

Bereishees

Religious Need, Secularism, and the Community

Why is it that there will be inevitably a conflict between those who hold a secular view of the world and those who hold a religious view of the world? Why can't they each just go their own way? As individuals they can. The problem comes when they try to act together as a community. We all know that a community must supply the needs of all of its members. Secular people feel no need for religion. That's the very definition of a secular person. By and large, secular people think that religion is, at best, foolish and, at worst, destructive. They feel that religion actually hinders in many cases the development of individuals and, therefore, they do not want to spend any community resources on religion, and they do not want to be inconvenienced in any way by any type of religious restrictions. Religious people, on the other hand, feel that the community should support religious needs as well as any other needs. They also feel, by and large, that as individuals, people can do what they want but that the community's standards should reflect religious values and be sensitive to religious issues.

Secular people feel, by and large, that community resources spent on religious activities are a complete waste of money and that religious values, if used on a community level at all, should only be used in conjunction with other values, *i.e.*, nationalistic, social, etc.

We can see this clearly in Israel where money spent on religious schools in Israel is looked on as political blackmail by the secularists, while the funding of the huge yearly deficits of the *kibbutzim* is considered by them a very legitimate and proper use of community funds. We can see this, too, in our own country, how when most of the Jewish people were poor before the Second World War, 90% of them kept some form of *kashruth*. Now, when most Jews are middle or upper class, we hear the cry that it is just too expensive to keep *kashruth*. What this means is not that it is too expensive to keep *kashruth* because most of the 90% of the Jews who do not keep *kashruth* today in America could well afford to. What they mean by saying that it is too expensive is that it is a waste of money. They do not feel that *kashruth* fulfills any spiritual need for them. On the contrary, they consider it a nuisance and a hindrance and, even if it would only cost them

\$100 more a year, they would not do it because they would rather spend that \$100 on going out to a show or going out to dinner. Our age is not, at least until now, a religious age. The reason for this is probably because we have had to spend so much energy coping with the rapidly changing conditions in the world that we have suppressed to a large extent our religious needs.

The rabbis in the *Torah* portion *Bereishis* tell us that the *Torah* was created even before the world was created, which teaches us that our spiritual needs are real. Rashi comments that the word *Reishis* can refer to *Torah*, and when it says *Bereishis*, which is usually translated "in the beginning," it can mean that "for the sake of the *Torah* and with the *Torah*, God created the world." This is meant to teach us that religious need is that it can, like all other needs, be sublimated, suppressed, or even perverted.

In the *Torah* portion *Vayelech*, we learn how Moshe Rabbeinu hands over the leadership to Joshua. We also learn how he completes writing the five *Books of Moses* and hands them over to the Levites, and how he commands the Jewish people to assemble once every 7 years at the end of the *Shmita* year in the Temple courtyard and hear the king read them the *Torah*. Moshe then reports how God has told him that after he dies, the people are going to rise up and go after strange gods, that they are going to break their covenant with God. Moshe then teaches them a poem which the Jewish people should read after troubles come upon them so that the Jewish people will return to God. This *Torah* portion then continues by telling how Moshe Rabbeinu took the *Sefer Torah* he completed and commanded the Levites to put the *Sefer Torah* alongside the Ark, which contained the *Ten Commandments*.

Why did God have Moshe tell the people that they were going to go stray? The people were about ready to enter the land of Israel. While they were in the desert, God had taken care of all their physical needs. *Manna* came from heaven, water came from a travelling well, and their clothes did not wear out. Now they were to enter the land of Israel. They were to live a natural existence. They were now going to have to grow their own food, dig their own wells, make their own clothes. They had a huge physical challenge ahead. This challenge would be difficult and it might be all consuming. They may misconstrue this physical challenge as the end all

and be all of the Jewish people's existence. After all, the rabbis teach us *Eem Ain Kemach Ain Torah*, if there is not flour, there is no *Torah*. Striving for physical necessities can also turn into a spiritual goal. The early Zionist pioneers conceived of their mission not only as a physical mission to create settlements in Israel, but also as a spiritual mission. Their founding of the settlements and towns of Israel was intended to save the Jewish people. The problem with this view is that once you have created the settlements and towns and poured all your energies, both physically and spiritually, into them, what are you going to do after they are built?

In Israel today, we see this problem. The youth of Israel are being told that they have already established enough settlements and towns and should leave some land for the Arabs. The mission of settling the land has basically been done. What are they going to do now? The people in Israel are now very vulnerable because there are no secular ideals for the secular youth to embrace. They can turn to the Jewish religion or they can turn to drugs and alcohol and all the other vices of the western world. We see the end of secular values in the American Jewish community today, too. Many Jewish families, when they first came to American, invested almost all their energy into creating the wherewithal which would allow them to send their children to colleges. They considered it almost a divine mission to make their children doctors and lawyers and accountants. They invested their striving for physical wealth with spirituality. The problem is now, by and large, they goals have been fulfilled, but what are their children to do who are now doctors and lawyers and accountants? What are they to do to give meaning to their lives? What spiritual goals are they to have? They already have the wherewithal to send their children to school. Many of them now are searching for spiritual content to their lives.

Moshe Rabbeinu knew that after the Jewish people had successfully settled the land of Israel, they were going to need religion and spiritual goals. Man needs religion. Since they had invested so much of their energies in settling and developing the land, their knowledge of their own religion was going to weaken, and they were going to be drawn to the religions of other people. Therefore, he made sure that he gave the Levites who bore the Ark of the Covenant of God a copy of the *Torah* to put alongside the *Ten Commandments* because the *Torah* is the blueprint of Jewish

spirituality. Learning *Torah* and observing the Commandments between Man and God are what assure Jewish spirituality. Of course, unless we first observe the Commandments between man and man, we can have no spirituality. We cannot, as other religions have done, separate morality from spirituality. Morality alone is not enough. Man needs more than morality. He needs morality plus spirituality.

The main reason why Judaism was so much against paganism was because it said that you could have spirituality without morality. In the name of spirituality, it condoned child sacrifice, violent, sadistic, licentious rites, etc. Moshe also commanded the Jewish people about the *mitzvah* of Hakhel, about the *mitzvah* of gathering together all the Jewish people: men, women, and children at the end of every 7 years, the end of the *Shmita* year, to hear the *Torah* read. Why was this so important? For a whole year, nothing had been planted, and the agricultural economy of Israel was weak. The people then might think that they would have to devote all their time and energies just to physical pursuits and forget about spiritual pursuits until at least their agricultural economy got caught up, but this was not so. They also were to devote time to spiritual pursuits; otherwise, they would lose contact entirely with Jewish spirituality by their headlong rush into physical pursuits, and they would be easy prey to other religious philosophies.

Secular people think that the pursuit of physical goals is enough, but it is not. There comes a time when you have built your cities, strengthened your economy, and then you realize that you need more in life. You cannot anymore sublimate or suppress your religious impulse. It is important that Jewish religious forms and spirituality be available to people so they can once again take them up. Religious needs are real needs. Religious people should be tolerant and not try to push down the throats of secular people religious values, but they should make sure that the community supports religious values and provides money for religious education so that the time will come when the secular people will realize that they have achieved all they can in the physical realm and that they now need spirituality in their lives, Jewish spirituality will be available to them. Money spent on religion is not wasted money. It is money which is spent on giving people the values and education which allows them to live lives of joy and happi-

ness, which gives them the strength to overcome their problems, and which uplifts their lives every day. The world was not just created with physical needs. The world was also created with the *Torah* in mind. Let us all support the learning of *Torah* and the practice of *Torah* because we all need it whether we recognize it now or whether we will recognize it later. Man needs spirituality, and Jewish spirituality has been and will always be connected to the *Torah*.

Being a Partner with the Lord

Few things in life are totally subject to our control. We can work very hard and still fail. Farmers, especially, know this. They can get up early morning after morning, plant their crops, weed, plow and do everything they are supposed to do and still fail either because there is too much or too little rain or too much or too little sun.

In life, we all need the help of G-d. He allows us to prosper. A person could be the best businessman in the world, but if he is born in a Communist country, he will not be able to use his business skills. He may have the greatest musical talent in the world, but if he is born in a poor village in India, most probably he will not have the opportunity to develop that talent. A person opening a business in Houston, Texas, in 1978 would have made a fortune; however, a person opening that same business in 1988 would probably have lost money. Who could have predicted in 1976 that oil prices would jump the way they did? Who could have predicted that in 1986 oil prices would have fallen the way they did?

Not everything is up to us. We need G-d's help. Though our silent partner, G-d does not demand 50% of what we make, He only demands 10%. And he asks us to give that 10 percent, not to Him, but to charity and to institutions which promote morality, knowledge, and *Torah*. *Tzedaka*, charity, is a foundation of the world because it teaches us not to be arrogant and feel superior and to understand that our achievements are not due to us along.

Tzedaka has another purpose as well. It allows us to be a partner with G-d in creation. That is why even a poor person, who is himself only sus-

tained by welfare, is required to contribute *tzedaka*, even if he can only give a little. Every individual must know that he can contribute to the world, that he does not live just for himself alone. A person has to share, to give to others, in order to reach full potential.

The question is asked: Why was Adam unhappy before Eve was created? After all, he had the angels to talk to, and the Lord had supplied him with everything he wanted. Why was he lonely? Why was he not satisfied?

Some rabbis answer that he was unfulfilled and unhappy because he had no one to give anything to. The angels did not need anything, but when Eve came, and later a family, he was able to provide for them. *Tzedaka*, therefore, is a basic requirement of human nature. A person must feel needed; he must be able to contribute to others.

Today, you and I have unusual opportunities to aid hundreds of thousands of Russian Jews. They need us desperately. And in helping them, we also acknowledge our gratitude to G-d who brought us or our parents or grandparents to the shores of America and blessed us in so many other ways.