

*January 25, 1973*

*Zealots Who Offend:*  
Can their ugly behavior be  
devoid of blind hatred for other human beings?

**B**asic it is in Biblical and Talmudic literature that one must never serve God by trampling upon a human being or in complete oblivion of the feelings and sensibilities of one's fellow man. It is a sad reflection on the rabbinate that at this late date they have to be reminded of this elementary principle of our tradition.

With regard to Israel's controversy surrounding Chief Rabbi Goren, altogether too many have forgotten that in their zeal to protect God's word they are being nothing less than immoral in demeaning colleagues and laymen alike. The prophets of old would have told them that God has no regard for their loud protestations that they are doing what they are doing because they love Him and His Torah.

Recently I came upon a comparatively unknown text that demonstrates how careful our sages wanted us to be with regard to the feelings of other human beings. It is in connection with the Joseph story that this insight is brought.

The Bible tells us that after Jacob, the father, had died and was interred in the land of Canaan, the brothers approached Joseph and told Joseph that their father had instructed them to tell him that he should forgive them their sin against him.

This statement in the Bible could not help but create consternation. Nowhere in the Bible do we find that Jacob said this to his sons. What is more, if Jacob had knowledge of the sin that the brothers had committed against Joseph and wanted Joseph to be forgiving, he would have made this request of Joseph himself. It must have been obvious to Joseph that the brothers were lying for if the father felt that way he would have told Joseph about it at any one of their many meetings.

Indeed from Biblical literature it is not even apparent that Jacob knew what had really happened. Some commentators tried to find oblique and very inconclusive sources to prove that he knew. My own guess is that he did not know for I cannot imagine that when he addressed the sons on his deathbed he would have made so much of the crime of Simon and Levi against the people of Shechem and said nothing about the sin against Joseph.

It is far more likely that neither Joseph nor his brothers ever gave him the whole truth so that his old age would have been a miserable one as he pondered the tragedy of brotherly strife that had infested his household. Yet one may ask, if Joseph was so silent for years about the crime committed against him, what is it that made the brothers feel that after the father's death Joseph would be vindictive and seek to punish them? After all he had done so much to relocate them in Egypt and make them happy.

In the exercise of their creative imagination our rabbis read something into the story that is truly remarkable. What they visualized was that as Joseph and his brothers returned from the funeral of their father they passed the pit into which they had thrown Joseph. Joseph approached the pit because there is a Jewish law requiring one to pronounce a blessing whenever one passes the place where one experienced a miracle. (*Berachos* 54a, b) Joseph has been saved from that pit and felt a moral and religious obligation to approach it and thank God for the miracle that had occurred to him.

However, in the fulfillment of that religious obligation he forgot how his brothers might feel about it. They sensed that the detour he took at the pit may have been a sign that there were being renewed in him feelings of anger and the impulse for vengeance.

Therefore the rabbis said that it was wrong of Joseph to have done that which he did. To fulfill a religious obligation and thereby hurt the feelings of human beings around you is hardly to be either religious or moral and in this connection our sages cited the verse, "And ye shall be clean, 'pure,' with both God and the people of Israel." (*Numbers* 32:22)

What our sages are telling us is that we are forever bound to be aware of the impact our behavior will have upon those about us. If what we do will be hurtful to them, then even if what we are

doing is something that God commanded, we should abstain. Perhaps we should obey God's will a little later, or a little less ostentatiously, but never when what we are doing can bring a sense of hurt or pain to those who behold us.

It is tragic that in our day we so often overlook this mandate of our sages. Christians, too, can use this message. What they are doing and saying in connection with their new campaign for religious revival is not being done or said with any special consideration for the feelings of non-Christians in the United States.

However, my principal argument is not so much with Christians as with my own co-religionists and especially my own colleagues. There are perhaps times when these zealots must speak up. However, before one justifies one's ugly behavior as a zealot, one must search one's heart and be sure that it has no motivation other than the love of God, that it is completely devoid of any hate for human beings, and that one is really prepared to lay down one's life for the cause as Pinchas and Elijah were in days of yore. Who is the zealot today who can pretend that all of this is true of him!

What they are doing instead is to give expression to anger and frustration in the name of God's law and their zeal to champion the integrity and inviolability of that law, and they do not care about those whom they crush in the process. For this our eyes must shed tears and our hearts must ache.

True, such zealots are a tiny minority and their loud speech and ugly demonstrations do not reflect the mood of the overwhelming majority of observant and committed Jews in either Israel or in the United States. Perhaps I do not even begrudge them their freedom of expression and their outraged feelings. I fear only that too many Jews and non-Jews will believe that they are representative and that they reflect what is the way of Torah.

Long ago our sages quoted from the Bible approvingly that the ways of Torah are the ways of pleasantness. (*Proverbs* 3:17) They even legislated on the basis of that maxim. (*Sukkah* 32a, b) Let us ever remember it.