

"SINCERELY YOURS"

Hypocrisy is rightly a despised trait, and the word "hypocrite" a harsh and contemptuous epithet reserved for vile people. It is all the more unfortunate, therefore, that the popular condemnation of insincerity is not always matched by a correspondingly universal abstention from this vice in the affairs of man in society. Every day many thousands of letters are written in which the writers employ varied devices ranging from subtle deviousness to outright deceit, and compound their crime by signing the letters, "I am, sincerely yours..."

What is a hypocrite? According to the dictionary definition it is one who pretends to be something other than what he really is (usually one who pretends to be better than he really is) or to feel what he does not really feel. Hypocrisy is feigning, acting a part, pretending. Perhaps a better word is the Hebrew tzeviut -- literally: coloring, dyeing. Hypocrisy then, is giving an impression which does not correspond with the facts, it is the incomensurateness of the inner fact and the outer appearance.

Our prophets stormed against hypocrisy. Our Rabbis thundered against it. The Talmud quotes King Yannai advising his

wife, Queen Salome, "do not be afraid either of the Pharisees or those who are not Pharisees; fear only those hypocrites who act like Pharisees, who behave like Zimri (an ignoble person) and expect to be rewarded like Pinhas (the saintly priest of Israel)."

In that case, we are presented with a problem by today's Sidra. We read this morning, in very few lines, that Reuben sinned with Bilhah, the concubine of his father Jacob. If the Bible said so, it is the truth. Yet the Talmud advises us that מַעֲשֵׂה רְעוּבֵן נִקְרָא וְלֹא מְתוּרָא-- the story of Reuben should be read but not translated. It once was the custom that the Torah would be read as we read it, and then one person would be assigned to translate it publicly into Aramaic, the vernacular at that time. But an exception was made of this story of Reuben, and when one Rabbi insisted that the story of Reuben be read in the Hebrew but left untranslated, he was congratulated by his colleagues. But is this not hypocritical and insincere? Is not the suppression of the truth hypocrisy, and is not every instance of hypocrisy deplorable?

The answer is: no, it is not hypocrisy or insincerity, although it suppresses the broadcast of a true event. And, if one should insist that this is hypocrisy, then with full

respect to all our honorable prejudices, certain forms of such insincerity are not malicious but wholesome and healthy. Not in all ways must one's appearances be thoroughly equivalent and correspond to his inner thoughts. To speak a conscious untruth aiming at personal gain or creating a favorable image and false impression, is a foul act. But to refrain from telling all I know and consider to be true, either because I am unsure how that truth will be interpreted, or out of respect for the sensitivity and feelings for others -- that is an act of civility, not insincerity.

Thus, in the affair of Reuben there were many mitigating factors, and varying interpretations are possible, as indeed many of them appear in the Talmud. A direct translation into the vernacular is, therefore, misleading and the cause of much misunderstanding. Furthermore, it is bad enough that the Torah preserves a sacred record of Reuben's misdeed, and there is no need to add salt to the wounds of a cherished forebear even if he is no longer in the world of the living.

It is an averah to lie; it is no mitzvah to tell all I know, even if it is the truth. There is a law in the Shulhan Arukh that if a man has, Heaven forbid, lost a close relative for whom he must mourn, but he is unaware of his loss, then one ought not to apprise him of it within thirty days of the death, for then he would be obligated to observe

all of the Shivah. One may not give a false answer upon interrogation, but one ought not to volunteer this kind of information, and if he does he is considered a kesil, a fool. A fool, indeed! Hypocrisy is not avoided and insincerity not served by mindless chattering and compulsive loquaciousness!

Too much cruelty has been practiced under the guise of honesty, too much frightful foolishness excused as frankness, too many assaults on the feelings of others carried out under the pretense of sincerity. Is it hypocrisy for a teacher to refrain from telling a slow student that he is unintelligent? Is it commendable sincerity to tell every homely person, "you are plain-looking and unattractive?" No, it is not. (In fact, Hillel taught that one must even tell an unattractive bride that she is beautiful and charming.) The truth should be spoken, not blurted out. If you hear a performer or entertainer or artist, and have adverse criticism -- even if it is constructive -- then Jewish ethics and derekh erez advise you: wait for a propitious time before offering your comments, do not offend the innermost feelings of another human being. If you apprehend a friend in embarrassing circumstances, performing an evil deed, it is a mitzvah to reproach him. You are not free

to withhold your comment. But the rebuke must be administered gently, considerately, delicately. The Torah commands us,

הוֹכַח תּוֹכִיחַ אֶת עַמִּיתְךָ, you shall reproach your friend. And the Rabbis add: אֶלְפֵי אַלְפֵי אַלְפֵי, even a thousand times. On this, one of the great lights of the Musar movement commented: this means that the single rebuke must be broken into a thousand pieces and offered in tiny doses, lest the person you seek to correct should become the victim of painful insult.

Furthermore, there is a decent, beneficial, and honorable kind of hypocrisy which is not insincere, and without which society might well collapse. There are certain conventional fictions that are apparently untrue, but ^{that} ~~which~~ suggest a kind of truth far beyond the reach of normal comprehension. Jewish law, for instance, aims at producing perfect individuals and a holy society, a kehillah kedoshah. Yet it knows full well, as King Solomon taught, ki adam ein tzaddik ba-aretz asher yaaseh tov ve'lo ye'eta -- that no person in the world is perfectly righteous and blameless. Halakhah grants each person a hezkat kashrut, a presumption of innocence and virtue; yet it knows full well that, as the Bible teaches, yetzer lev ha-adam rak ra mi-ne'urav -- man's innate disposition is towards evil. Is this hypocrisy? If it is -- we should all be in favor of hypocrisy! For with-

out it, all law and religion must progressively be reduced and diminished to the lowest level of common practice. This spells the death of all ideals. Just as a child who errs and stumbles, yet is trusted by a parent, and feels that the parent has an opinion of him that is higher than his poor reality, is inspired by this discrepancy to fulfill the higher image; so with the Jew and his Halakhah: he is imperfect and faulted, yet because he is granted the hezkat kashrut and told that he incorporates the Image of G-d, and is expected to live up to it, he will strive to do just that, lest he suffer inner embarrassment and shame.

This week the Supreme Court has been deliberating on the problems of censorship and pornography. This brings to mind a fascinating article I read in a national magazine (Harper's, March 1965, by George P. Elliot) in which a principle similar to the one we have been discussing was put forth. The author believes that the law should banish pornography, but not enforce this regulation. He asks: is it not, however, hypocrisy to outlaw pornography if we know well that it will be sold surreptitiously? He answers: "The law should rest content with a decent hypocrisy," and ban obscene literature in the marketplace even if it knows that it will be sold under the counter, where the law will not and cannot bother with it. Law is the way that society

approves and disapproves of certain acts. "A certain amount of official hypocrisy is one of the operative principles of a good society." Unenforced laws express society's goals and ideals and visions. Law is meant not only to punish, but also to educate to higher standards. "Civilization behaves as though men are decent in full knowledge that they are not."

Judaism cannot take exception to this doctrine. When, at the beginning of the Emancipation, non-Orthodox Jews did ^{adopt an opposite point of view,} they began to prune the laws and cut down the Halakhah to fit current, prevalent practice. As a result, they discovered -- as we well know in our days -- that when you do this, Judaism begins to crumble and Jews begin to vanish. If Jewish laws are abandoned because they are not universally observed, Judaism becomes nothing but a sanctimonious self-approval for spiritual failures, a vacuous "hekhsher" for not-so-kosher Jews.

That is why we ought not to be impressed or depressed at the cries of hypocrisy often hurled at Orthodox synagogues that disapprove of travel on the Sabbath, though many of its members violate that standard; that insist upon full and meticulous observance of kashrut, though some members in the privacy of their homes or when away from home, do not live up to this ideal. If a standard is set, the congregation must live under the impression that the ideal is a reality; and all

who fail to conform must suffer the pangs of guilt. If that is a fiction, it is a splendid and sublime fiction, on the way to becoming a luminous truth.

Finally there is a form of feigning or pretense which is not only necessary and permissible, but the highest rung that men can reach. We read last week that Jacob, after twenty years with Laban, decided to return to Canaan and the inevitable confrontation with his vengeful brother Esau. This came about, the Torah tells us, immediately after the birth of Joseph. Why just then? The Talmud answers, referring to this morning's Haftorah, that the House of Joseph is regarded as a flame, and the House of Esau as straw; in other words, that Joseph for some reason is the ideal antidote to Esau's hatred. The Midrash introduces this answer with the following four words which are most significant: mi-shenolad sitno shel esav, upon the birth of Joseph who was the "Satan" of Esau! Joseph is considered the "Satan" -- the adversary or antagonist -- of his uncle Esau. One of the great Hasidic rabbis of the Sochotchower dynasty explained this as follows. Esau was a hypocrite. Outwardly, he was a pious individual. He would approach his blind father, Isaac, with such questions as: ketzad me'asrin et ha-teven, how does one offer a tithe of salt or straw -- although he well knew

that such objects do not require any tithe. He put on an act; he pretended to be pious and observant. At the same time, inwardly, he was a rasha, vile and wicked and cruel. Now, Joseph was also guilty of pretense -- but in the exactly opposite way! Outwardly, our Tradition tells us, he was a callow youth. He was mesalsel be'saaro, the sort of youngster who would stand for hours in front of a mirror teasing his hair. He occupied himself with maasei naarut, the latest fads and fashions of the contemporary youth. An outside objective observer would gather that he was nothing more than a shallow childish youngster with nothing better to occupy his mind than the style and length of his hair! Yet, as we know with the benefit of hindsight, this young Joseph was anything but a Biblical Beatnick; he was a true tzaddik, a man of utter piety and complete self-discipline, who incorporated within his conscience the demut diyukno shel abba, the spiritual image of his saintly father!

This too, then, is a form of pretense -- but how delightful and noble! To achieve inner dignity and not brag about it; to attain greatness and not exhibit it; to reach spiritual heights and not display them -- this, if it be hypocrisy, is the saintliest insincerity, the most precious pretense within the capacity of man to attain.

This gem of character recommended by the Talmud

was incorporated in the famous legend of Jewish tradition about the Lamed Vavnicks -- the thirty-six hidden tzaddikim, or righteous men. In every generation, according to this legend, there are thirty-six righteous people of whom no one knows; sometimes they themselves are not conscious of it. Yet it is because of their inner, hidden, disguised saintliness that the world is sustained. Without them, divine wrath would turn all the world into primordial chaos. These Lamed Vavnicks are patterned on the character of Joseph: outwardly mediocre, ordinary, plain, and unimpressive, whilst inwardly made of the finest spiritual stuff, righteous, self-sacrificing, and utterly moral.

An interesting consequence of this teaching about Joseph and the legend of the thirty-six righteous people is: one must never scorn or slight any human being no matter how ordinary he appears. One must never disdain or underestimate any fellow man no matter what the provocation. You can never tell: he may be a hidden tzaddik, one of the thirty-six! He may be a Joseph whose shallow exterior disguises inner greatness! How often has a teacher found that a student ^{who} ~~that~~ is quiet and withdrawn and retiring will suddenly, at the end of a term or a year or an entire school career, rise to the greatest intellectual heights. How often have parents found that children whom they did not suspect of anything beyond the average demonstrate,

as they grow older, inner resources that amaze and delight their parents. Our Rabbis put it this way: al tehi baz le'kol adam, never scorn any person. You can't be sure of what they really are like!

In sum, hypocrisy is a contemptible vice, and sincerity a glowing virtue. But while sincerity calls for no falsehood, neither does it call for telling all that is within me, even if it is true, if telling this truth can hurt others.

Secondly, sincerity is not a reason to abolish unpracticed ideals and laws.

Thirdly, there is a kind of pretense which is saintly: that which urges me to develop my inner life without deriving the benefit of society's applause and approval.

We live in an alma di'peruda, an imperfect and fragmented world. For truth to be triumphant, it must proceed cautiously. We must give no quarter to falsehood, but we must remember that truth must often disguise itself in a thousand different garments -- until that blessed day, the "day of the Lord," when man and society will be redeemed; when truth will be revealed courageously and fully; when this world will become transformed into an olam ha-emet, a world of truth; when G-d's unity will be expressed in living the whole truth and nothing but the truth; and when

men will confront their own selves in emet, in truth, and be truly devoted to each other, so that each man will be able to address his brother and say, in full and genuine honesty, "I am, sincerely, yours!"