

CREATIVE AND DESTRUCTIVE HABITS

A High Holiday Sermon

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There is an old European Jewish Story that goes this way. An American Jewish man who was one of 10,000 tailors in a certain province of Poland, said to his friend, "If I were as rich as Rothchild, I would be richer than Rothchild". "How is that", asked his friend. "How could it be that you would be richer than Rothchild?" To which the poor tailor replied, "I would do a little tailoring on the side".

The story tells us something about the poverty of East European Jews just short decades ago, but it also tells us something about the importance of habit. This poor tailor really could not see himself doing anything different if he were a rich man than he was doing everyday of his poverty-stricken life. As rich as he might become, he could not see himself giving up completely the task he had performed so ardently twelve hours of each day, six days a week.

Educators have long understood the force of habit. No less a person than the great philosopher known as Aristotle said 2400 years ago in Greece that if you want a child to develop good habits, you should reward him for doing the right things. John Dewey, the famous Columbia University educator of 50 years ago said, "You become what you do". Jewish educators from time immemorial have agreed with Aristotle and Dewey. Maimonides, the renowned Jewish philosopher, wrote in "Shaare Ha-Musar", "Habit and character are closely interwoven, habit becoming, as it were, second nature".

Jewish ethical teachers, understanding the prime significance of habits, have always stressed conduct rather than theology. "Follow the commandments", our teachers have taught, "and you will find God". The biblical approach as well as the talmudic approach is not to have us accept a creed or a catechism which explains God. On the contrary, we are told that God is holy because He acts in a certain way, and we are asked to imitate God's actions insofar as we are able. The Bible is filled with positive commandments and negative commandments. "Do this", the Jew is told. "Do not do that".

"Leave the harvest in the corners of your field for the poor", we are told. "Do not pick up the fallen corn in the field, that is for the widow and the orphan; Do not stand idly by the blood of your neighbor; If someone drives away your neighbor's donkey and you observe the evil, you must get the donkey back and bring him to your neighbor". On the other hand, Jews are told: "You must not fraternize with those who are evil; You must not follow a multitude to do that which is wrong; You must not bear false witness at court; You must avoid drunkenness and lewdness".

Most of us in modern times understand the importance of good habits, even when we don't follow them. Most of us are dieters of one kind or another. We know that we aren't going to keep our weight down unless we form good eating habits. Some of us are quite good at carrying out a prescribed diet. We eat only coffee and juice for breakfast; we eat soup and salad for lunch; and we stay away from rich deserts at dinner. We know also that if a diet is to work, we must keep at it. And, after we get off the strict diet, we must go on maintenance, as they call it, and follow some set rules every day of our life. Any wise dieter knows that dieting is a life time procedure. Good dieting requires the formation of long-term disciplined habits.

Athletes know the importance of right habits. If you want to run in a marathon, you have to run a substantial amount, if not daily, then many times a week. Any good tennis player or golfer knows that the more you permit an incorrect swing to go unchanged, the more difficult it is to correct that swing. What happens is that the improper swing becomes second nature, and your body begins to respond that way automatically. The

religious teacher said it this way, "Whosoever stoops too often finds it the more difficult to stand erect".

The results of bad habits seem to be so obvious that it would seem that modern, intelligent, highly educated people would steer clear of such habits, but this is not true. On the contrary, many of us here today are very much trapped by bad habits, and it behooves us on the occasion of this solemn holiday to think about some of these habits and resolve to change them.

There was a time when Jews were rarely dependent on alcohol or drugs, but, if you were on the inside of some of the drug abuse programs which are increasingly operative in Dade County, you would find that some Jews have abandoned their old habits and have taken up new and more dangerous ones. There are an increasing number of Jews who having become accustomed to social drinking on a regular basis, now turn to cocktails at lunch, and finally to a little nip in the morning. One does not become an alcoholic suddenly. The status is earned by a regular habit, a habit that proceeds from a little bit here and a little bit there to a little more here and a little more there. It is a wise person who is able to see himself or herself becoming victimized by the alcohol habit, and it is the courageous person who goes to seek help to shake the habit. As we have indicated, shaking a habit is much more difficult than avoiding a habit in the first place, but there are many who have succeeded in extricating themselves from this destructive practice.

Some of the more sophisticated people among us do not condescend to use alcohol for their habit. Alcohol, they say, is for the plebians. Instead, the sophisticates go to parties where solid drugs are used. But, alas, some of us, having developed the social habit of using a drug like cocaine, begin to take small amounts of it privately to help us through a harrowing day. Later we take larger amounts of it, as we get progressively hooked. The most brilliant of people, the most educated of our people, have had their life ruined by the drug habit. As smart and as well educated as they are, they could not perceive the creeping, insidious effect of the drug. Gradually their life and character was claimed by what seemed at first to be a relatively innocent and rare usage. Still I am told by some young people that you can't go to a party today, and you can't be one of the gang, unless you join them in the sharing of drugs. Not everyone who uses alcohol and drugs becomes an addict of course, but I never met a person who refused to try them who became an addict.

How wide spread is the addictive habit? Well, think for a moment of all the people in public life who have made an admission of their dependency, and this is just the tip of the iceberg. Betty Ford, Elizabeth Taylor, Sid Caesar, Red Skelton, Tony Curtis, and just recently Liza Minelli and Mary Tyler Moore. The drug dependent personalities in the sports world are legion: Mercury Morris, and Chuck Muncie to name a few. But many less prominent people are similarly involved. I recently attended a meeting in Orlando of the Governor's Task Force on Drugs and was surprised to learn that of the ten Ministers present, three freely admitted that they were alcoholics. Doctors are also notoriously open to drug abuse. Think of the slaughter on our highways due to drivers who are under the influence of one substance or another. I myself have buried too many beautiful children who were cut down by abusers at the wheel, and 20,000 die nationwide each year at the hands of such drivers, not to mention the greater numbers who are maimed and crippled.

A young man raised in our congregation recently told me that he has to get out of the movie industry in New York, because he is surrounded by fellow workers who are involved in two things—drugs and sexual infidelity. Sexual infidelity is another one of the habits being carefully developed in our affluent society. Where parents used to set an example of mutual trust for their children to follow, now it is not unusual for a husband especially to relate to a sexual partner other than his wife with the full knowledge of his children. In such a way does the father teach his child, "When

you get married, you don't have to be faithful either". Not only are we developing habits that harm other adults who are near to us, we are teaching our children destructive habits, habits that will surely make their life miserable as they grow older and which will handicap them when they try to establish mature and lasting relationships.

Recently a young lady in her late twenties came into my office to talk about her wedding. She wanted me to describe every last detail of the wedding ceremony, for you see, she had never been present at a Jewish wedding ceremony. None of her Jewish friends, also in their late twenties, had been married. She and many of her friends were accustomed to having sexual experiences, and some of them had lived with one man or another over a substantial period of time, but none of them had experienced a Jewish wedding ceremony. The young lady and her friends are evidence of a totally new regime of sexual habits which are being experienced by many modern young ladies. They, and of course, our young men, who are ever freer in their associations, are developing habits of sexual experience disassociated from love, marriage, and the having of children. Sex, we old timers are learning, now is equated with pleasure, convenience, accomodation, maybe even with affection, but not with enduring love and commitment.

Small wonder then that this young lady of whom I speak had never held a baby in her arms. Imagine that, a woman almost thirty, has noone in her family and no friends who have small babies, so that she can at least learn the thrill of holding an infant close to her. Through her new habits the modern middle-class woman has substituted higher education and a career for some of the habits and experiences that until a few decades ago were fundamental and essential to feminine fulfillment.

This modern habit of sex for the sake of sex but not for the sake of love and family has produced some unbelievable phenonmena. In the city of Chicago, I am told, there is a vast army of young people of marriageable age who are not getting married. Of this army, there are sixty thousand Jewish singles unable to bring themselves to the chupah. For New York, of course, the figures would be larger. When you get used to having your sexual release outside of marriage, it is hard to break the habit. As time goes on, it becomes increasingly more difficult to make the kind of commitment which means that you will have to be loyal to one sexual partner. What many of our young people, as part of the current American scene, are practicing is non-commitment. I submit to you that non-commitment is at its base unethical, for it teaches the use of another person solely for the purpose of gratification.

We were told by the apostles of the new sexual freedom that if you live with someone for a while, the chances of your having a good marriage are increased. After the trial marriage, we were told, the real marriage will be better. The overall statistics demonstrate that this is hogwash. Where couples have lived together before getting married, there are more not less divorces. Not that the other statistics are rosy, but it is clearly evident that what a trial marriage teaches young people is that you can go to bed with someone without making a commitment, and when commitment time comes, it is all the more difficult to maintain the partnership. The reason is that when you have rehearsed non-commitment so long, it is the more difficult to throw off the old habit.

Decades ago, the reasoning was that a young lady should not marry a confirmed batchelor late in his life because he would be too set in his ways. There was much wisdom in that. Men and Women form certain kinds of habits as they go through the years, and when they finally decide to get married, they do not have much room for compromise and adjustment. Old habits are hard to dislodge. Those who practice overmuch at being single may not make the best married partners. We are speaking now of a whole generation of young people who have fallen into a habit that goes counter to everything human beings, in every kind of society, have practiced for hundreds of thousands of years.

One of the greatest American writers of the last century was Ralph Waldo Emerson who wrote a magnificent essay on compensation. Emerson made a very simple point in this essay. If you are doing "this", you are taking time away from doing "that". If you are becoming expert in one thing, you have less chance to be expert in another thing. Our young people are becoming expert in the performance of the sexual act with different partners. The chances are that they are more adept at the sexual act, more athletic and efficient about it, than those of us of the previous generation. But they have lost much of our expertise in holding a marriage together, and they are ignorant of the art of having and loving children.

A newspaper article appearing in a Boston newspaper a few years ago reported a survey of 185 graduates of the best women's schools in the Boston area. Ten years after graduation, these 185 women, the cream of the crop in America, had a total of three children. The survey would show that the most educated, most career oriented women in America have gotten out of the habit of having children. To the extent that many of these women were Jewish, we must acknowledge that a debacle is taking place in the Jewish community. We are becoming a barren people unable to reproduce ourselves.

Our young generation likes to say of itself that it is the natural generation. The youngsters like to dress naturally and eat only natural foods. But what could be more unnatural and against the whole tide of the flow of life than to be barren, to restrict the having of children to such a point that we are not reproducing ourselves. It is true that in China the having of children is closely supervised, because China has a superabundance of people, but Jewish people are becoming an endangered species, and our young people are unwittingly assisting in our demise.

I submit to you that the having of children is a good habit, a life-affirming habit, while the not having of children is a habit that narrows the meaning and purpose of life. No wonder the Chinese people are fighting their government's restrictions by every devious means possible.

I want to make it clear that my sympathies in the current sad scene are with the young lady who thinks of marriage and the having of children in the traditional fashion. I am certainly not speaking of a woman who is subservient to the man, nor am I speaking of a woman who eschews a career. I am speaking of the woman who understands that sexual licentiousness is not a good rehearsal for fidelity in marriage. Unfortunately, the young lady who thinks in these more conventional terms is not likely to be very popular in today's society. She may not even be asked out on a date if she doesn't want to play around, and if she is asked out, she will be dropped like a hot potato when it becomes clear that she is not an easy push over. A young lady who will not agree to live with her boy friend may very well run the risk of having no boy friend and no chance of marriage at all. Traditionally oriented parents have to be very sympathetic to their daughters who may want very much to be married but who are incidental and innocent victims of the current aberration.

Similarly the boy who isn't athletically sexual may not be a desirable date for an aggressive girl, and his reputation will suffer with many of the young ladies. It isn't easy out there for any one male or female, for whom sex is not a casual matter!

My point tonight is simple. Habits fashion character. The drug or alcohol dependent person soon becomes a slave to the substance and loses all sense of direction as well as his/her integrity. A person who delays the marriage commitment overmuch and who develops the habit of sleeping with many different people in the absence of love, becomes progressively less capable of linking sex and love, and thus less capable of being a committed spouse.

Each of us has to be certain that he does not fall victim to this kind of habit and where possible he has to point out the dangers to those who are racing towards the abyss.

More and more hospitals are organizing centers for drug and alcohol abuse. The need for them is a sign of our times. Perhaps we should also start organizing centers for sex abuse. I am speaking now not of centers for those who are the victim of violent sex crimes. We need such centers of course. I am speaking more particularly of centers for those who have lost their integrity on the way to the bedroom. We live in the age of the pill and the equality of the sexes. We will never return to that kind of sexual overview which has marked previous generations and which perhaps was overly restrictive and narrow in its scope, but the complete freedom which is exercised in our time is reminiscent of a bull let loose in a china shop or a child let loose in a candy store. Such irresponsible freedom leads only to chaos. It is time we rang the bell and called sane people back to life affirming habits. Hopefully it is not too late for our young people to learn how to love and create. Hopefully it is not too late for them to learn how to appreciate the most natural of all pleasures-- holding your own child in your arms.