

GREAT IDEAS ARE DANGEROUS

Jewish mysticism teaches a great principle, which it derives from the verse in Kohelet that God created the world ^{זש שניצל זש}, "one opposite the other." This means, according to the Kabbalah, that every manifestation of holiness in the world had an underside of profanity and destructiveness. Hence, when God emanated the ten spheres of holiness, there came into being, corresponding to them, ^{יעה, קקנס שיי' 20 708}, the ten spheres of impurity. This underside of evil and impurity that always accompanies the phenomena of sanctity, is referred to as the ^{ק'הק ק'גו}, "the other side" -- a term often applied, in Yiddish, to the devil or demons.

This is not only a mystical idea, but a universal truth that applies at all times and places.

For instance, love is a great idea, but it can easily be distorted into something powerfully destructive: lust. The same tender and warm feelings of love, when applied to the wrong person, become illicit and immoral. No wonder that the word ^{אדו}, which is usually used to express the idea of affectionate generosity, is also used by the Torah to describe a particularly ugly form of incest.

Self-confidence is a great attribute. Every parent wants to inculcate this quality in his children. Yet by the slightest twist, this great idea reveals its "other side" of impurity, and it becomes -- arrogance, changing a confident person into an insufferably supercilious one.

Democracy is certainly a great idea, one which has inspired millions. Yet the same idea of power being invested in the people can, if one is not careful, turn into its "other side," and become merely mob-rule. What is a lynch mob, if not democracy distorted?

All of these, and many more, are great ideas which are dangerous. I often use this as a test of an idea. If someone proposes an idea to me, I see if it can become dangerous if it is distorted. If it can not, then probably the idea is trivial!

Of course, one can simply opt for safety and security by abandoning all great ideas -- but that is a living death. Rather, it is incumbent upon us to search out greatness, but to beware of going to the extremes, to be always suspicious of ~~taking things~~ to their "logical conclusion," which usually means the Sitra Ahara, the "other side."

The same principle applies to the quality of zeal. Without it, commitment has little value and can hardly survive. Judaism cannot do without the passion that goes with zeal. Our Sidra begins with the personality of Pinhas, who is the symbol of zeal -- ^{פיהס} in Biblical Hebrew, ^{פיהס} in modern Hebrew. The Children of Israel had sinned with the Midianite women in the cult of the idol Baal Pe-or, and Zimri, one of the princes of the Tribe of Simeon, had flaunted his immoral liaison with a Midianite princess before Moses and the children of Israel. If this had gone unopposed and unpunished, only God knows how dreadful

the consequences would have been for Israel then and for all posterity. Whereupon the Priest Pinhas took a sword and stabbed the two perpetrators to death. Our Sidra tells us that because of this act of zeal, Pinhas was awarded with the High Priesthood as a hereditary gift.

Unquestionably, Kana'ut is a valuable sentiment. Without this zealotness, without this passion, commitment is at best superficial. Zeal involves self-sacrifice and earnestness.

Such Kana'ut is not an easy achievement. There may be those who resort to zealotness as a substitute for thinking, but that is not always the case. The zealot is often a lonely man, willing to sacrifice popularity for the sake of his ideals. Consider the difference between the last Sidra and this one. Read through what the pagan prophet Balaam had to say about our people -- a veritable string of adulatory compliments! Every time you feel hesitant and uncertain as a Jew, go back to the prophecies of Balaam, and you will emerge much more optimistic and self-confident. And yet, the Rabbis considered him a pervert, and the tradition refers to him as רע דן פרס, the evil or wicked Balaam! Contrariwise, Pinhas, according to many of our commentators, incurred the displeasure and animosity of large numbers of Israelites by his act of zealotness. And he is praised and offered the perpetual High-Priesthood in recognition of his act!

The founding of the State of Israel in 1948 required a great deal of zealotness. Looking back at that era with the benefit of historical perspective and emotional detachment, many of us who at that time were opposed to the extremist groups now can recognize that the so-called "Stern Gang," and the Irgun were indispensable for the success of our venture. And these groups proved far more civilized and moral and humane than the guerrillas of so many other nationalist movements. It is for this reason that we ought offer our respect and undying gratitude to those two young men who were hanged by the British in 1947 and who this past week were re-interred on Mt. Herzl with honors by all of Israel.

And what is true for the State is true for Judaism. We have survived to this day because of the self-sacrifice of countless zealots, the successors of Pinhas.

That is why I am not overly anxious for our camp, what we call "Modern Orthodoxy," to cut off from the "right wing." The "Yeshiva world" and the "Hasidic world" are reservoirs of passionate commitment, without which we are wishy-washy, wan, weak, and wavering. Of course I am unhappy with many of their policies. But our very survival may well depend on the degree to which we can become inspired by their zeal and learn to bring passion to our own commitments, no matter how much we may disagree with them on specific issues.

In our Sidra, Pinhas is therefore praised and rewarded.

And yet, if we study the verses of today's Sidra carefully, we can find in them tell-tale signs of reservation and hesitation about zealotness. Our Rabbis were much more explicit when they said that Pinhas acted פ'נ'יהוה נ'ס'ג'ג' כ'ע'ב, "against the wishes of the Sages."

But even in the Torah itself we find hints of apprehension that, like all great ideas, Kana'ut has an "other side," that of destructive fanaticism. The other side of a warm-blooded approach is a hot-headed one.

כִּי יִשְׁמַע אֱלֹהִים קִנְיָן וְיִשְׁמַע אֱלֹהִים קִנְיָן

Thus, one verse reads:
"Therefore say, Behold I give him (Pinhas) my covenant of peace." However this verse is a bit difficult. Should it not say

וְיִשְׁמַע אֱלֹהִים קִנְיָן or (כִּי יִשְׁמַע אֱלֹהִים קִנְיָן)

"say unto him" or, "say unto the Children of Israel?" Instead we find the word קִנְיָן all by itself. A number of years ago, a student of mine became proficient in Semitic languages, and published an article on one verse in the beginning of the Torah, which describes the actions of Cain towards Abel. When we read of the murder by Cain, the Torah says וַיִּקַּח קַיִן אֶת אֶבֶן וַיִּזְרוּ אֹתוֹ, "and Cain said," but does not tell us what he said. This student discovered that in cognate languages, the root קִנְיָן frequently means "to puff up" with anger. Thus it means that Cain became angry with Abel and therefore killed him.

I suggest that the same is true for this verse. It means: Therefore become angry, show your displeasure, even at the same time that you are rewarding Pinhas! And give him the covenant of peace, teaching him that zeal must never be sustained, that it is appropriate only for extraordinary moments in history, but that in ordinary life situations there must be only Shalom, peace. The בְּרִית (covenant) is meant for the regular ongoing activities of life, and there only peace and not zeal must prevail.

So the next verse: "And it shall be for him and his descendants after him for an eternal covenant of the priesthood וְיִשְׁמַע אֱלֹהִים קִנְיָן וְיִשְׁמַע אֱלֹהִים קִנְיָן." That is usually translated as, "because he was zealous for his God." I suggest that here the word בְּרִית has the meaning of, "instead." Thus, Pinhas, who did something meritorious when he performed his act of zeal, must now learn to adopt a policy of peace and priesthood instead of zeal. Or perhaps בְּרִית means, in almost a physical sense, "underneath," that even when one is zealous, underneath the zeal must always be love and peace. Not vengeance but love, not zeal but peace, are the attributes of hereditary priesthood.

So, in all aspects of contemporary life we must seek out Kana'ut, but by keeping it confined and restrained and in the context of love and peace, we will avoid the "other side" of fanaticism.

As I have said, I admire the zeal of our right-wing. But קִנְיָן, we must become upset and indignant when it is thoughtless, abusive, uncivilized. At that point, it can well become destructive and self-defeating.

Of course it is not easy to propose clear formulae on how to determine when zeal shades into fanaticism, when passion become poisonous.

But if we are conscious of this potential of danger, if we are aware of how destructive great ideas can become, then we will be able to latch on to greatness and avoid the snares and pitfalls of "the other side."

If *think*, if we are sensitive to the abuses of exalted ideas, then we will attain *עוֹלָם וָעוֹלָם בְּרִית הַשְּׁלוֹמִים*, the blessing and covenant of eternal peace.