chattel, 'the untouchables' of ancient Egypt.

At Sinai, the Israelites had a transforming experience of Divine Revelation as moral will which was ratified by an everlasting Covenant. Henceforth, the Israelites are perceived by God to be a 'kingdom of priests and a holy nation'. What an extraordinary Divine-human scenario! Yesterday, they were slaves, the outcasts of history; now an entire people are stamped with the dignity of priesthood and holiness, and are set on the course of history with a messianic task of redemption in society and through history until the coming of the Kingdom.

Israel's religion, Prof. David Flusser asserts, was a breakthrough in human consciousness. The God of Israel initiated a new era in the history of mankind, introducing a new concept of justice - which is the central message of His revelation - an uncompromising moral law, and an original social order to be established paradigmatically in the Holy Land of Palestine (see The Holy Year and Its Origins in the Jewish Jubilee Year, by this writer, published by the Vatican Office for the Holy Year, 1975, Vatican City) conceived in this justice. This postulate of individual and social justice was not to be limited to Israel only. The Creator of the universe postulates this justice for all His human creatures; it was incumbent on all the peoples of the world.

The concept of justice which emerges from the Hebrew Bible is not just the regiment of mighty men - the Bible does not identify God on the side of Pharaoh and his imperium! It stresses that God cares for the poor and unprotected, for the orphan, the widow and the stranger.

The basis of social justice was not to be external power and might, but the reverence of God and obedience to His moral will.

A. The Sacredness of Human Life

To understand the idea of justice in Israel, we must bear in mind the Biblical teaching that the human being is created in the image of God, that each human life is sacred and of infinite worth. In consequence, a human being cannot be treated as a chattel, or an object to be disposed of for someone's programme or project or ideology, but must be treated as a personality. Every human being is the possessor of the right-to-life, dignity and honour, and the fruits of his or her labour.

Justice is respect for the personality of others and their inalienable rights, even as injustice is the most flagrant manifestation of disrespect for the personality of others. Judaism requires that human personality be respected in every human being - in the female prisoner of war, in the delinquent, even in the criminal condemned to death. The supreme importance of the human being in the economy of the Universe is expressed in this Rabbinic teaching: 'Man (the human being) was first created as a single individual to teach the lesson that whoever destroys one life, Scripture ascribes it to him as though he had destroyed a whole world; and whoever saves one life, Scripture ascribes it to him as though he had saved a whole world' (Sanhedrin 4:5).

However, justice is more than mere abstention from injuring our fellow human beings. 'The work of justice is peace, and the effect thereof quietness and confidence forever' (Isaiah 32:17). It is a positive conception, and includes economic well-being, intellectual and spiritual growth, philanthropy, and every endeavour that will enable human beings to realize the highest and best in their natures.

The conditions for that self-realization require active efforts to bring about the final disappearance of injustice and oppression, which as represented in the Jewish High Holiday liturgy, are the goals of human history. 'And may all wickedness be consumed as a flame and may evil rule be removed from the earth', declare the Rosh Hashana prayers.

B. The Moral Duties of Tzedakah

Nothing is more fundamental in Biblical and Rabbinic ethics than the moral obligation of tzedakah, a Hebrew term which means both 'charity' and 'to do justice'. The Rabbinic sages of the Talmud declared that 'Almsgiving - i.e., aiding the poor and feeding the hungry - weighs as heavily as all the other commandments of the Torah' (Talmud Baba Batra 9a).

In proclaiming the Jubilee year, which like the Ten Commandments was ascribed to divinely-inspired legislation revealed on Mount Sinai, the Bible ordained: 'And if your brother waxes poor, and his means fail with you, then you shall uphold him: as a stranger and a settler shall he live with you' (Leviticus 25:35). The Rabbis observe that the expression that 'Your brother may live with you' means that it is our personal and communal duty to see to it that our fellow human beings do

not die of starvation. Though the person be a 'stranger' or 'an alien settler', he (or she) is to be included in the term 'your brother' and is to be treated in a brotherly and compassionate manner.

To underscore the supreme virtue of humanitarian aid to the needy in the hierarchy of Jewish moral and spiritual values, the Rabbinic sages regarded such compassionate care of man as an act worthy of association with Divinity itself: 'God says to Israel, "My sons whenever you give sustenance to the poor, I impute it to you as though you gave sustenance to me, for it says, 'Command the children of Israel... my bread for for my sacrifices... shall ye observe unto me. Does, then, God eat and drink? No, but whenever you give food to the poor, God accounts it to you as if you gave food to Him'" (Numbers Rabbah XXVIII: 2).

The virtue of such care for the poor and hungry is depicted in Jewish tradition as the salient attribute of the 'founding father' of Judaism, the Patriarch Abraham, who is called the archetype of the 'Pharisee of love'. In a midrashic commentary that begins with the phrases, 'Let your house be open; let the poor be members of your household. Let a man's house be open to the north and to the south, and to the east and to the west', the Rabbis describe the humanitarianism of Abraham:

He went out and wandered about, and when he found wayfarers, he brought them to his house, and he gave wheaten bread to him whose wont it was not to eat wheaten bread, and so with meat and wine. And not only this, but he built large inns on the roads, and put food and drink within them, and all came and ate and drank and blessed God. Therefore, quiet of spirit was granted to him, and all that the mouth of man can ask for was found in his house /Abot de Rabbi Nathan, VII: 17a,b/

Elsewhere the Talmud admonishes: 'He who has no pity upon his fellow creatures is assuredly not of the seed of Abraham our father' (Bezah 32b).

In Jewish communities, from Biblical times through the present, there was much free and generous giving of alms to all who asked - even to deceivers' - and there was also much systematic and careful relief through established institutions. Each Jewish community boasted of a tamhui (public kitchen) from which the poor received two meals daily. There was also the kupah (alms box) for the disbursement of benevolent funds on Sabbath eve to provide three meals for Sabbath (Mishnah Peah VIII: 7). Additional care was exercised in respect of the itinerant poor, who were provided with a loaf of bread which sufficed for two meals, and who were also entitled to the cost of lodging.

The Biblical laws of charity in Palestine relating to 'gleaning' the 'forgotten sheaf' and 'the corner of the field', implied the underlying idea that national territory belongs to the public as a whole. In accordance with Jewish law, landowners used to lay open fences surrounding their fields and vineyards, and during certain hours of the day, the needy were allowed to eat from the produce of the harvest. There was also a three-yearly allocation of Maaser Ani (poor man's tithe) from the threshing floor.

Thus, there arose the charitable traditions and institutions of the Jewish people which have remained a religious-communal characteristic ever since. These customs of charity, which were foreign to the pagan frame of mind of the Greeks and Romans, also had an abiding impact on the nature of the Christian 'caritas'.

C. Peace and War

And finally, the stability, as well as the happiness of a community, can only be assured when it rests upon a foundation of peace. In the absence of peace there can be neither prosperity nor well-being. 'Peace is equal in worth to everything', declare the Rabbis (Sifra), and they add: 'Beloved is peace since the benedictions only conclude with the hope of peace', thus teaching that the blessings even of the High Priest are of no avail unless accompanied by peace (Numbers Rabbah 11:7).

While the Prophets of Israel and the Rabbis believed that God intended the nations to be at peace with one another, war was not prohibited. Jewish ethics would admit the duty to defend the higher values in human life by war if necessary. If Isaiah or Jeremiah had thought that yielding to the foreign invader would mean destruction to the religion or the people they valued, they would have urged resistance, with the same vigour that they demanded constantly the practice of righteousness in obedience to God's will. All the facts of Biblical and post-Biblical Judaism taken together lead to the conclusion that the ethical judgement on war, according to Judaism, is that it must be eradicated to make human life conform to the Divine rule, that those guilty of causing it commit a crime against humanity and a sin against God. However, they are justified who, to defend the higher values in human life, resist, if necessary by war, an attack on them. The justification would extend to a nation's defence of its liberty. The spiritual values in the life of a nation, which include its historic distinctiveness, may justify it, when attacked or threatened, to engage in war to save its independent existence. (See Dr Israel Mattuck in his study, Jewish Ethics, particularly his chapter on 'The Judgement on War'.)

II. SOME IMPLICATIONS FOR CHRISTIANS AND JEWS

What are the implications of these facts for Christians and Jews today?

It is evident that we live in an age of violence and of terror. There is not a continent on the globe that is not despoiled by terror and violence, by barbarism and by a growing callousness to human suffering and pain and threat to human existence. At the centre of the human crisis is the fundamental depreciation of the meaning and value of human life. In theological terms, the Biblical affirmation that each human life is created in the sacred image of God and is therefore of ultimate worth and preciousness is being battered from every side.

It is my conviction that this erosion in the belief in the sanctity of human life is one of the decisive black legacies bequeathed by Nazi Germany to mankind. By and large, with rare exception, the

overwhelming majority of citizens of the Western world, and their dominant institutions have avoided confronting the magnitude of evil incarnate in the Nazi Holocaust, and have therefore failed to learn how to cope with forces and structures of dehumanization that are being replicated in many parts of the globe.

The Nazi campaign against the Jewish people was unique and in many ways unprecedented. Yet the Nazi trauma must not be seen as 'a Jewish obsession', for the fateful meaning of the Holocaust is of ultimate importance to the future capacity of mankind to understand itself and to acquire the resources to cope with the challenges to its survival. (See the discussion of Max Weber's 'secularization, disenchantment of the world, and rationalization' as root causes for undermining all moral norms in a bureaucratized society in my Religious Values in an Age of Violence, pp. 46/52.)

Bleak as are the prospects for countering these forces of dehumanization in the world, 'we need not complete the task', as Rabbi Tarphon admonished, 'but neither are we free to desist therefrom'. In concert, if we are to learn from the Nazi Holocaust and not be doomed to allow its repetition, we must attempt at the very least the following:

First, Christians and Jews should engage in a massive, concerted effort to establish a 'new humanism' on a global basis that seeks to restore the Biblical value of the infinite worth and preciousness of each human life that must be appreciated as an end itself and never as an object of somebody else's project, programme, ideology, or revolution.

Second, Christians and Jews must help engender a national and international attitude of scorn and contempt for those who use violence or who advocate the use of violence. We must work to deromanticize all appeals to use violence and terrorism as a means of liberation or of institutionalized oppression, since from a moral standpoint no ends can justify such anti-human means.

Third, Christians and Jews must work to curtail the resort to inflammatory propaganda, especially from international forums which have psychological impact on an international scale. As Prof. Gordon Allport of Harvard University demonstrated in his monumental study, The Nature of Prejudice, there is an inevitable progression from 'verbal aggression to violence, from rumour to riot, from gossip to genocide'.

Fourth, Christians and Jews must work toward educational development and communication among peoples to reduce the abrasive effects of 'differences'. Differences, as we have learned in the pluralistic experience of the Western world, can be a source of enrichment rather than a threat.

Fifth, Christians and Jews should engage in an urgent and sustained intellectual and educational effort to elaborate a theology and ideology of pluralism which presupposes the right of each religious, racial, and ethnic group to define itself in its own terms and to be accepted unconditionally by its own self-definition. Group narcissism, as Dr Erich Fromm observes, arouses intense hostility between groups, and 'is one of

the most important sources of human aggression'. In helping establish a pluralistic world-view, Christians and Jews have a decisive contribution to make to the building of the ideological foundations without which a stable world community cannot come into being.

Sixth, Christians and Jews should work toward making the economy of each nation as self-sufficient and stable as possible in the sense of not perpetually requiring relief support. Inextricably linked with such an effort is the control of the arms race on an international scale, and a rational re-ordering of priorities that allows for adequate defence and yet at the same time reallocates some of the billions wasted on arms that should be applied to the crying needs of the hungry, the diseased and the homeless.

Central in such efforts must be the pressing need to raise human consciousness in an effective international effort to halt the irrational proliferation of nuclear weaponry and to bring about serious sustained actions for universal simultaneous disarmament. There is no higher priority for human survival at this moment in human history.

And finally, Christians and Jews need to recognize the fundamental interdependence of all human rights and collaborate vigorously to assure that every nation - East and West, North and South - implement fully their commitments to the Universal Declaration on Human Rights.

In particular, Christians and Jews should work for the completion of the judicial instrumentalities called for by Article 6 of the Genocide convention in the form of an international penal tribunal for trying those who are accused of genocide attempts anywhere in the world.

'The salvation of mankind', Alexander Solzhenitzyn reminds us, 'will depend on everyone becoming concerned about the welfare of everybody everywhere'.