

Rabbi's Message

"Sucker Sermon"

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Rabbi Nathan Hirsch Finkel, one of the greatest teachers of Jewish ethics in the last generation, was wont to make a brilliant point with regard to the Joseph story. He held that it was simply incredible that nine of Jacob's children should conspire (to kill a tenth only because they were jealous of their father's exceptional love of him. These were not ordinary men — these were the great-grandchildren of Abraham, the grandchildren of Isaac, and the progenitors of the sacred tribes of Israel. How could they be so brutal as to kill Joseph, their own kin, because they coveted his shirt, or even because of his dream! Nay, said the Rabbi. It must have been that the brethren really fought over much more significant issues pertaining to Jewish law and Jewish philosophy. Perhaps they even argued the relative merits of democracy over monarchy and wanted to kill Joseph because he favored dictatorship. His view would thus be a threat to the future happiness of all mankind. Undoubtedly the controversy raged over matters that seemed important enough to warrant homicide or tyrannicide. But G-d refused to reveal to us what it was that they debated because the Torah wanted us to realize that no matter what the oral arguments may have appeared to be, the real cause of the crime was their jealousy — the simple, unmistakable envy of the brothers. And thus the Torah wanted to teach us that whenever we fight over what may appear to be issues of the greatest consequence, it may not be the significance of the issues that incites us to violent deeds or harsh words but rather a basic disturbance in our own psyches, a base or vile passion, and nothing more.

It would be an exceedingly marvelous discipline for each of us if we would think of this insight the next time we have a truly bitter argument with any person within our family or outside the family circle. Undoubtedly the argument will involve a principle which we hold dear. We will see the controversy as one involving a principle with regard to which we cannot compromise. It will be a principle in whose name, we feel, anything short of murder would be justified. Then let us detach ourselves from the argument for a few minutes and in a calm dispassionate analysis ponder what basic

primitive emotion is driving us to become indignant, angry, vengeful, malicious, or even homicidal.

If the goal of our religious observance and our religious living is the cultivation of our ethical personalities then we must take the lesson of Rabbi Finkel to heart. Nothing short of this will entitle us to claim that our religion has meaning for us.