


Trumah

Faith, Modern Perceptions, and Judaism's Concepts

ne of the biggest problems we have today is, how can we maintain faith in our modern secular age? What is it that causes so many of our young people especially to lose faith, and what causes some of them all of a sudden to find faith?

According to modern thinkers, modern man has developed a unique perception of himself and the world in which he lives. This modern perception is not wholly in consonance with Jewish conceptions. It is also not wholly at variance with them either. According to Charles Taylor and agreed to by most thinkers, the modern consciousness is composed of three parts: inwardness; the affirmation of life's ordinary experiences, eating, drinking, talking, sex, etc.; and expressiveness. Inwardness means that we should only be called upon to do those things that we want to do. We are the measure of all morality. We do things and should only be called upon to do things because they feel good to us. We are totally inner directed and not outer directed at all. Our values spring from ourselves. They are not imposed from without. Of course, this concept, if carried to the extreme, can become ludicrous. For example, we do not feel like getting up in the middle of the night to take care of the baby, but we still have to if we are responsible human beings, even though we do not want to. We do not feel like getting up in the morning to go to our job, but we still have to if we want a paycheck.

Judaism says that man is not the measure of all things. Our values do not spring totally from within ourselves. They, of course, do conform to our human nature because the same G-d Who created our values also created us, but what we ought to do is not always what we want to do. There is a problem, though, and this problem is, how can you force values on people who do not feel these values? That's why Judaism has always stressed education. The real purpose of Jewish education is not to teach us Hebrew or ceremonies or text. They are only means to an end. The purpose of Jewish education is to teach us to want to do what we ought to do. That's why it is so important that children at an early age and up through college get an intensive Jewish education, because it is only through an intensive Jewish education that our children can learn and actually assimilate.

late in their most inner being the idea that what they want to do is what they ought to do.

The *Torah* recognizes, though, that there is a problem. When people are raised in an environment foreign to Judaism's values, it is very difficult for them to assume Judaism's values when they come back to the Jewish people. This is the concept of *Tinok Sheneeshbah*. This concept states that if a Jewish child is captured by foreigners and raised in a non-Jewish environment even when he is returned to the Jewish fold, he cannot be expected to keep Jewish practices. They are too foreign to him. What he ought to do and what he wants to do are too far apart. This, of course, applies to the experiences of Soviet Jewry who were denied all access to Jewish learning and experiences and, if the truth be told, this applies to most American Jewry, too.

The way that Judaism solves the problem of inwardness is through intensive Jewish learning, not just for children but for adults, too. In those families where there is Jewish observance but no Jewish learning, it is highly unlikely that the children in these families will grow up keeping the observances of their parents, but if there is Jewish learning as well as observance then the likelihood that the children will continue the observances of the parents is very great. It is Jewish learning which allows us to confront the modern problem of inwardness and to solve it successfully.

The second unique perception that modern man has about himself is his affirmation of life's ordinary experiences, eating, drinking, talking, sex, etc. This is something new for the western world. In the Middle Ages, traditional Christianity denigrated the natural functions of man and considered them, at best, concessions of the flesh. It gave them no worth whatsoever and considered the holy life, a life directed solely to the mystical and to the spiritual, to prayer and contemplation. Anyone who would think of taking care of his body would be considered decidedly non-spiritual, and lice were considered the true companion of a holy man.

Judaism never accepted that philosophy. We have always believed that we can only achieve holiness by going through the physical, that we can only achieve holiness if we sanctify eating, drinking, talking, sex, etc. We, however, have not considered these activities as goals in themselves but as necessary means in order to reach spirituality. We have always had

to bathe for the Sabbath, put on our finest clothes, eat the best food, engage in sparkling conversation at the dinner table, and Friday night has always been designated as especially propitious for couples to get together. The attainment of spirituality always went through the physical. Modern man, however, has completely denigrated the spiritual and has said that man can be totally happy by just concentrating on the physical. This, of course, has led to great excesses which have been harmful to man. We can go along with the modern conception of the affirmation of life's ordinary experiences as long as they are directed toward a spiritual goal. *Shabbat* is our antidote to the materialism of our day. We heartily embrace the ordinary experiences of life but we say they must be directed toward a spiritual goal. There is nothing wrong with wealth as long as the person who acquires wealth gives charity and is concerned with his community and the fate of world Jewry. There is nothing wrong with material things as long as they are used to attain higher spiritual goals. Wealth for wealth's sake along or concentrating on material things just for material things is anathema to Judaism.

The third unique perception which modern man has about himself is the necessity to express himself. Self-expression, the development of one's talents above all else is considered the highest form of morality. Even if it means deserting your family and children to find yourself and to pursue your talents, you must do so, modern man is urged. Modern man also delights in letting everything hang out, even the most sordid details about his personal life. Somehow we feel that this form of self-abasement is not only therapeutic but good for the world. Prominent people publicize autobiographies in which they reveal all sorts of sordid details of their lives which can only bring disrepute upon them. People go on TV and say all sorts of things about themselves and their spouses which may make good entertainment but which are completely degrading.

Judaism does not believe in this type of self-expression. We do not even believe in public confession. On *Yom Kippur* when we confess our sins, we confess them in the plural and everybody says them together. We are not supposed to express our sins in public. We have to ask forgiveness from the people against whom we have sinned but our sins against private individuals may not be made public for everyone to hear unless we com-

mitted them in public. When Micah said, “You are to humbly walk before the Lord,” what that word “humbly” means in Hebrew is to show restraint not only in our actions but also in our self-expression. Any type of expression which is self-degrading or which degrades others is to be abhorred and certainly expression which causes us to desert our spouse and family is abhorred by Judaism. Judaism believes in free speech especially within families but there are limits. If our desire to express our thoughts and words or our talents and actions are going to destroy our families or our institutions, we are not and should not strive to express them.

In the *Torah* portion *Terumah* we learn how we are commanded to build a Tabernacle so that “G-d will dwell in us.” The purpose of the Tabernacle was not so that G-d should dwell in it but so that G-d should dwell in us. We built the Tabernacle with the finest materials in order to teach us that we can use the ordinary things of life and make them holy, that in order to arrive at the spiritual we must go through the physical, not deny the physical. In the holy part of the Tabernacle there were three things. There was a *menorah* which had to be beaten from one piece. You could not take different pieces of gold and solder them together to make the *menorah*. The *menorah* had to be made from one piece. The *menorah*, the rabbis teach us, was the symbol of Jewish learning. The purpose of Jewish learning was to make us whole and one. It was to make us want to do what we ought to do. In all aspects of our life, the *menorah* was to bring home to us this lesson.

Also in the holy part of the Tabernacle there was a table which held the showbread. This table contained 12 loaves of bread corresponding to the tribes of Israel. Each *Shabbat* new bread was placed in two rows and left there for the next *Shabbat*. This was to affirm that the ordinary things of life are important and can lead to holiness if they are directed toward the *Shabbat*. To emphasize this point, the priests ate this bread in a state of holiness after it was removed from the table. *Shabbat* is what sanctifies the ordinary aspects of life and raises them to a high level of holiness.

The third thing that was in the holy part of the Tabernacle was the incense altar. The incense altar is not dealt with in the *Torah* portion *Terumah* but is dealt with at the end of the *Torah* portion *Tetzaveh*. After all the descriptions of the Tabernacle with its curtains and bars and bolts have

been described in the *Torah* portion *Terumah* and after all the garments of the high priest and priests and the initiation ceremonies of the priests and high priest have been described in the *Torah* portion *Tetzaveh*, then we learn about the incense altar. Why was this incense altar placed at the very end of the *Torah* portion *Tetzaveh* when it should have been placed right by the menorah and table where the appurtenances of the holy part of the Tabernacle are described? The answer is that this incense altar was a symbol of fervent and contrite prayer. Incense is a symbol in Judaism of self-expressiveness. We learn about this incense altar last to teach us that our expressiveness should never destroy our institutions or homes. We can criticize them, we can try to improve them, but we should never express ourselves in such a way that we bring disgrace upon ourselves or degrade or mock our own institutions. The Hebrew word for "incense" is "*Ketores*." It stands for *Kedusha* (holiness), *Tahara* (purity), *Rachameen* (pity), and *Tikvah* (hope). Our expressiveness should always result in all these things, especially hope.

In the holy of holies above the *Ten Commandments* the *Torah* tells us that there was an ark cover composed of two cherubim. The rabbis say that they had the faces of a boy and a girl. The Jewish people could always tell when the Jewish people were doing well because on the pilgrim holidays, the curtain between the holy of holies was opened and the people could see these two children. If they were in a warm embrace, then things were going right. If, on the other hand, things were not going well, then their faces were turned away from each other and smoke came up between them.

If we see our children turning away from each other and the principles of Judaism, it is because their faith has been weakened. They do not know that Judaism is compatible with modern man's unique conceptions of himself. Judaism does not agree with the extreme views of some of these perceptions, but it is not incompatible with them. Jewish children will seek each other and warmly embrace Judaism if they realize that inwardness and Judaism are not incompatible as long as there is Jewish learning, if they realize that Judaism has always sanctified the ordinary things of life as long as they are directed toward a spiritual goal, and that Judaism has always practiced and encouraged expressiveness as long as it does not destroy the Jewish home. Let us hope and pray that our young people es-

pecially will realize this so that their Jewish faith will be strengthened in the years ahead and many more of our young people will flock to it.