

LIVING WITH PURPOSE - LIVING WITH K'VANAH

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My grandfather lived in our home during the early years of my life. He never finished a meal without rigorously proclaiming, "Gedankt und gelaibt is Gott - God is thanked and praised." My grandfather was not what we would call a success in the modern world. His grocery store never made money. He was always giving food away to his black customers who were poorer than he was. Yet, for my grandfather life was wonderful, because God was always present. Poor as he was, my grandfather was very rich, because he felt that God provided for him and his family every day.

Traditional Judaism contains within itself a secret key to happiness, for it stipulates that every day we must thank God for the many things he has given us. As the traditional Jew goes over the list of things for which he thanks God, he reminds himself how fortunate he is. The basic Hebrew prayer is called a "Brachah," a "Thank you." In traditional Judaism, there is a b'rachah, a thank you for the privilege of waking up in the morning, there is a b'rachah for the air we breathe, for the food we eat, however little. There is a b'rachah for friends and family and loved ones. There is even a b'rachah for the orifices of one's body, for the miracle of sight and hearing, for the ability to speak and understand. If one is truly able to feel grateful for all of these wonderful gifts, as my grandfather was, then one must inevitably feel blessed and happy.

I have learned something very important from my grandfather and from traditional Judaism. Whether or not one is happy and whether or not one leads a meaningful life often depends simply on one's basic attitude. There is the commonplace story of the two people who see a glass of water that is half filled. One person says the glass is half empty and is depressed about it. The other says it is half filled and feels grateful for it. What makes one person an optimist and the other a pessimist? The psychologists have their very wise answers, but religion has some answers too. Let us see what Judaism has to say about fashioning an attitude that can enable us to enjoy the struggles of life.

Do you remember the story of the New York Times reporter many years ago who interviewed the workers who were building a fairly large Manhattan edifice? The reporter asked the bricklayer what he was doing, and the bricklayer answered, "I am placing the bricks on top of one another with the help of plaster in between." The reporter then went to the man installing the windows and asked him what he was doing. The man replied, "I fill these holes with these pieces of framed glass." The plasterer said, "I'm putting the plaster on the walls." The roofer said, "I'm placing these tiles on the roof," and so it went, each worker simply describing his particular job in isolation from all others. Then the reporter went up to an old man who was performing the unskilled job of stirring cement in a trough. "Tell me, old man," said the reporter, "what are you doing?" The old man smiled and said with great warmth, "I'm building a house of God." Only then did the reporter discover that the building being erected was indeed a synagogue. The story teaches us that the person doing the most menial task can have the noblest attitude, and it is the attitude, not the type of work, which lights up one's life and makes it meaningful.

It is part of the basic teaching of Hasidism, one of the most creative movements in Judaism, that our most important work in life is to bind ourselves to God. The key to this binding, the key to this fellowship with God, is K'vahah, intention. The Hasidim teach, "Whatever you are doing, know that you are doing it for God's sake." And again they teach, "Each little thing you do is important to God. What seems to you to be the least important thing may be the most important to God."

The Hasidim teach that those who seem to be the lowest on the social ladder may be the most beloved by God. Their stories make this clear. You must remember the popular story of the boy who was mute, who could not speak or make a sound. Like all other Jews, he came into the synagogue on Yom Kippur and opened the prayer book, but unlike all others, he could not sing nor read aloud. As he watched the other people singing and expressing their feeling for God, the boy had the irresistible urge to express himself in some way, so he took out his whistle, and in the middle of the solemn service, blew the whistle as loud as he could. You can imagine that most of the worshippers were shocked, and they began to scold the boy and even to strike him, but the Rabbi stopped the service and said simply for all to hear and understand, "Leave the boy alone. Perhaps his prayer is the holiest of all!" It is the intention which counts! It is the attitude, the intent, with which we pray and live which makes prayer and life worthwhile.

All of us can profit by relating what we do to God's purpose for the world. If a doctor treats his patients merely for the sake of the income he can derive from them, he does not have what the Hasidim call K'vanah, intention, and his life will not be charged with special meaning. If the doctor understands, however, that his hands are in a real sense an extension of the hands of God, then he acts with K'vanah, and both the doctor and the patient will know the difference.

If the mother considers the raising of her children as just a chore which she has to endure until they are old enough to leave the house, then she will not experience that special joy that comes to those mothers who labor with K'vanah. The mother who knows that she is the key link in that miraculous process whereby a human mind takes shape and a human soul blossoms, this mother binds herself not only to her children but to God.

The person who wants to make a great deal of money for the simple purpose of ego needs leads a sterile life. Such a person will see the people with whom he deals only as objects to be manipulated. But the person who has K'vanah, who sees himself as one child of God relating in his business to other children of God will act in a different way. The person who comes to understand that God is present in each moment, in each interview, in each transaction, will conduct himself in such a way that he will build a new personality for himself and a new relationship with those with whom he interacts.

Our ancient teachers taught that God wants us to love our neighbors as ourselves, but they never surrendered the idea that we ought to be grateful enough to God to give him a return gift. They taught that we should love our neighbor not only for our neighbor's sake, but for God's sake. I hope you can grasp the extra dimension here. What our ancestors taught was this. A kindness performed to a human being is also a kindness performed for God. There is this difference between Judaism and the humanism that emerged from it. We are taught as Jews that a sin against a fellow human being is also a sin against God. To place it in a more dramatic setting, the Talmud teaches that since humankind is created in the image of God, he who kills one person is as if he has killed a part of God. A certain Jewish teacher said that when we help a human being it is as if we help God. The words are, "Inasmuch as you did it unto the least of these, you have done it unto me."

Several years ago, I officiated at the funeral of a man who was adored by the members of his family, but his business associates told me that for him business was a matter of dog eat dog. It is not possible to divide one's life into compartments so that one tries to live a different life style in each compartment. A healthy person is an undivided self. If we truly wish to relate ourselves to God, we must try to do so as hard as we can in every moment and situation, without exception. By trying to ennoble each situation, however routine it may seem to be, we are able to establish a clear sense of who we are and what we are. When you meet a person with a love for human beings, there is a warmth, a light that radiates from him. This light colors all the events of that person's life. It also influences the life of the people who come into contact with him. From such a person we all gather strength and hope, for he or she is a link to the divine.

It is unfortunately true that most people do not have the simple faith of the cement mixer who knew that his menial task was essential to the construction of a synagogue. Most of us have difficulty in relating what we do every day to a noble purpose and to God. Yet, Judaism asks us to try to do just this.

Let us think of the Jews who lived in Europe during all of those dark centuries when they were the poorest of the poor, when they were not permitted to own land, when they were denied admission into the workers guilds, when they were the victims of pogroms. How do you think our ancestors were able to stand these burdensome years? The answer is that they understood that their suffering was linked to God's purpose for the world. They believed that they had a mission in life to live out the teachings of the Torah and thus to mediate these laws to all the nations. What if the nations rejected these laws and what if the nations tortured God's people. The Jews were not free to cast off their Torah. They had no choice but to live as nobly as they could for God's sake, if not for their own. And so it was that the Hasidic Rabbi prayed, "Oh Lord, I do not ask you to eliminate my suffering. I only ask if I suffer for your sake." The Rabbi was asking God to reaffirm the fact that there was purpose to his suffering as a Jew. That assurance was enough for him to go on suffering endlessly.

Recently, a nationally known psychologist by the name of Becker was smitten with a progressively debilitating disease. Dr. Becker suffered mightily from the slow attrition of this disease. How was he able to stand it? Dr. Becker told a journalist, "I have the faith that somehow my suffering has meaning and importance to God." How like the Hasidic rabbi sounds this modern intellectual.

K'vanah, directing our thoughts and purpose to God, sometimes is the only way we can deal with the serious illness of a child or a spouse. It may be the only way we can accept the pain that comes with watching an aged parent wither away. Considered only in terms of our own life and time, such a staggering illness seems to be utterly meaningless and unbearable. Yet, somehow we get the strength to endure - because we sense that our fate is part of a greater destiny. We sense somehow that the bad as well as the good is linked to a purpose greater than our own.

Many of you will remember a lovely lady in this congregation who suffered severely with cancer for a dozen years. Yet there was never a public complaint from her lips, never the absence of a smile on her face, never the absence of concern about your welfare. Shirley was determined to live out her days graciously. She was determined to show others how to face a tragedy of this type, with nobility. The way she died taught others how to live with K'vanah.

The act of dying is sometimes in itself an act of K'vanah. Many a Jew in the Spanish Inquisition in the 15th century died rather than reveal the hiding place of other Jews escaping the Inquisition. Many a Jew in Germany died trying to make it possible for other Jews to escape Hitler's storm troopers. Many a Jewish teenager has died defending the modern State of Israel. Many a Jew in the Middle Ages died rather than accept forced conversion to another religion. We call this dying "al kiddush ha shem, dying for the sanctification of God." Rabbi Akiba became the personification of this kind of Jew when, as he was burned by the Romans, he proclaimed the Sh'ma. Yes, it is possible to make the moment of death an exalted moment, if one is capable of K'vanah at such a time.

But Judaism is anything but a cult of death. It is the life affirming religion par excellence. It is not our martyrs but our Prophets who are the basic symbols of our faith. It was the Prophets who taught us that resistance against evil is the highest expression of our relationship with God. We do not have to speak only about the Prophets to cite outstanding examples of this special kind of Jewish K'vanah. We have only to think of the American Jew whom President Roosevelt called Isaiah, Louis Brandeis. Brandeis in his career as an attorney and as Justice of the Supreme Court of the United States worked tirelessly in behalf of America's beleaguered workers. No Supreme Court Justice before or since has been such an outspoken opponent of the huge business trusts which ignored the needs of their employees. Brandeis never indulged himself in the pastimes that we would call fun or recreation. He never so much as went to a movie. He considered such entertainment a waste of time - time that could be spent on reading and working to obtain facts that would help the underprivileged of our nation. The entire life of Brandeis was geared to one purpose, the helping of the underprivileged. He was a man with intense K'vanah.

Such a person was Einstein, who said, "A life lived not for the sake of others is no life at all." Such a person was Sidney Hillman, who organized the sweatshop workers in New York to establish a union which became the prototype of all other democratic unions. Hillman's union was the first to be concerned not only with wages and hours and working conditions, but also with the health and psychological well being of the workers and the problems of their old age. Such a person was Golda Meir, who gave up an easy life in the U.S. to go to Israel to labor for the Jewish state. Such a person was Kivvie Kaplan, who served for many years as the president and chief fund raiser for the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People.

All of these Jews shared one thing in common. They felt that as a Jew they had an extra responsibility to work in behalf of oppressed humanity. To feel this compulsion is to experience K'vanah. The Prophet Jeremiah said, "There are times when I become weary of proclaiming God's message. I am tired of criticism by the people and sick from imprisonment by those in power, but when I think of stopping my work, I feel a fire surging in my bones, and I cannot restrain myself from saying, "Thus saith the Lord..."

This surely is the experience of K'vanah at its height. Not all of us can share this feeling to such an intense degree, but to the extent that we are knowledgeable Jews, we are all capable of feeling something like it. Jeremiah and Brandeis and the Hasidim and Meir had something in common. They believed that God had entered into a covenant with the Jewish people whereby each party agreed to a special intimacy and to a personal responsibility. The Bible tells us that when the covenant was established with Abraham, God said to him, "Through you shall all the nations of the earth be blessed..." If a Jew only accepts his responsibility as part of this covenant, he will enter into the stream of K'vanah. And as he strives to be a blessing to other human beings, he will learn what it is to experience fellowship with God.