

1969

“Loving What Is Close — The Problem of over-reaching”

RABBI DR. HERBERT M. BAUMGARD

BETH AM

MIAMI, FLORIDA

Dr. J. Robert Oppenheimer, head of the Los Alamos project that produced the atomic bomb, regretted, after the dropping of the bomb on Hiroshima, that he had been helpful in producing this awesome weapon. When military leaders asked Oppenheimer to help produce the more powerful hydrogen bomb, Oppenheimer was reluctant to do so. As a consequence, a special investigating committee declared him a questionable security risk who could no longer participate in top level discussions. This attack on his patriotism, after he had worked the miracle of producing the atomic bomb, was a shattering blow to Oppenheimer. In the investigation, Oppenheimer's loyalty to his life-long friends had been attacked, because some of them had flirted with Communism in their youth. Particularly was Oppenheimer criticized for meeting with a former secretary who was dying of cancer. The fact that she was emotionally desperate because of her illness and needed every reassurance she could attract was of no consequence to Oppenheimer's accusers. The secretary, who later took her own life, could not be befriended, even on the most elementary human level, because she had been a Communist.

Oppenheimer lost his case before the investigating body, but he emerged as a hero of sorts to most elements of the scientific community who, like him, feared the production of a more devastating weapon. Invited to speak at the University of California after the trial, Oppenheimer said, *“Each of us, knowing his limitations, knowing the evils of superficiality and the terrors of fatigue, will have to cling to what is close to him . . . to his friends and his tradition, to love, lest he be dissolved in a universal confusion and know nothing and love nothing”*. Apparently, Oppenheimer was afraid that the ideals of human decency would be lost in the struggle for bigger bombs. He feared that he was watching the development of a regimented class of scientists who were asked to respond as intellectual robots to the demands of the military and national security agencies.

In the investigation of Oppenheimer, two Jews appeared as the main

antagonists. Opposing Oppenheimer was Dr. Edward Teller, now known as the "father of the hydrogen bomb." Teller testified that if scientists could produce the hydrogen bomb, they had the obligation to do it. "Moreover," said Teller, "the Russians will surely develop the hydrogen bomb and America had better have it first." One of the members of the investigating committee asked Teller this question, "Dr. Teller, do you mean to say that you believe that man has no alternative but to produce the bomb, which, if used, will probably destroy him?" Dr. Teller replied in the affirmative.

The problem on which Drs. Oppenheimer and Teller took opposing sides is as old as man himself. Should man press on to greater knowledge and power even if such knowledge might destroy him? The question is posed in the Biblical myth of the Tower of Babel. In the myth, a group of men tried to build a tower which reached into Heaven itself, presumably, to gain certain powers hitherto reserved for God. The symbolic story draws the moral that there are certain powers that men cannot handle properly, and the gaining of these powers only confuses men and leads to anarchy. Was Oppenheimer saying the same thing when he said at the University of California, "Each of us, knowing his limitations, knowing the evils of superficiality, and the terrors of fatigue, will have to cling to what is close to him, to what he knows, to what he can do, to his friends and his tradition, to love, lest he be dissolved in a universal confusion, and know nothing and love nothing". The biblical myth concludes that the builders of the tower were no longer able to understand each other's language. In the light of the teaching of the myth, we might well ask, "Has the manufacture of the hydrogen bomb brought the nations closer together, or has it made the nations even more suspicious and warlike? Has the manufacture of the bigger bomb made the individual citizens of the world happier, or have they become even more afraid, more melancholy, more desperate?"

The Happiness Beyond

It seems to me that the ancient story of the Tower of Babel has a second and more profound teaching. I think the authors were trying to demonstrate that happiness lies not in conquering that which is distant but in mastering that which is close at hand. A few weeks ago, a man, who happened to be visiting Miami, found his way to my office. He was a man unable to relate well to his wife and children. His sadness hung around him like a dark cloud. "The world is a terrible place", this man told me. "The only thing that seems exciting", he said, "is news of the trip to the Moon". Then, he added, "I think the only thing that would please me would be a trip to Africa. That's my great dream". This man is like so many people we all know. They are attracted to what is beyond the horizon, perhaps, because what is near is too overwhelming for them. Still,

Dr. Oppenheimer said, "Each of us will have to cling to his friends and his tradition, to love, lest he be dissolved in a universal confusion . . .".

The belief that distant things will bring happiness is so often frustrated and denied. Some people have been talking about the Moon landing as the beginning of a new frontier that will solve many of the earth's present problems; but scientists like C. P. Snow of England contend that we are simply wasting a great deal of money on the Moon effort. Dr. Snow has written that we might possibly reach Mars and one of the moons of Jupiter, but, after that, we will be thrown back upon ourselves once again. Dr. Snow asks us to confront the simple fact that it will take us over five thousand years of continuous travelling at the fastest possible speed to reach the nearest star. "Why, then", Dr. Snow asks, "Are we spending so much of our wealth and energy in reaching so far, when we can gain little more than the ashen dust which the Moon has yielded?"

The myth of the Tower of Babel points to a fundamental truth which Dr. Oppenheimer and Dr. Snow are also trying to teach us. Happiness is not so much in the big things, or in the far away things, as in the small and near things. For my wife and I, as I am sure for many of you, the greatest thrill of our life was when our first child was born. We felt at that moment as if we were privileged witnesses to the miracle of Creation. Is there greater joy in travelling to Paris than in watching a child take its first step? Is there greater joy in making a million dollars than in holding your grandchild in your arms? The greatest joy in the life of the patriarch Jacob, who was a famous man of his age, was when he saw his son, Joseph, whom he had thought to be dead. Little things contain the secret of life. When a husband comes home from work after a harrying day and notes that his wife has taken pains to make a dinner he likes, his work seems less burdensome. When a wife puts up with the cannonading of her children throughout the day and is able to discuss her problems with a sympathetic husband, somehow, the next day seems not so threatening. When a child fails at a task assigned him and finds his parent understanding and encouraging, the world seems not half so dark. The greatest satisfaction in life comes from helping an old friend, from remembering a brother or sister in time of trouble or in time of joy. The mystery of life is experienced in watching a babbling brook, in lighting candles which link you to your parents and which provide your children with an emotional link to you, in coming together in a group like this to be reminded that one is part of a creative and enduring people; . . . in these things lies happiness. The man or woman who flits from mate to mate looking for that constant exhilaration which he believes to exist in distant things may find occasional excitement, but he will never find enduring happiness. Within a marriage, too, happiness lies in the sharing of little things, in compromises achieved after hard searching and sacrifice, in respectful give and take, in admitting one's weakness and finding an understanding and supporting friend.

The Lure of Affluence

One of the factors that encourages us to reach farther than we sometimes should is affluence. Psychological and sociological studies show that more and more people are lonely because of complications brought about by the possession of wealth. For example, two people who do not have a perfect marriage, may have to try to work things out if they are dependent on one another economically. By working through a problem, they may develop something far richer than they could have with a different partner, but if the family has more than a sufficiency of money, one or both of the partners may be encouraged to think of reaching out rather than to work on the present situation. Frequently, after divorce and remarriage, a person finds that he is in another imperfect marriage, but his problems are more complicated with additional children and the added guilt that, maybe, he was unwise in abandoning the first marriage. Let no one underestimate the psychic injury that comes to children of a broken marriage, which is why I always recommend that divorce take place only after *heroic* steps have been taken to work things through *in an existing marriage*. Please don't misunderstand me. Divorce is, sometimes, a mandatory and healthy procedure, but the vast majority of divorces take place because one or both of the parties involved are immature and unable to work patiently on a solvable problem.

We adults show a similar kind of immaturity when we give our children too much money and too many gadgets. Because our children have everything they want, they never learn to appreciate the little things or the near things, and they begin to reach out for exotic things that look like they might be exciting. The Bible tells us that while King David had been the poor son of a shepherd, Absalom, David's son, was the spoiled son of a rich king. Absalom repaid his coddling father by trying to capture his father's throne. Absalom was encouraged by the excessive freedom he was given to try "to grab it all". So the modern youngster, deprived of the character building economic struggles of his parents, may use his money to buy drugs or alcohol. From these, he may get some early kicks, but, in time the youngster is even less satisfied and more isolated from both family and society. His affluence, coupled with an absence of meaningful work, leads him into more abysmal loneliness. He has reached too far and has only become more confused. Absalom, who, incidentally, was renowned for his long, beautiful hair, reached too far and was killed in the battle which he initiated. The modern affluent youngster may back into a kind of spiritual death.

Some of our more brilliant college students, impressed with the sudden burst of mankind into the realm of scientific discovery in the last fifty years, have decided that they belong to a new breed of Supermen. Accordingly, they have experimented with something called "mind expansion".

They have deliberately taken drugs to stimulate their rate of thought and to magnify their emotional sensitivity. Sadly, through this exhilarating process, they have worn thin the fragile human mind and, in an explosion of fantasies, have loosened their hold on society and this world. Many of them, directly because of the use of drugs, have flirted with insanity or have gone over the brink. They have, as human beings, outreached themselves. They have built their tower too high, and its collapse has engulfed them. In all fairness to our young people, let it be said that some of them have understood that the frantic pursuit of wealth can be a snare and a delusion. Accordingly, they have set out to live the simple life and have turned their backs on the clothes, the gadgets, and the bank accounts that seem overly important to some of their parents. Let me say that, in one sense, this revolt is a sign of health and moral fiber; but when the revolt overshoots its mark and results in the withdrawal of the young people from the attempt to improve society, then, the revolt, itself, becomes a kind of over-reaching and is destructive.

Experience Without Feeling

The new sexual freedom also seems to have encouraged a kind of over-reaching. The psychiatrist, Dr. Rollo May, writes in a new book, "Love and Will", that where psychiatrists used to get patients suffering from an unhealthy repression of their sexual desires, now, they get patients suffering from anxiety, because they have tried the sexual route, and, like Portnoy, they have not found love. The psychiatrists have discovered that anxiety increases as sexual experimentation increases—in the absence of love. For most of the new experimenters, sex has been reduced to a mechanical routine. They become concerned with performance and technique but not with feeling. The sexual partner in these sophisticated circles no longer asks, "Do I love him or her?" but, "How proficient is he or she in the sexual act?" Those in this kind of group are, thus, constantly competing with each other to achieve good technique and lose, thereby, all that is vital, fulfilling, and human in the sexual act. We are reminded that Dr. Oppenheimer said, "We will have to learn to love that which is close, lest we come to love nothing".

The Jews of old, however much we might reserve the right to differ from them, had a deep awareness of the importance of that which is close. Perhaps, they overdid it a little, but we can learn something from them, nonetheless. The Talmud teaches, "Better a morsel where contentment is than abundance without joy". Translation for men, your wife doesn't have to be Marilyn Monroe for you to find contentment, and we all know what happened to poor Miss Monroe, whose problem, for all her natural endowment and financial wealth, was desperate loneliness. Like Absalom, she stormed Heaven and made for her own death. Her lungs were not

equipped to breathe the rarified atmosphere of stardom. If Miss Monroe had had the simple ability to enjoy the companionship of any one of her three husbands, she could have found the happiness that eluded her.

The Much Traveled but Lost Jew

Dr. Oppenheimer said that true happiness lies in clinging to one's traditions. It would not be out of place in the general context of the theme of over-reaching to point out that the affluent Jew in American society is all too ready to reach out to every tradition but his own. We are busy developing a taste for a thousand foreign dishes, but we have little time to recall mama's cooking. For us, won ton and ravioli are exotic, but kreplach is forgotten. Many Jewish homes have antiques from every culture, but no place on the shelf for the Bible, the most ancient of all books. We dance the frug and the cha-cha-cha, but not the hora. We study French and Spanish, but not Hebrew. We light candles at the most insignificant social affair, but never on Shabbos. We fast to lose weight, constantly, but never on Yom Kippur. We follow the morality of the crowd, but we ignore our ancient charge to be a Kingdom of Priests and to set an example for mankind. We have become big spenders for everything but charity, the one thing our tradition says is precious above all. We Jews have become so busy reaching out to know the world that we no longer know who or what we are. We travel so much, we don't even know where *home* is! We think we belong everywhere, when the truth is we belong nowhere. Now, I am not against travel or study, mind you. I am not even against gathering dust on the Moon; but I am, first and foremost, for tending one's lush garden in the back yard.

Our Jewish tradition, like Dr. Oppenheimer, who is one of its products, teaches that universalism can be superficial unless it is rooted in the love of the particular. You can not live meaningfully in a broad circle of people or of ideas unless you are first deeply rooted in the smaller circle of your own ideas and your personal friends. "To thine own self be true", the poet said; "thou canst not, then, be false to any man". It follows that if one is not true to himself, if one does not know himself, if he depreciates or aggrandizes himself, he cannot be true to others. "I gotta be *Me*", the song says in true Hasidic fashion! Marvelous! But before one can be "*Me*", one has to know what or who "*Me*" really is. The man who knows the world, but not his family, knows nothing. The man who loves the world, but not his own people or tradition, loves nothing. The Hasidic Rabbi taught, peer deeply into one human face and you will find God. How frightening and how difficult this is, to peer deeply at close range, to stand close, to open oneself to that which is *near*; yet this is the way to health and happiness. Upon this pillar depends the stability of society. This is the path God and Judaism have appointed for us.