

THE RELIGIOUS NATURE OF GOLF

RABBI DR. HERBERT M. BAUMGARD,
BETH AM, 1967

A COLLEAGUE OF MINE, RABBI ISRAEL GERBER, HAS SUGGESTED THAT GOLF IS A GAME WITH MANY SPIRITUAL-LIKE ASPECTS. I AM INCLINED TO AGREE WITH HIM AND FOR THE FOLLOWING REASONS. WE MIGHT SAY THAT A MAN IS RELIGIOUS IF HE IS PENITENT FOR HIS PAST ACTIONS, IF HE HAS FAITH THAT DEVOTED EFFORT WILL BE REWARDED, AND IF HE HAS CONCERN FOR HIS FELLOW MAN. IN MY OPINION, THE PERSON WHO SUBJECTS HIMSELF TO THE DISCIPLINE OF GOLF IS DEVELOPING HABITS AND ATTITUDES WHICH COULD HELP MAKE HIM INTO A MORE RELIGIOUS PERSON.

SURELY ALL AGREE THAT THE RELIGIOUS PERSON MUST BE SINCERELY REPENTANT. HE MUST ADMIT TO HIMSELF THAT HE HAS NOT DONE AS WELL AS HE MIGHT, AND HE MUST COMMIT HIMSELF TO DOING BETTER IN THE FUTURE. I MUST ADMIT THAT I HAVE NEVER SEEN SUCH SELF-CONDEMNATION AND SUCH BREAST-BEATING AS I HAVE SEEN ON THE GOLF COURSE! WHY, SOME OF THE PLAYERS CAN BE SEEN PERFORMING SPONTANEOUS DANCES OF ANGUISH IN THEIR ACUTE UNHAPPINESS OVER THEIR MISDEEDS. THE PAIN WRITTEN ON THEIR FACES, AND THE FREQUENT INVOKING OF THE NAME OF GOD IN THESE PENITENT OUTBURSTS CAN HARDLY BE MATCHED IN THE SYNAGOGUE EVEN ON YOM KIPPUR. ANGER WITH ONESELF FOR NOT DOING AS WELL AS ONE MIGHT HAS A DEEP SPIRITUAL SIGNIFICANCE PROVIDED, OF COURSE, THAT SUCH ANGER IS USED CONSTRUCTIVELY. IT IS QUITE POSSIBLE THAT THE FREQUENT EXPERIENCE OF THIS MOOD OF SELF-EVALUATION CAN BE OF GREAT SPIRITUAL SIGNIFICANCE TO OUR GOLFERS IF THEY CAN APPLY THE SAME TECHNIQUE TO THEIR DEEDS IN THE BROADER WORLD THAT LIES BEYOND THE GOLF COURSE.

IT IS ALSO TRUE THAT ONE OFTEN WITNESSES THE DEMONSTRATION OF GREAT COMPASSION AND CONCERN FOR ONE'S FELLOW MAN ON THE GOLF COURSE. IN A FOURSOME WHERE TWO TWO-MAN TEAMS ARE PLAYING EACH OTHER, I HAVE SEEN A MAN FROM TEAM "X" HIT THE BALL IN THE

WATER AND A MAN FROM THE OPPOSING TEAM OFFER THE MOST SOLICITIOUS SYMPATHY. FURTHER, THE PENITENCE OF THE MAN WHO HIT THE BALL INTO THE WATER SEEMS TO BE MORE THAN SHARED BY HIS PARTNER WHO ASSISTS THE ERRANT PLAYER IN A SHOW OF MOURNING REMINISCENT OF "SHIVAH". IN OTHER SITUATIONS, I HAVE SEEN PLAYERS ON OPPOSING TEAMS ACTUALLY INSTRUCTING EACH OTHER IN THE "HALACHAH", IN THE WAY TO GO, IN THE WAY TO PERFORM CORRECTLY. SUCH WILLINGNESS TO HELP ON THE PART OF ALL CONCERNED IS NOT SO OFTEN DEMONSTRATED IN OTHER CHANNELS OF HUMAN ACTIVITY. IT IS HEART-WARMING TO SEE THAT THE GOLFER EXPERIENCING DIFFICULTY RECEIVES IMMEDIATE ADVICE AND COACHING FROM SO MANY DIFFERENT SOURCES. IN OTHER AREAS OF LIFE THE PERSON IN DIFFICULTY MAY BE COMPLETELY IGNORED AND LEFT FLOUNDERING ON HIS OWN. THE HEIGHT OF CHARITABLENESS, HOWEVER, IS ACHIEVED WHEN THE MEMBERS OF AN OPPOSING GOLF TEAM WILL ACTUALLY FREELY CONCEDE TO THE COMPETITIVE PLAYER A PUTT OF TWO INCHES, OR THEY WILL PERMIT A COMPETING PLAYER TO STOP COUNTING STROKES AFTER A MAXIMUM OF 15 ON ANY PARTICULAR HOLE. WHEN YOU COMPARE THIS TO THE ATTITUDE IN THE BUSINESS WORLD OF "DOG-EAT-DOG", YOU CAN SEE THAT WE CAN ALL LEARN FROM THE GRACIOUSNESS OF PEOPLE WHO PLAY GOLF.

THUS FAR, WE HAVE INDICATED THAT MOST GOLFERS PRACTICE PENITENCE OR SELF-CONDEMNATION AND THEY EXHIBIT CHARITY OR CONCERN FOR THEIR FELLOW GOLFERS. A THIRD QUALITY OF THE GOLFER IS WHAT CONNECTS THE GAME SO CLOSELY TO THE RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE. I HAVE NEVER SEEN SUCH FAITH AS I HAVE SEEN AMONGST GOLFERS. FAITH HAS BEEN DEFINED AS THE WILLINGNESS TO BELIEVE SOMETHING WHEN COMPLETE PROOF IS NOT AVAILABLE FOR DEMONSTRATING ITS TRUTH. GOLFERS CONTINUE TO HAVE FAITH THAT THEY CAN PLAY WELL, IN SPITE OF OVERWHELMING EVIDENCE TO THE CONTRARY. ON THE BILTMORE GOLF COURSE IN CORAL GABLES, FOR EXAMPLE, THERE IS ONE HOLE WITH A WIDE RIVER ABOUT SIXTY YARDS WIDE (SOME GOLFERS CALL IT AN OCEAN) SEPARATING THE GOLFER FROM THE FAIRWAY FURTHER DOWN. EVEN AS THE GOLFER GETS SET TO HIT HIS SHOT ACROSS THE WATER, A MAN, HIRED BY THE GOLF COURSE AND EQUIPPED WITH AQUA-LUNGS, DIVES DOWN INTO THE WATER PREPARED TO CATCH THE

BALL WHEN IT GOES UNDER. IN SPITE OF THE PRESENCE OF THIS SATANIC PERSON, PLACED THERE BY THE OWNERS OF THE GOLF COURSE TO TANTALIZE, AND TO GOAD, THE GOLFER, IN A SHOW OF SUPREME CONFIDENCE, UNDERTAKES HIS SWING, HOPING AGAINST HOPE THAT HE WILL OVERCOME THE EVIL TEMPTATION TO HIT THE BALL INTO THE WATER.

EVEN IF A GOLFER REQUIRES 120 STROKES TODAY, HE SECRETLY BELIEVES THAT HE CAN DO 80 NEXT WEEK. HE GOES HOME TO DREAM AND TO PRAY THAT HE WILL MIRACULOUSLY IMPROVE IN THE NEXT FEW DAYS. AS WE ALL KNOW, HOWEVER, IN JUDAISM, WORK IS AN ESSENTIAL PART OF FAITH. FAITH IS NOT VALID IF IT IS NOT ACCOMPANIED BY GREAT EFFORT ON THE PART OF THE PERSON HIMSELF TO HELP IN THE ATTAINMENT OF HIS GOAL. IN THIS SENSE, MOST REGULAR GOLFERS, DEMONSTRATE THE MOST RELIGIOUS DEVOTION. THEY PRACTICE FOR HOURS, HOLDING THE LEFT SHOULDER DOWN, KEEPING THE LEFT FOOT FIRM. THEY WILL CONCENTRATE FOR HUNDREDS OF SWINGS ON BREAKING THE WRISTS AT THE RIGHT TIME, ON KEEPING THE HEAD DOWN, ON FOLLOWING THROUGH IN THE DIRECTION OF THE HOLE. ALL OF THIS PRACTICE IS IN THE HOPE OF SELF-IMPROVEMENT, HOW NOBLE A GOAL! IF EACH OF US COULD BE SO STUDIOUS AND CONCERNED ABOUT SELF-IMPROVEMENT IN OTHER PHASES OF OUR LIFE HOW WONDERFUL A WORLD THIS WOULD BE! FOR THIS REASON, I THINK THE GOLFER CAN HELP US IN OUR RELIGIOUS DEVELOPMENT. IF ONLY HE CAN TEACH US TO CARRY OVER THESE TECHNIQUES FROM THE GOLF COURSE AND TO APPLY THEM TO OUR EVERYDAY PROBLEMS.

FOR THE PESSIMIST, THE GOLFER HAS A RELIGIOUS ANSWER, WORK AND FAITH. IF HE HAS HIT THE BALL DOWN THE BANK OF THE RIVER, THE GOLFER IS NOT AFRAID. IN HIS MIND HE RECITES THE 23RD PSALM, "THOU LEADEST ME BESIDE THE STILL WATERS", AND AGAIN HE SAYS, AS HE CLIMBS DOWN THE BANK TO ATTEMPT A MOST DIFFICULT SHOT, "THOUGH I WALK THROUGH THE VALLEY.....I SHALL FEAR NO EVIL". LET ME ASSURE YOU, DEAR FRIENDS, THAT FOR ALL OF HIS COURAGE AND PERSISTENCE, THE GOLFER IS FREQUENTLY REWARDED. FROM

THE MIDST OF DEFEAT HE OFTEN WRESTS VICTORY, AND HE LEARNS FIRST HAND THAT FAITH IS NOT ALWAYS UNFULFILLED. BECAUSE GOLF IS TRULY SUCH A DEMANDING AND DIFFICULT GAME, THE GOLFER LEARNS THAT LIFE CAN NEVER BE ALL GOOD OR ALL BAD, AND LIKE THE JEW WHO EATS MAROR AND CHAROSES ON PASSOVER, THE BITTER AND THE SWEET TOGETHER, SO THE GOLFER LEARNS THAT TO LIVE AT ALL IS TO EXPERIENCE "UPS" AND "DOWNS". THE GOLFER GETS AN EXCELLENT TRAINING IN ACCEPTING ALL VARIETIES OF HUMAN EXPERIENCE.

WHEN THE PROPHET MICAH INFORMED THE HEBREWS 2800 YEARS AGO AS TO WHAT GOD REQUIRED OF MAN, HE SAID THAT ONE OF THE THREE MAJOR VIRTUES WAS HUMILITY. IN ONE STROKE THE MIGHTY ARE BROUGHT LOW, AND THE LOWLY CAN BE RAISED FROM THE DUST. NO MAN CAN PLAY GOLF REGULARLY AND CONTINUE TO BE AS ARROGANT AS HE MIGHT HAVE BEEN. HE SOON LEARNS THAT HE IS LESS THAN OMNIPOTENT AND NOT BEYOND ERROR. INDEED, IN THE JOINT HUMILIATION THAT GOLF ADMINISTERS TO ALL WHO PLAY IT, THERE IS DERIVED A COMRADERY AND FELLOWSHIP WHICH IS ONE OF THE POSITIVE BY-PRODUCTS OF THE GAME. HOW WONDERFUL IT WOULD BE, IF WE COULD EXPERIENCE SOME OF THIS SAME KIND OF COMRADERY IN THE OTHER GAMES WE PLAY IN LIFE, IN THE GAME OF THE MARKET PLACE, FOR EXAMPLE, THE GAME OF BUYING AND SELLING. THE PROBLEM IN THE BUSINESS WORLD IS THAT SOME OF US, BY CHANCE OR OTHERWISE, SUCCEED SO WELL THAT WE BECOME CONVINCED OF OUR SUPERIORITY. THE BUSINESS WORLD IS NOT SO RELIGIOUSLY ORIENTED AS A GAME OF GOLF, FOR IT IS DECEPTIVE AND CONCEALS FROM US THE TRUTH THAT GOLF MAKES CLEAR, ~~THE~~ TRUTH THAT BEFORE THE LAWS OF NATURE, WE ARE ALL SUBJECT TO ERROR AND TO THE FALL. THERE IS SOMETHING ABOUT THIS AWARENESS THAT MAKES FOR BROTHERHOOD AND HUMILITY.

FINALLY, GOLF IS LIKE RELIGION, IN THAT IT HAS ITS OWN SET OF RITUALS, AND ITS DEVOTEES ARE PIOUS IN THE OBSERVANCE OF THESE RITUALS. FOR EXAMPLE, JUDAISM TEACHES THAT IF YOU ARE TO DEVELOP THE ART OF PRAYER, YOU MUST WORK AT IT REGULARLY, AT

LEAST ONCE A WEEK, ON THE SABBATH, ESPECIALLY. GOLF REQUIRES THE SAME DISCIPLINE OF ITS FOLLOWERS, AND USUALLY ON THE SABBATH THE GOLFER MAKES HIS WAY TO THE COURSE WHICH IS THE "SANCTUARY" OF THE GOLFER. THE VALUE OF A RITUAL IS THAT IT HELPS TO TRAIN YOU TOWARDS A DESIRED GOAL. GOLFERS LEARN TO APPRECIATE THE VALUE OF SOMETHING REPEATED OVER AND OVER. FOR EXAMPLE, THE GOLFERS ARE ENCOURAGED TO WIGGLE THEIR CLUB BACKWARDS AND FORWARDS BEFORE THEY HIT THE BALL. THIS LITTLE GESTURE MAY MEAN NOTHING TO THE NON-GOLFER BUT A PIOUS GOLFER ALWAYS PERFORMS THIS RITUAL. GOLFERS HAVE A RITUAL WITH RESPECT TO DRESS ALSO. THEY ALL WEAR A "YARMULKA" OF SOME KIND, A LITTLE HAT WITH A BRIM, A CUSTOM WHICH AS SOME OF YOU KNOW, ORIGINATED IN JUDAISM IN THE WARM WEATHER COUNTRIES WHERE THE DIETY COULD NOT BE WORSHIPPED WITHOUT HEAD COVERING IN THE HOT SUN.

GOLFERS ALSO FREQUENTLY PARTICIPATE IN A KIND OF "ONEG SHABBAT" THAT FOLLOWS THE GAME. THEY GATHER TOGETHER IN THE CLUBHOUSE, OR IN THE "19TH HOLE LOUNGE" TO SHARE THEIR JOY OR GRIEF, AND THE OCCASION IS USUALLY MARKED BY THE PARTAKING OF WINE OR SOME OTHER LIQUID AFTER THE MANNER OF A "KIDDUSH". WE CAN, THEN, FAIRLY CONCLUDE THAT GOLF PROVIDES AN EXCELLENT TRAINING GROUND FOR THE DEVELOPMENT OF THAT KIND OF DISCIPLINE AND HABIT WHICH IS NECESSARY FOR RELIGIOUS LIVING. IT OFFERS TRAINING IN THE PROCESS OF REPENTENCE, TRAINING IN SHARING THE TRIALS AND TRIBULATIONS OF YOUR NEIGHBOR, AND ABOVE ALL, IT IS A CLASSIC DEMONSTRATION OF THE POWER OF FAITH AND THE STRUGGLE FOR SELF-IMPROVEMENT. SURELY, IF OUR GOLFERS WILL BRING THESE VIRTUES TO THE BATTLEGROUND OF LIFE, THEN OUR SOCIETY AND OUR WORLD IS SAVED.