

"THE NORMAL JEW"

In this morning's Sidra the Torah presents us with its code of sexual morality, a code that has been accepted as a cornerstone of our Western civilization.

However, despite the widespread acceptance in theory of the Torah's moral code, statistics in recent years indicate that it is honored more in the breach than in the observance. Moral laxity and marital infidelity have become part of a matter-of-fact way of life, not only amongst the idols of the amusement world, but for an ever larger number of people. The most corrosive aspect of this situation is what it has done to the morale of those who are truly moral. Since they are in the minority, or a gradually diminishing majority, they tend to think that perhaps they are wrong.

Perhaps unchastity is normal, and those who abstain are not normal. Maybe, as some statisticians have suggested, our whole moral code needs revamping. Since much of what has been previously condemned as immoral and degenerate is now widely practiced, perhaps they should no longer be regarded as wrong and reprehensible.

It is against this devious kind of reasoning that the Torah, centuries ago, proclaimed in clear words, in its introduction to its moral code, the doctrine: ke'maasei eretz mitzrayim asher yeshavtem bah lo taasu, u-khe'maasei eretz kenaan asher ani mevi etkhem shamah lo taasu u-ve'chukotehem lo telekhu.

"Like the doings of the land of Egypt, wherein you dwelt, shall you not do; like the doings of the land of Cana^{an}, whither I am bringing you, shall you not do; neither shall you walk in their statutes." What the Torah is saying is that what is being done -- whether in Egypt or Cana^{an} -- is no guide for what should be done -- whether in those places or anywhere else.

A distinguished man of letter,^S Joseph Wood Krutch, has brilliantly analyzed the difference between two concepts which are most pertinent to our discussions. They are, "average" and "normal."

A new phenomenon in our modern age -- with its democratization, its penchant for measuring and statistics, and its mass culture -- is the tendency to identify the normal with the average, to believe that what most people do must be right. The sophisticated call this "relativism." The ordinary man knows it by experience as "being normal." To do as most people do - that is normal. To do otherwise - that is abnormal, or subnormal, as the case may be. When a young mother says, "I want my child to be normal," she usually - though not always - means that she does not want him to stand out by being too bookish or too intellectual. She means "average," though she says "normal."

This is one of the most fundamental and disastrous errors that anyone can make. In order to remain civilized and prevent our whole society as well as our personal lives from deteriorating to the lowest common denominator, we must understand that there is a tremendous abyss that separates the average from the normal. The average is a description of what is; the normal is the ideal, the principle, what ought to be. It is only in a perfect world that the average is normal. In real life, the average is usually far below the normal. In fact, to be completely normal is very rare indeed.

From this it follows that it is the normal, not the average, which is desirable and for which we should strive. Otherwise, life becomes meaningless, even ludicrous. For instance, in the population at large there are some people who have only one leg, and some who have none. Thus the average man or woman has about 1.9 legs. Nevertheless, the normal person still has two legs. If we were to accept the popular error, and say that what is average is normal,

and that this is desirable, then anyone who has two legs ought to be required to cut off an inch of one of them! If the average is declared the normal, then all ~~genius and excellence~~ ^{and the pursuit of excellence abandoned} must be banished. All art must be reduced to cartooning, all music defined by the Hit Parade selections, and all literature confined to "Best Sellers."

This confusion of the two terms "average" and "normal" becomes most critical in the realm of morality. The statistics on the moral behavior of Americans, compiled and published in recent years, revealed a painful gap between the moral theories and immoral practices of great numbers of Americans. This in itself was simply a piece of astounding scientific information. The real problem arose when the report was interpreted - or misinterpreted, perhaps - to mean that these findings indicate a need for radically ~~modifying~~ ^{altering} the moral code by which most Americans live. To conclude from these studies that our moral laws and standards should be modified in order to conform to our current practice - that is an assertion as immoral as anything described and tabulated in the reports themselves. To maintain that the normal must be made equal to the average is a most fundamental and unprincipled offense against decency. It implies that whatever man does is satisfactory, that he never need strive for any loftier goal, that mores may replace morals. Transpose this idea for immorality in America to murder in Germany and you have a perfect rationale for killing Jews under the Nazis: everyone is doing it, therefore it is proper, or normal.

It is against this debased doctrine that the Torah, in introducing its moral legislation, warned us not to follow the practice of the Egyptians or the ^aCananites, the "average" of the societies which we had left or to which we were coming, but the "normal" which, originating from Sinai, must continue unchanged and undiminished through the centuries.

It is interesting that Rashi maintains that the places in Egypt and Canaan where the Israelites dwelt and which the Torah condemns because of their immorality were the very worst, the most degenerate, of all the places in these two ^{count} countries: ha-mekulkalin she-ba-hem. The author of Keli Yakar takes exception to these comments by Rashi. Why, he asks, should Providence place the people of Israel, that nation which was to become the model of holiness and virtue before the world, specifically in those places least conducive to a moral life? On the contrary, he concludes, the areas inhabited by the Israelites were the least immoral of all.

The Keli Yakar has a good argument. And yet I believe that Rashi had greater insight. By placing the Jews in the most licentious of cities, Providence wanted to teach them, and civilized human beings of all generations, that reducing the normal to the average is not a harmless exercise. The average, that which is practiced by most men, is a fluctuating and uncertain standard. He who follows the morality of the average builds the foundation of his life on the quicksands of the spirit. The Torah says to our ancestors, and through them to us: if you want to see how low, how ugly, how degrading the average can become, look about you and observe how people lead their lives in a manner that can evoke nothing but disgust in any decent human being. If you are willing to enshrine the average as the normal, then you must be prepared to characterize as normal even ha-mekulkalin she-ba-hem, even degenerates if they happen to form the majority of any society. These most revolting examples of the worst of the Egyptians and the Canaanites demonstrate the ultimate absurdity of taking refuge in the contemptible crowd.

What does it mean to be "normal?" The word derives from the Latin norma which in its anglicized form is norm. This means: a rule or authorized standard, a law. So that "normal" means: corresponding to a standard, conforming to law. The "average" is not law but statistics, it is the "~~doings~~" of the land of Egypt" and the "~~doings~~ of the land of Canaan" - and concerning them we are commanded lo taasu, do not follow or emulate this practice.

The Torah adds the word u-ve'chukotehem lo telekhu, "you shall not walk in their statutes." Why does the Torah first refer to maasei, "their doings," and then to chukotehem, "their statutes?" The famed Bible commentator, Abraham Ibn Ezra, remarks: she-lo yargil ha-adam la-lekhet be'derekh zeh ad she-yihyek lo chok, a man should not accustom himself to follow this way until it becomes for him a standard. In other words, Ibn Ezra tells us, the Torah did not want maasei to become chukotehem, it did not want us to sanction the average as the norm. The average must never be legitimized as the standard of conduct, the normal. For a Jew, the normal is not maasei eretz mitzrayim or maasei eretz Kenaan, but, as the Torah says in the very next verse, u-shemartem et chukotai v'et mishpatai - and you shall observe My laws and My statutes. The law of G-d, that is our "norm." And the observance of that Torah - that is "normal," no matter how little the average individual may adhere to it.

Many of the modernist deviations from Traditional Judaism also began with the principle that since the Law is largely violated, it loses its validity. This is arrant nonsense. If the average observance is low, it is the business of those who know and love the Torah to make the average rise until it becomes the normal, not the reverse. Torah is not an infinitely plastic substance that can constantly be changed so as to fit the shape of our taste and our conduct. It is we who must change and our circumstances that must be altered to fit the demands of Torah.

No wonder we read this portion, the parshat arayot, on Yom Kippur. On the very holiest day of the year we read the Torah's moral code, for on this day we pause and take stock and, doing that, we realize that we must apologize for being average -- and promise to ~~try~~ to be normal.

What we have said is true not only about the Torah's moral legislation, but about all of life and all of the Torah. Thus, if you want to know who or what is a normal Jew, you cannot merely compile statistics and derive the answer. The sociologist can describe for you the average Jew. Only the student of Torah can tell you about the normal Jew. The average Jew today may not put on Tefillin; the normal does. The average Jew may speak ill of another human being; the normal Jew - never. To be a normal Jew means to observe Kashruth, Shabbat, Taharat ha-Mishpochah -- in short, all of Torah.

The average Jew today is subnormal, because he is far behind this kind of observance, this depth of commitment, this purity of mind and nobility of spirit. The normal Jewish child receives a full, maximal Jewish education, even if the average may achieve no more than Sunday School Scholarship. The State of Israel is a normal Jewish state when it is inspired and guided by the teachings of our Torah, the visions of our Prophets, the doctrines of the Talmud. It is only another disappointingly average little country if it does not fulfill these requirements. When secular Zionism preached the establishment of a state ke'khol ha-goyim they called it a "normalization" of Jewish life. This was a historic error. Actually, it was a reduction to the average concept of most nations. It represents the "sub-normalization" of Jewish life.

This, then, is the duty of every individual, every society, every nation, of the world itself: never to be smug and satisfied with the mere average, but to try to raise it to the levels of the objective norms which transcend the transient whims of men. For in this direction lies the enhancement and ennoblement of life itself. In the words of the Torah, immediately after urging us to abandon the practice of the averages of Egypt and Canaan and encouraging us to adopt the "normal" law of Torah, asher yaaseh otam ha-adam ve'chai be-hem - for these are the statutes which a man shall do, and live by them.