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One-Sided Orthodoxy ?
Passover message insists honesty just as important as ritual observance

As I celebrate Passover this year with my family and my congregation, I shall try to focus attention on Passover's significance as a holiday to refine human character and promote the basic values of honesty and integrity.

Needless to say, Passover's central theme is freedom. God freed us from Egyptian bondage and therefore we must try to remain free and help liberate all who still do not enjoy that blessing. No one familiar with Biblical or Talmudic literature can be oblivious of that message. But this year I feel impelled to make that theme a secondary consideration. I will play it in low key. For unfortunately too many of us have abused the privilege of freedom. We forgot that freedom without a sense of responsibility is suicidal - destructive of ourselves, of human society, and of our natural environment.

In the name of free enterprise we have aggrandized ourselves whether by exploiting the disadvantaged, or demeaning truth, or wasting resources that should be conserved for our posterity. Nothing is more embarrassing to the Jewish people than the revelation day after day that the descendants of those who heard the Ten Commandments on Mount Sinai have forgotten their commitment to obey those laws forever and ever.

That non-Jews also misbehave is not an excuse. Jews are not free to ignore God's imperatives and we risk our very existence in the world when we undermine that moral code without which no society can long endure. True, only a tiny minority among us may be guilty but we are jointly and severally responsible for each other and we must stress as never before the centrality in Judaism of

God's will that in our dealings with our fellow-man we must be more meticulous than in our relationship with Him.

And Passover conveys this message. I cite but one instance. God hates those who use dishonest weights and measures in their business transactions (Deuteronomy 25:13-16). But when he ordered us to make sure that our scales are accurate, He reminded us that it was He who took us out of the land of Egypt (Leviticus 19:36).

And the Talmud explains the connection between the two. When God struck the Egyptian first-born and spared the Jewish first-born - immediately prior to the exodus from bondage - He knew how to distinguish between one tiny drop of semen and another - between the drop that made one Jewish and the drop that didn't. {*See Bava Metzia* 61b) In like manner He will know how to distinguish between one who gives sixteen ounces to the pound and one who gives but fifteen. That is not all. How will He punish us for such dishonesty? {*Ibid.*) In Deuteronomy we are reminded that for dishonesty the Amalekites - the Hamans - the Hitlers - will attack us. {*Deuteronomy* 25:17-18) How prophetic that was!

Throughout the millennia this point and countless others in the same vein were stressed in Jewish education. Yet I do not know how it happened that precisely in the schools that today provide maximum Jewish education this point is not receiving the attention it merits.

And that is why I recently urged the dedicated and committed devotees of a prominent leader to be less concerned at the moment with Jews who do not don phylacteries or do not have kosher mezuzahs on their doors and more concerned with those who though they do don the phylacteries and have the kosher mezuzahs are not setting good examples to their children, their associates, even their pupils, by their disregard of those portions of the Torah which mandate honesty and integrity in our dealings with all men - observant and non-observant, Jewish and non-Jewish. Indeed, they could start such a campaign in the very Yeshivot dedicated to the propagation of Torah.

Again I say - only a minority is guilty. But we cannot afford to tolerate even a tiny minority to embarrass all our people. And we must see to it that youngsters appreciate that cheating in any form is a more heinous offense than eating non-kosher food. And in-

suiting a fellow human is more unforgivable than desecrating the Sabbath or eating on Yom Kippur. The Talmud so tells us. *(See Baua Metzia* 58b) And it is imperative that we learn this especially on Passover.

The leaven of which we must rid our homes is only a symbol of the leaven in our souls of which we must rid ourselves. *(See Berachos* 17a) That leaven is self-indulgence - the self-indulgence that goads us to advance ourselves at the expense of others - the self-indulgence that prompts us to acquire worldly goods by foul means - the self-indulgence that makes us insensitive to the standards of honesty and integrity that God Himself ordained.

Among the tiny minority that flouts the will of God there are, of course, non-orthodox Jews as well as orthodox Jews. But when orthodox Jews are the offenders the stench is more pronounced. Decent people feel more outraged when those who ostensibly presume to be obedient to God in one area, ignore His commands in another area. But these decent people should remember that villains of all persuasions have the need to camouflage their villainy.

They often seek a cloak of righteousness sometimes only to conceal their real purpose and sometimes to maintain a good self-image which is necessary for mental health. In a milieu in which religiosity is respected the villain will purport to be a religious man. In a communist society he will be a highly vocal worshipper of Marx or Lenin or Stalin. In the academic community he will shout the values respected in that circle - academic freedom or free, uninhibited research. Let us not forget that even Nero justified his burning of Rome to rid it of Christians. This is the pattern of evil men everywhere. They need masks. We must not condemn the masks but rather the men who use them. And when religious observance is the mask it is our duty not to demean religious observance as an ideal but rather to unmask or unfrock those who misuse it.

I write this message not because these men have done so much damage recently to the image of orthodox Jews. I write rather because of offenses which all we encounter so often in our daily dealings and which prompt us to question whether there is any correlation between religious observance and good character. That is what concerns me.

There was a time when a man who wore Tefilin was presumed to be an honest man. This was a rule of law. I want the return to that condition and no more.