

March 8, 1985

*Questioning or Accepting Reasons
for Commandments*

Recently I overheard a brief exchange of views between two Jews, both learned in Jewish law. One suggested a reason why the Bible may have forbidden priests to marry divorcees. The other appeared to be impatient with the attempt to rationalize a divine commandment and emphatically stated that a Jew must obey without seeking explanations. Using a sophisticated term which may give the appearance of pedantry, one calls the latter view deontological.

I did not become involved in the dispute because the two men represented two well-known attitudes that Jewish scholars have maintained through the centuries. Both views are authentic in the sense that among the greatest Jewish thinkers - our luminaries of the past - one finds some committed to one view while others were committed to the other, and, therefore, one cannot say either view has no support in our tradition. Neither view is unorthodox. However, one is likely to find modern Orthodox Jews searching for explanations, while those who are opposed to modern Orthodoxy prefer blind obedience. And both groups believe as they do for reasons they consider adequate.

The group that prefers blind obedience is fearful that if one is prone to seek explanations for all the laws, then when an explanation is not readily forthcoming, one may be tempted not to obey the law. Or if an explanation is available but it is no longer relevant because of changed circumstances, one may dismiss it as no longer obligatory. The law is deemed obsolescent. Or one may feel that the explanation one has discovered requires most Jews to obey it but not those who are superior intellectually or spiritually.

Indeed, the Talmud cites one interesting illustration in support of the view that the search for explanations can yield undesirable

results. (*Sanhedrin* 21b) The Bible tells us specifically why kings are prohibited from marrying certain women.

Many of these may be idolaters of foreign birth, and they will influence the king to forsake the ancestral faith. King Solomon, wisest of all men, held that the law was inapplicable to him - he was too wise to be misguided by the fairer sex. Unfortunately, he did not obey the law, and what the Torah predicted came to pass even for him. Therefore, it was best that the Torah withhold giving us more than the law itself. If the reasons had been revealed as well, the consequences might be as disastrous as they were in the case of Solomon.

In addition to this reason, there is another that is not articulated as often. The test of one's faith is one's readiness to obey God's wish, even if one cannot understand why He commanded what He did. To paraphrase Tennyson, "Ours not to reason why, ours but to do and die." If there were good reason for doing what we were asked to do, then the stimulus to obedience would be reason and not faith. And those who see in faithful service to God the ultimate for man prefer that the compulsion come from faith and not from self-propelling understanding.

Among Christians this approach was so central that some of their theologians felt that even with doctrines of the faith, reason ought to play no part, and the more irrational and the more unreasonable the doctrine the better. In that way one proves how faithful one is - one is prepared to believe even the absurd, if God so willed it. This approach helped them accept that three can be one. I cannot recall any Jewish philosopher who was so extreme in his position, but there were many who did not want to rationalize the commandments.

The modern Orthodox are generally committed to the opposite point of view. They agree with Maimonides that God would not have commanded anything what was without reason and not for the good of man. Thus they want to reveal what God concealed. They know that their own intellectual powers are faulty, that they may search in vain for the reason and, even if they find one, it may be far from the truth. That explains why they rarely modify their performance of the commandment because of their hypotheses with regard to the commandments' reasons. But they cannot re-

press their desire to understand the whys and wherefores of God. It is human to want explanations. Moreover, a good explanation makes observance of the commandments more exciting. Life without meaning is hardly worthwhile. And a commandment without meaning can become perfunctory.

In rare instances the discovery of a meaning may influence the development of the law and its application. The rabbis debated this in the Talmud, and there were differences of opinion. The majority held that one should not use the presumed rationale for a law to justify exceptions if the law itself did not make the exceptions. Yet one often finds that the presumed rationale was responsible not only for exceptions but also for its obsolescence. This was especially the case in connection with rabbinic legislation.

This is not the proper forum for a full analysis of the theme. For my purpose it is adequate to state that there are two views and the men who argued the propriety of explaining why priests may not marry divorcees had intellectual ancestors on whom they relied.

Needless to say, in an age of reason the modern Orthodox are more in accord with the times and search for reasons. In an age when the pursuit of the occult is in vogue, the pursuit of reason is less popular. But both approaches have their roots in our tradition, and Jews can choose one or the other.

It is when they become intolerant of each other that they reveal how remote they are from understanding that our tradition is non-monolithic and how much they must learn not only about the love of all Jews but also about the tradition itself.