

The Self-Conscious Jew

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Judaism has no developed theology. It doesn't have a precise definition of God. On the contrary, it assumes that God is not defineable because His greatness is beyond man's knowing. The best way to know God, according to Judaism, is to try to discover the law through which He creates the universe. These laws (Torah) are an extension of His being. As we relate to these laws, we relate to God.

Such a religion is the reverse of mysticism. Not meditation with God, but ethical conduct, purposeful conduct, is the highest Jewish virtue.

There are those who say, "But I can live purposefully without being religious. I can be ethical without being aware of God." Perhaps this is so, but the deepest roots of all purposeful living lie in the belief that our thoughts and deeds are related to a profound meaning that undergirds the universe. The man who is ethical, merely for his own sake, can hardly find life as meaningful as if he understands that what he does is in support of generations past, in loyalty to future generations, and in tribute to the heart of the universe. The self-conscious Jew also has the added joy of knowing that he serves as part of his mission, as part of his special responsibility to his people.

Moral Imperative

The religious deed, as the Jew understands it, is the deed that binds one to the vibrant stream that flows through all eras of time. The deed which the self-conscious Jew performs is not just an "ethical deed." It is the deed he cannot help but perform if he wishes not to betray his people, his God, and mankind. The person who is religious in this sense operates with a kind of "moral imperative" within, such as the prophet Jeremiah experienced when with one part of himself he wished to surrender the religious life, and, yet, something within him compelled him to teach the things he felt that God wanted him to teach.

The Hasidic Jews of eastern Europe were moved by this inner compulsion to try to "redeem-elevate" all living things. They felt it a duty to grow towards the divine, to liberate the divine potential within themselves and within others.

We must understand that this "imperative" a religious person feels is not unconditioned. For a Jew, it is conditioned by the background of the Jewish experience. It is defined by the character of Jewish law. It cannot be translated as merely the right of self-expression. The welfare of the group is always involved. We might say that the "imperative" is a combination of highest thought and deepest feeling which comes only to those who know human history so well that they cannot divorce themselves from it and feel impelled to help mankind on its way. To be a Jew in the highest sense is to be so immersed in man's effort to create a life of meaning that one's personal goals are strongly determined by this prior claim.