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*The Path of Mitzvah —*

*Finding Our Way  
Back to Judaism*

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Over one hundred years ago, a Yiddish writer by the name of Peretz wrote a short story called, "Four Generations, Four Wills." The story is so modern as to have been written today. Peretz tells us that there was a very religious Orthodox Jew who died and left a will. The will was very simple and brief. The religious scholar left all of his Hebrew books to his children. He asked that they use the little money he left to maintain the Synagogue and other charities, and he blessed them in God's name.

The second will was written by the son of the pious scholar. He expressed the hope that his children might read the books, but, failing that, he urged them to give the books to a good library. He left somewhat more money than his father, and he asked his children to invest the money properly. He expressed the hope that, at the very least, they would retain their membership in the Synagogue.

The grandson of the scholar was a very "modern" man. His connection to the things revered by his grandfather was remote. He died a much wealthier man than his father, and his will was quite lengthy, with many "whereas"es and "to-wit"s. His will read, in part, "The funds I bequeath are to be held in escrow and in trust and are to be properly used for the education of my children." There was no provision for charity and no reference to anything related to Judaism.

The fourth and final will, that Peretz describes in his story, was left by the great-grandson of the scholar. Absent from his life had been any interest in Jewish books or learning. Absent, also, was a concern for the well-being of the Synagogue or public charities. The will of the great-grandson was found beside his body in an attic where he lived his unhappy life. It read, "I have all this money, yet I have no one to give it to, no one to share it with, no meaning in my life, no roots, no past, no present, no future". After signing the will, he, apparently, had ended his life by his own hand.

While the story of the four wills is fiction, it bears some resemblance to what has happened to American Jews. Our bank resources have increased, while our reserve of Jewish knowledge has decreased. Jewish books dealing with our relationship to God, to the Jewish problem, and to moral purpose have meaning to many of us only as decorations. The book with which we are most familiar is our bank book. Most of us have to admit that there is a sharply declining intensity in our ties to the Jewish community, and we will have to admit that, in most cases, our children seem to be still another step further away from the heart of Judaism. It is not impossible for us to foresee the time when someone in our family will say with the great-grandson of Peretz's story, "I have all the money . . . but there is little meaning in my life, no roots, no past . . . no future".

Clinical work done by psychologists like Kurt Lewin show that as Jews get further away from their roots, they tend to be more unhappy. Testing done by University of Miami graduate students in the Beth Am Religious School confirms the fact that the children who have the least interest in Judaism also happen to be less happy than the children who feel more positively about Judaism. Clinical studies show that as Jewish adults become more assimilated to the prevailing culture and mores, they are measurably less content in their marriages; they drink more; and they are the more agitated. If we were able to be objective about it, we could see that, in

abandoning our Jewish culture, we are moving from a higher to a lower culture, from security to insecurity.

Unfortunately, our children are taking the brunt of our gradual disassociation from Judaism. Thrust into the college world, where all loyalties are tested, and where disassociation from the group is a natural aspect of maturing, many of our young people consider themselves as neutrals in a world of many optional groups, and they are playing the game of making their own new alliances, as if they did not have a history of four thousand years, and as if they were not descended from Abraham, Moses, and the Prophets.

### *The Need for a Small Group*

With all of the talk coming from some of our collegians about being "citizens of the world", the truth is that belonging to such a huge, amorphous community is not enough to bring personal happiness. One must also sink roots in a smaller community. One must feel the warmth, the tradition, and the meaning of people who are close. This is why some of our young people have developed communes. The fact that almost all communes have failed miserably is not the point. What we need to learn is that the desire to organize the commune stems from a natural and profound human desire to belong to a small group that is dedicated to an ideal.

So, I'm going to pose the question here, tonite, "*What's wrong with belonging to the Jewish people?*". Never have members of a group done more to help each other than within the Jewish community. One has only to study, for a few minutes, the record of the Joint Distribution Committee, now combined with the United Jewish Appeal, which has worked to save millions of Jews within the past fifty years. When has a nation, like the State of Israel, been organized for the primary purpose of gathering in afflicted members of the group? Which commune in America has succeeded half so well as an Israeli kibbutz, and which nation has shown such imagination in experimenting with democratic forms as has the modern State of Israel?

Black people in the past several decades have consciously tried to create a sense of brotherhood amongst blacks. They call each other "soul brothers". They label their special kinds of food, like pig-knuckles and "chitlings", as "soul-food". When a black is hitchhiking, another black will stop to pick him up. This is a marvelous thing that the blacks are doing for themselves, but the Jews have done this for thousands of years. For long centuries of European cruelty, Jews were the only friends that Jews had, and a Jew could run from a pogrom in Russia and know that he would find a Jewish friend and shelter in Poland or in Roumania. For thousands of years, Jews have had dependable soul brothers, and they had their soul-food, too—kosher food. The Jewish soul-food is not exactly the same as black soul-food. The system of Kashrut is rooted in anti-paganism, and it is a complicated and profound regulatory system for health and cleanliness. To be sure, we have lost a great deal of this Jewish sense of "soul", but we can gain it back. This generation of Jews hasn't yet written its last will and testament, and we can change any clause we want to change.

What I am suggesting tonite is that we Jews must make a conscious and forceful reversal of our thinking. The nice thing about Jewish loyalty

is that we don't have to abandon the world community in order to move closer to other Jews. On the contrary, to be supremely Jewish we must labor, not only for the well-being of our own small group, but, in behalf of the world community as well. What is it that Einstein once said in expressing his reason for choosing to be a Jew? "The pursuit of knowledge for its own sake, an almost fanatical love of justice, and the desire for personal independence, these are the features of Jewish tradition which make me thank my stars that I belong to it".<sup>1</sup> Einstein was an individualist par excellence, but he recognized the need to belong to a small and meaningful group. He believed in cosmic religion because he was a Jew, because being a Jew gave him a reservoir of tradition and thought which fed his best and highest motivation.

1. "*The World As I See It*", 1934, p. 143.

### *When Will the Messiah Come?*

We are talking today about the need to return to the Jewish community, and the question is how to instigate such a return. There are many paths which could lead us back to Judaism, but I shall speak now of only one such path, the path of Mitzvah. Our grandfathers considered themselves bound to each other and to God by the concept of mitzvah. To perform a mitzvah is to perform a deed beyond the requirement of the law. Doing a mitzvah is doing what you don't have to do, but if you do it, the world will be the more beautiful. Consider, for example, my wife's grandmother. On Friday afternoon, Sarah Geller would bake large amounts of bread for her family. Always, she would bake more than they would need. What did she do with the extra loaves? She would hide them under her apron and visit a poor neighbor down the street. When she left the neighbor's house, somehow, the neighbor would have bread for her family. "Maybe, Elijah left the bread," the simple neighbor thought. It was a miracle! Certainly, it was a miracle, the miracle of human compassion. It was in this way, and in other similar ways, that our grandmothers performed a mitzvah, a deed "LESHEM SHAMAYIM, for the Sake of Heaven".

Now, we cannot look at mitzvah as just another example of a good deed, for it was rooted in a definite philosophy that is distinctly Jewish. Our fathers performed a mitzvah, because they believed that there was an organic relationship between a man's deed and the well-being of society and the world. When will the Messiah come, our fathers would ask? Their wise-men answered, "When we make it possible for him to come. When we create the conditions for peace and justice". In this way was a mitzvah transformed from the simple context of a human kindness to a deed with revolutionary and world-shaking consequences. Each deed would either hasten or delay the coming of the Messiah. Each deed was, therefore, of momentous implications. Our generation has lost the mystical pull of the concept of mitzvah. We must return to it to save our soul.

The Jewish mystics carried the idea of mitzvah further than the Talmudic Rabbis. They claimed that every deed of human kindness gave strength to God himself! They claimed that what man did on earth supplied the stars with their energy to light the sky. No act, the Jewish mystics

taught, however small, had just a personal or local meaning. Everything we did, we did in behalf of the souls of the dead who waited for us to create the conditions for their return, and everything we did, we did in behalf of those yet unborn. Wouldn't it be wonderful if we who are alive today could believe, as our fathers did, in the sanctity of mitzvah, in the power of our personal deeds?

2. Mitzvah has another meaning, also, but that is another discussion entirely.

Perhaps it is not too late for us to live a more reverent kind of life. Each of us, in his daily life, has time for a mitzvah or two. If a lawyer, to whom a couple comes seeking a divorce, gives some of his time to urge them to think the matter over, this is a mitzvah. If a busy doctor gives some of his time for a free clinic for the poor, this is a mitzvah. If a policeman counsels a teenager and tries to lead him away from dope or crime, this is a mitzvah. If a mother disciplines herself to read books on how to raise children so that she can improve her technique and be more objective, this, too, is a mitzvah. If a father, overwhelmed by the pressures of business, consciously makes time to be with his children, even if this means a loss of income, this, too, is a mitzvah.

Our tradition teaches that during the High Holiday Season, especially, we are urged to perform mitzvahs. If someone has wronged you, make it easy for him to apologize. Hold out the hand of friendship. If you have quarreled with your spouse, make the first approach, give the first kiss. Grab hold of your child during this season. Admit to him that you have not always been right, and tell him that what you want most of all is that you should work together in mutual respect and love. He'll be grateful for the chance at a new start.

What is a mitzvah? The Bible gives us many examples of the ethical mitzvah. If your enemy's donkey is lying on the ground overburdened with his load, you may not pass him by. You must help the unfortunate animal. Cursing the deaf and placing a stumbling block in the path of the blind is forbidden, but helping the deaf to understand and removing the stumbling block for those who do not see it, this is a mitzvah. Taking advantage of those who know less than you is sinful, but educating the ignorant, this is a mitzvah. Paying your membership dues in a synagogue is your responsibility, but making a sacrifice in order to help the institution, this is a mitzvah.

3. The trick is to project this spirit of extra effort into every day of the year.

### *Not By Ethics Alone*

What is a mitzvah? There are actually two types. One type is the act of voluntary kindness, about which we have been speaking. The other type is of the irrational variety. It is tied to the performance of rituals and customs which seem to have emotional, rather than ethical roots. Our fathers believed that if they performed an act of charity, they helped to keep the world in its orbit. They believed the same thing of the act of lighting Sabbath candles. If we are to survive as Jews, if we are to revitalize the Jewish community so that it will be a source of strength to our grandchildren, *we also, will have to*

*perform at least some ritualistic mitzvahs.* A people does not survive on ethics alone. It must remain identifiable according to a set of customs commonly observed by those who associate with it. We, in Reform Judaism, have audaciously contended that we do not have to observe all of the mitzvahs attributed to Moses. I still hold to this view, but I also believe that if we do not consciously and voluntarily maintain at least a minimum regimen of rituals, then, Reform Judaism will be a spirit without a body.

Let me say the same thing in a more direct way. If you do not light Sabbath candles in your home every Friday night, you are making for the death of the Jewish people. If you understand that by lighting the candles, you help to keep the Jewish people alive, and you are determined to do so, then you comprehend the meaning of ritualistic mitzvah. Of course, there is no magic about lighting the candles, but, then again, there is some magic about it, for candles have an influence that ethical principles sometimes do not have. I believe the same thing about holding a Passover Seder in your home and about not eating bread on Passover, or about setting aside the Sabbath as a day for strengthening one's loyalty to the Jewish community and to its values. I think that fasting on Yom Kippur is a mitzvah which, if you are able to do it, will deepen your loyalty to Judaism and will help preserve our people. To me, rituals are not God made, and failure to observe them has nothing to do with sin; but rituals, like certain symbols, can be vehicles for conveying emotions and thoughts from generation to generation, and, in that sense, rituals have an abiding meaning.

### *"For the Sake of Heaven"*

I think you get the idea. The *ritualistic mitzvah* is designed to keep the body of the Jewish community identifiable and alive. The *ethical mitzvah* is designed to keep the Jewish soul alive. The concept of mitzvah is born out of Jewish experience, created out of the matrix of Jewish suffering. Nonetheless, as you can see, it has universalistic implications, as does any profound Jewish idea. When you perform a mitzvah, think to yourself, "I am doing this because I am a Jew, L'SHEM SHAMAYIM, for the sake of Heaven".

Suppose you say, "I find it difficult to perform a deed L'SHEM SHAMAYIM, for I am not even certain that I believe in God". It takes a wise man or woman to admit that he or she is unable even to define God, but each of us, whatever he believes, can have a mystic sense of identity with the heart of the universe. If you cannot do your mitzvah for God's sake, then, do it for the sake of mankind. Do it for the sake of generations yet unborn. Do it for the sake of those who have made sacrifices in the past, for the six million who were cremated by Hitler. Do it to help prevent a hydrogen war so that the earth will not be dissolved. Do your mitzvah to help the stars turn in their spheres.

One thing I promise you, if you do your mitzvahs, not anticipating any personal gain, but with the knowledge that you are the agent of the Divine, then, you will leave a different kind of legacy to your children. They will understand, by your example, that to be a Jew is "something special", and they will want to add to what you have begun.

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