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SHABBAT LEKH LEKHAH
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"STATURE -SYMBOLS"

THE ANSWER TO STATUS SYMBOLS

Keen observers of the ^{on}temporary American scene have informed us that one of the distinguishing characteristics of our society is the search for status, for reaching ever higher plateaus of social recognition and acceptability. We are, all of us, involved in a kind of game ~~for~~ mythology whereby the status we seek is represented by certain kinds of symbols.

You are all acquainted with the status symbols of our society. One status symbol is the "right" kind of car - one year an outsized monster, the next an undersized foreign import. The neighborhood in which one lives is often a status symbol - even a remote, inaccessible area with no clear advantages over places closer to the city are sometimes regarded as having high status value. A status symbol is the "right" kind of store, regardless of the quality of the goods or their price; the kind of school to which you send your children; the kind of clothes you wear, the club you belong to, the temple you are affiliated with, and the restaurants you patronize.

These symbols are supposed to bestow status upon the fortunate ones who achieve them. They are decided upon by a closed, anonymous circle of fashion - dictators and opinion - makers who are social leaders in our society, and whom others follow instinctively. They place a premium not on contents, inwardness, objective quality, or utility, but on a fiction elaborately developed for the purpose of defining class - structure and mobility in America. Much of our current literature ^{features} ~~teaches~~ books by sociologists who describe all this in detail, and usually gently poke fun at the status-seeker.

What does Judaism have to say about ~~all~~ this? What insight can we cull from our ancient wisdom? I believe ~~that~~ if we ponder our sacred literature we can discover nothing inherently objectionable in status-seeking.

To some extent, every society must have a set of status-symbols. There is something of the status-seeker in every one of us. Kept in bounds, and practiced in moderation, status-seeking is unexceptionable.

But I believe that our sacred ~~position~~^{tradi}tion would object were status-seeking to become - as it so often does - an obsession, a kind of socially sanctioned compulsion which makes us progressively sillier and sadder, and preempts our loyalty, ^mind, and concentration from far more serious pursuits.

How can we keep excessive status-seeking and the obsession with status-symbols in check? The answer, I believe, is: stature-seeking. Judaism's solution for the craze for status is the craving for stature.

For indeed there is a great difference between the pursuit of status and the striving for stature. The status-seeker desires the respect of others. The stature-seeker - self-respect. Status is a matter of where you stand; stature - how high you reach. Status-seeking is directed to pleasing society; stature-seeking - to pleasing the deity. The status-seeker craves the applause of the mighty; the stature-seeker - the approval of the Almighty. Status-seeking is usually hollow. Stature-seeking can be truly hallowed and holy.

Which comes first according to Jewish thought? There is no question that if the two cannot be reconciled, and we must choose between both alternatives, then stature-seeking must take precedence over status-seeking.

Allow me to present to you an admittedly extreme example, but one which highlights the attitude of Judaism to our problem. The Rabbis of the Mishnah posed the following question: to whom must we give greater respect and honor, to a man who is a great scholar but of illegitimate birth, or to the High Priest of Israel if he happens^S to be an ignoramus? Translated into our terms, that would mean: who is more important in the eyes of Judaism, the man of stature -

the scholar - who has no status (for he is illegitimate), or the man of status - the High Priest, who has no stature (for he is an ignoramus)? And the answer of Judaism is clear: Mamzer talmid chakham kodem le'kohen gadol am ha-aretz, that the illegitimate scholar is greater in our esteem and affection than the ignorant High Priest. The man of stature is more deserving of eminence^{se} and reverence than is the man of mere status.

This is, as we have said, an extreme example but its lesson is applicable to us in every form and manner. It tells us that in our times and circumstances we must emphasize inwardness over outwardness, private achievements over public relations, spiritual permanence over social prominence.

The status-seeker has been described as a sometimes pathetic human being in some of our best selling current non-fiction. He is, more often than not, "other - directed," subservient to the wishes of others who set standards for his "taste," and behavior. He is almost neurotic with anxiety as to whether he is "accepted" or not in society. He is over-anxious to please, to prove himself to and ingratiate himself with others.

It is interesting, therefore, to read a short excerpt from the writings of a very wise Jew who was evidently aware of just these symptoms of status-seeking. In this passage, in which he speaks of the advantages of the man of faith over him who has no faith, merely substitute the expression "stature-seeker" for "the man of faith", and you will learn of the ills of status-seeking from which the man of stature is exempt.

"He [the man of faith] will not serve anyone beside G-d. He will not set his hope on any human being nor wait upon the children of men. He will not be subservient to them in order to win their favor. He will neither flatter them nor agree with them when to do so violates his religious conscience. Their behavior will not frighten him, nor will he be afraid

of their opposition. He will divest himself of the cloak of their favor and not find it necessary to feel obligated to ~~em~~^{them} and ingratiate himself with them... He will not give falsehood a gloss of beauty."

Does that sound modern? These words were written by R. Bachya Ibn Pakuda in his Chovot Ha-Levavot (Chapter 4) over nine-hundred years ago!

But if we are to counterbalance status-seeking with stature-striving, we must also have a set of stature-symbols to offset the status-symbols. What are they? They are, I recommend, our mitzvot. When a Jew observes the Mitzvot he is creat^{ing} for himself true stature rather than mere status, he is achieving real dignity rather than just prestige. One can give a thousand examples. When a Jew eats matzah or lights the Channukah candles, he grows in stature, for by the performance of the mitzvah he identifies with the great Jewish tradition of freedom-fighting and the denial of tyranny and slavery. When the Jew waves his lulav in all directions in the Synagogue, he is at one with ^{the} ~~the~~ prophets who proclaim the oneness of G-d everywhere. In fact, in the performance of any mitzvot a man increases his stature, for he thereby increases the holiness in the world, the kedushah in society, for indeed before performing the mitzvah he blesses G-d Who "hath sanctified us with his commandments and commanded us..." The performance of a mitzvah has cosmic significance, for according to the Kabbalah the observance of a religious commandment is a step in the direction of tikkun or the elevation of the entire world, and the increase in the unity and oneness of G-d.

I wish to comm^end your attent^on ~~especially to~~ the historical and traditional associations of two mitzvot in particular. Perhaps these will serve as examples of how a life ^{of} mitzvot is a career of stature-seeking. In our Bible reading of this morning we learn of how Abraham had interv^ened in the war of the kings of that time in order to rescue his nephew Lot. In the course of winning the war for one side, he rescu^ed the king of Sodom. This latter king expressed

his gratitude to Abraham by saying to him ha-re^{ch}ush kach lakh - take for yourself all the spoils of war if you so wish. But Abraham declined. He said, I have raised my hand to the Lord, the G-d on high, possessor of Heaven and Earth, that I will not take anything that belongs to you - im mi-chut v'ad serokh na'al, "from a thread to a shoe lace." Nothing will I take from you, v'al tomar ani he'esharti et Avram, "and thou shalt not say 'I made Abraham rich.'"

Our Rabbis were ^{impressed} ~~increased~~ by this demonstration of independence on the part of Abraham and they said that as a reward for Abraham's refusal to accept anything from the King of Sodom, neither a chut ⁿ or a serokh na'al - a ^{thread or a} shoe lace, his descendants were privileged to receive from G-d two Mitzvot: chut shel tekhelet u-retz^uvah shel tefillin. That is, because Abraham refused even a thread, his children received the Mitzvot of tzitzit, the ^{threads of the} fringes on the tallit; and because he refused even a shoe-lace, which in those days ~~were~~ was made of leather, his children were awarded with the Mitzvah of tefillin.

What a powerful insight! Do you see what they mean? When a Jew wears his tallit and tefillin, he no longer cares what others think, for he himself has grown a foot taller, he has gained stature and become contemptuous of the Kings of ^{Sodom} ~~Solomon~~ and their spiritual descendants in all ages and places. He has gained a new-found personal independence, for he is - through the tallit and tefillin - the heir of Abraham who would not think of taking a shoe-lace or a thread from the King whom he had saved. Through the tallit and tefillin you identify with the great Abraham. And how significant his action was! According to Rashi he refused to touch the spoils of war because he considered them gezel - stolen property, and he was a man of great ethical instinct. So that when we put on the tallit or don ^{the tefillin,} we too become people of great ethical stature. Or take the interpretation of Malbim, that Abraham refused the spoils of war because he wanted to teach the King that the

triumph was not Abraham's but G-d's, that only the Almighty is the one who deserves the ~~fruits~~ ^{fruits} of victory. In that case, we, the descendents of Abraham, by wearing tallit and tefillin, gain in religious stature. Or take what is probably the most incisive interpretation of Abraham's actions, that of Abarbanel, who maintains that Abraham's refusal was based on the fact that Abraham was a Nadiv, an aristocrat - not of birth, not of wealth, but of spirit - and an aristocrat does not accept gifts from just anyone. So that Abraham turned to the King of Sodom and said, "I have lifted my hand to the Lord, the G-d on High" - to him I stretch out my hand asking for favors. But I would never put my hand out to you asking for a hand-out. You are not significant enough to give me a gift. You, O King of Sodom, can keep your status; I prefer the stature of being a man of G-d. And so we, by performing the commandments of tallit and tefillin, become aristocrats in the tradition of Abraham.

Indeed it is only through the concepts of Mitzvot that we can learn to grow in stature in our personal lives. If you give charity only because it is a social necessity or because of social pressures, then you may be retaining your status. Only if you give because you believe in it, heart and soul and because you are performing a Mitzvah of Tzedakah, are you gaining in stature. If your concept of a Bar-Mitzvah is only to splurge in a big birthday party, then it is nothing more than status-seeking. If it is a solemn occasion on which the young man commits his life to the observance of the divine commandments, then it is the achievement of stature. If you have an open home and hospitality, but only to entertain social equals or, preferably, social superiors, - then it is the hospitality of a status-seeker. But if your home is open for the poor and the scholarly, for the indigent or the wise, then you are a stature-seeker in the tradition of Abraham who practiced hakhnasat orchim, true religious hospitality.

Stature-symbols, then, are an answer to status-symbols. I must conclude with this note: We ought not to assume ~~always~~ that the two are irreconcilably in ~~conflict.~~ ~~comfort.~~ Our effort, must be dedicated to putting a premium on piety, to giving esteem to scholarship, to creating a society which will value that which is truly valuable. In a word, we must learn to give status to stature.

This noble effort of narrowing the gap between inner stature and outer status, of giving status to stature, is largely being achieved in Israel today. When, as occurred only recently, the country as a whole gives its applause to a poor, hungry, scholarly, Yeminite Rabbi who is the winner of the International Bible Contest, ~~It~~ ^{it} is a sign that the citizenry ~~as a whole~~ appreciates true stature. The same holds true when the city of Tel Aviv distributes its annual Rav Kook awards for the best religious literature of the year. It is a matter of giving status to stature. And the ~~same holds true~~ ^{can be said}, on a smaller scale, in the United States, when honors are accorded to students who prove superior in their studies of Bible or Talmud.

This indeed is the path we must follow; to give priority to stature over status until such a time as both will have become identical. That is, until - in the words of the prophet Isaiah, "and the world shall be filled with the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea."