

" SWEET, SOUR, OR SALTY?"
A Recipe for Religion

Judaism counsels moderation, and rejects extremism. This teaching of moderation in character is raised by Maimonides to a fundamental of the Halakhah, and is elaborately described by him in the first part of his immortal Code of Jewish Law, the Mishnah Torah.

Furthermore, this "Goldean Mean" of abjuring the extremes and choosing the middle of the road in conduct, is identified by Maimonides as nothing less than the **דֶּרֶךְ ה'**, "the way of the Lord." This is what the Torah means, according to Maimonides, when before the destruction of Sodom the Lord says: **כִּי אֶגְדַּל אֶת אַבְרָהָם אֵלַי**
וְאֵלֵךְ עִמּוֹ וְאֶמְצָא אֶת אֶתְמֹלֶת יָמָיו וְאֶמְצָא אֶת אֶתְמֹלֶת יָמָיו
-- I shall tell Abraham what I am doing, "for I know him that he will command his children and his household after him that they shall observe the **דֶּרֶךְ ה'**, the way of the Lord, to do righteousness and justice." While Sodom vered to the extremes, Abraham walked in the "way of the Lord," doing justice and righteousness, following the Golden Mean. This is what is meant by the "heritage of Abraham", the priceless possession of our people.

According to this "way of the Lord," a man should develop the kind of character that is distinguished neither by anger and temperamental tantrums nor apathy and indifference; he should be neither a spendthrift who squanders every dollar, nor a miser who cannot bring himself to spend a cent; he must be neither giddy nor gloomy, neither in a state of manic joy nor in a state of somber

depression. One must always try to keep his mood and his quality of conduct moderate, stable, and thoughtful. Of course, there are exceptions, and Maimonides describes them in detail. But the general principle remains; keep away from all extremes in conduct.

This fundamental of Jewish ethics was discovered by a renowned Rabbi in, of all places, today's Sidra on the laws of the sacrifices. Rabbi Joseph Saul Nathanson, the eminent halakhic decisor who was Rabbi of Lwow, thus interprets symbolically the commandment

concerning the *מנחה*, the meal-offering on the altar: *בן שמור וסוג*

אין תעלה; you may offer up on the altar, as part of a gift-offering, neither leaven nor honey. Rabbi Joseph Saul points out that leaven, or sour-sough, and honey represent two

extremes of taste: sour and sweet. Neither is permissible on the div^{ine}

altar. The two extremes of sour and sweet symbolize the extremes of human character, all of which should be rejected. If life is

conceived of as *מנחה*, as a gift offered to God; and if

life is to be lived as *קטרת*, as incense, as

harmonious and pleasant; then it must be neither *בן שמור וסוג*,

neither sour-dough nor sweet honey. The laws of sacrifices thus offer us a symbolic hint of the Golden Mean.

Yet there is a danger that people will overstate the theory of moderation and reduce it to an absurdity. They might conclude that one must always choose the middle of the road. Hence, if you are faced with the extremes of, on the one hand, Kashruth, and, on

the other, those who are non-kosher, then one might interpret the Golden Mean to recommend being only half-kosher, or to have a kosher home but to be non-kosher outside the home. One might reduce it to the ridiculous conclusion that if some feast on Yom Kippur and some fast, then one should simply eat lightly or just skip breakfast, in an effort to be moderate. It might mean that if some are Orthodox and some are Reform, then the teaching of moderation urges that everyone be Conservative; or that between the extremes of truth and falsehood, one should always tell a half-truth!

In this, indeed, the ד' ק"ג, "the way of the Lord?" Obviously not! In fact, it is Maimonides who, in the introduction to his Guide for the Perplexed, tells us that if he has a very difficult passage to teach, and he can teach it to one wise man only at the risk of displeasing ten thousand fools, then he prefers to address his remarks to the one wise man and take no note whatever of the multitude of fools. Surely this is not the seeking of a mathematical average as an application of the principle of moderation!

What then does it mean to be moderate, and what are its limits? I believe the answer is this: in matters of character and personality, in developing the traits wherewith one reacts to the world, in teaching oneself personal habits, there must be only the Golden Mean and one must keep a healthy distance away from extremes. But when it comes to principle, to ideals and philosophy and commitments, to a code rather than a mode of conduct -- then only the vision of truth may

guide us. And truth is radical; sometimes it will lead us to a middle position, more often to one extreme or the other. Let us remember that, as one Rabbi pointed out, the Hebrew word for "truth" is $\aleph \nu \kappa$, and these three Hebrew letters allude to a symbolic truth. The first of these letters is the first letter of the Hebrew alphabet; the second letter of $\aleph \nu \kappa$ is the middle letter of the alphabet; and the last of the three letters is the last of the Hebrew alphabet. In other words, truth may be found at either extreme or right in the middle -- there is no predicting in advance where it will lead us. In my faith and in my practice of my principles, I must follow only the truth. There is no conflict between moderation in character and truth of ideals. A man may be liberal or conservative in his views; that is a matter of his principles. In his expression of these principles, however, he ought to be moderate. But the principles themselves are beyond any rule of moderation. Whosoever tries to live his life and work out his destiny merely by finding the middle point equidistant from the extremes, and squatting there -- surrenders his critical judgment and yields to a disgraceful, dull, deadly, depressing conformism, which can only kill one's character. Here, only truth must be our guide. To travel automatically in the middle of the road is to exercise neither intelligence nor humanity. The renowned Kotzker Rebbe, reflecting the traffic condition of his society, said that only behemos, animals, walk in the middle of the road -- not human beings. We,

reflecting the traffic conditions of our own society, might say that the middle of the road is the most dangerous place of all; one can be hit from both sides ...

Certainly, if you find yourself in a society of extremes, where some are promiscuous and some highly moral, some honest and some deceitful, some believe in God and some are virulent atheists, -- Judaism's teaching of the Golden Mean^a does not mean to say to you: be half moral, tell half a truth, believe in half a God. You must, of course, be utterly moral, totally truthful, completely devout -- even if that condemns you as an extremist and marks you as off-beat. Therefore, in questions of Halakhah^a, a decision may sometimes be extreme; that does not matter, for our only guide is: *אמת*, truth.

Does this mean, however, that in dealing with principles, such as Halakhah, that since I may go to an extreme, therefore my expression of it may be uncivil and even reckless? Certainly not! here is where character is required. For even people with extreme views must express them moderately. In articulating the truth, in living by it, I must always consider others: their conditions and their sensitivities. My opinion may be unpopular, but my presentation of it ought to be non-repulsive.

Perhaps this is the essence of what was meant by the great prophet Malachi, who, in describing the ideal man, the perfect Kohen, uttered the immortal phrases: *תורת אמת היתה בפי וזוהר אמונה על שפתיו*. "The law of truth was in his mouth, and no unrighteousness was found on his lips". What the prophet meant to say about the ideal priest was

that in his mouth, internally, in his own vision of his ultimate commitments, there was only the "Torah of truth" -- no other consideration may be entertained. But when it came to expressing this truth to his fellow men, to bringing forth his vision from his mouth, within, to the words that appeared on his lips, without, then while he never changed this vision, he did not allow it to be expressed with unrighteousness, with ugliness, with contempt for others. The greatness of the Kohen described by the prophet is that his ideals are uncompromising, and yet the character of his expression is so very attractive.

Perhaps this is what the Torah meant, when, in prohibiting ~~and~~ (and sour-dough and honey, symbols of the extremes in conduct, it added affirmatively: $\text{לֶחֶם זֶיֶת וְחֶמֶץ לֶחֶם זֶיֶת וְחֶמֶץ}$, that to every sacrifice that is offered up on the altar, we must add a pinch of salt. What does this mean? In character there must be no extremes, neither sweet nor sour. Ideals must always follow the vision of יְהוָה , of truth. But even then, even when we follow truth without compromise, we must keep it flavored, we must season it with a bit of salt. We must see to it that the truth we serve up is neither bland nor harsh. Salt, unlike sweet or sour additives, is not essentially a flavor added from without; rather, it enhances the flavour inherent in the food itself, it brings out the best within it. So the salt of the sacrifice, symbol of the attitude we must bring to Torah: it reveals the inner beauty of Torah itself.

Permit me to give you some examples. The Halakhah, as the Torah of truth, may sometimes decide "forbidden," and sometimes "permitted." This is the אמת, the truth, and should be acknowledged as such.

Nevertheless, the decision of Halakhah must always be applied with a pinch of salt. For instance, even when the Torah says "forbidden," and we are required to communicate this prohibition to our fellow Jews --

דו כח מוסיף מלח, we

must rebuke our friend who does wrong -- nevertheless, there

remain limiting principles, such as

אין מביא מלח, that where we know that our rebuke will not

be accepted, it is better not to offer it in the first place, so

that the fellow Jew who violates the commandments will do so unwittingly and out of ignorance, rather than out of spite and wilfulness.

Similarly, the Halakhah may sometimes say: yes, such and such is permitted; nevertheless, do not put this permission into practice!

Often the Halakhah will urge a man to refrain from a technical

permission permission on the grounds that

one ought to sanctify himself by accepting self-restraint even where the Halakhah is essentially permissive.

At other times we are told not to practice what is permissible in front of others who are

אין מביא מלח, who do not regard this particular act as being permissible. Such conduct is dictated by the "salt" in our religious diet. The correct recipe for religion, therefore, is: "neither sweet nor sour, but salty."

These thoughts are of utmost significance especially this Sabbath when, from the pulpit of this synagogue, as well as several neighboring synagogues, we shall read to you a special announcement concerning the construction of an Eruv in Manhattan. This Eruv permits carrying in the Island of Manhattan under certain conditions and with certain restrictions. Within those limits, it is an unqualified halakhic decision, very long in the making. Without question, one may henceforth carry in Manhattan with the exceptions, as noted, of such items as are considered Muktzah.

Nevertheless, in actual practise, we urgently recommend "salt". Although the א נ/י, the truth is that carrying is permitted, yet חסד ורחמים, we ought to add some sacrificial salt by practicing some self-sacrifice in exercising common sense, discretion, and good taste. Do not overuse the Eruv. Make only minimum use of it. Do not exploit it. Please refrain from all obvious and open violation of what others may, in good conscience, still regard as wrong.

The recipe for religion requires, in this case, as in every other case, that ^{tasteful} ~~painful~~ discretion and proper understanding that will contribute both to the holiness of the Sabbath and the enjoyment of the Sabbath.

May God grant that our actions be acceptable before Almighty God as both, א נ/י רחמי, as a gift of our spiritual endeavors, and ^{as} a pleasant and harmonious contribution to the

welfare of all Israel.

Amen,