

Where Angels Fear to Tread

On December 11, 1971, Rabbi Dr. Norman Lamm, who was then rabbi of the Jewish Center in Manhattan, delivered a sermon for Parashat Vayeshev and Chanukah titled “Where Angels Fear to Tread.” This sermon touches on the themes of Torat Emet and Torat Chaim and we are including an excerpt to enhance this section of the publication. We thank Rabbi Mark Dratch for his assistance.

One of the greatest difficulties for and challenges to Orthodox Judaism, is modern man’s lack of appreciation of the value of tradition for its own sake. Indeed, modern man often seems to be antagonistic to the past, and anxious to disassociate from it. He worships change, which he often regards as synonymous with progress. Why not, he asks, discard the old and substitute the new for it?

Moreover, contemporary man is anxious to take new notions and put them into practice immediately. Theory should not remain theoretical, it should at once be converted into action. After all, that is the secret of the success of technology which has done so much to transform our lives and make life more liveable:



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a pure scientist formulates an idea, and immediately the engineers and the inventors begin to develop it into practical gadgets or medicines or equipment. A secularized world, for whom the category of the holy is alien, would like to do the same with religion. It sees nothing wrong with experimentation, innovation, and constant change in the realm of religion and the spirit.

This, indeed, is the spirit of the age, the *zeitgeist*. Hence, it is common for people to consider tradition dated and ready to be jettisoned in favor

of anything that is new either in content or in form.

Morality? — out with the old “code-morality” and in with the New Morality. Services? — we are bored with the traditional services and the cadences and rhythms of the ages. Let us, rather, write our own poetry, and worship to the tune of “rock-n-roll.”

And yet, this is so dangerous — and, even worse, so foolish! A great Anglican thinker, Dean Inge, once said: “A man who marries the age will soon find himself a widower.”



The Five Torot of Yeshiva University

TORAT EMET

TORAT CHAIM

TORAT ADAM

TORAT CHESED

TORAT TZION

The kernel of this idea may be found in symbolic form in the Haftorah we read this morning, from the Book of Amos. The Prophet tells us that one of the sins for which God will not forgive Israel is:

על מִכְרָם בְּכֶסֶף צְדִיק וְאֶבְיוֹן בְּעִבּוֹר נְעֻלִים.
On selling the righteous man for silver and the poor man for shoes.

Amos 2:6

In general, the Prophet is referring to a kind of treachery which allows us to subordinate human values to commercial values. More specifically, the Rabbis saw in this prophetic metaphor a reference in the selling of Joseph by his brothers — a theme which, together with the eating of the fruit of Tree of Knowledge and the dancing about the Golden Calf, is one of the archetypical sins in the Jewish historical consciousness. The brothers sold Joseph, who was a *tzaddik*, righteous, for silver. What of the reference to shoes? Here they tell us that the brothers took the 20 silver pieces which they received for Joseph and with them bought shoes for themselves. Hence, the prophet's warning against repeating the sin of "selling the righteous for silver and the oppressed for shoes."

But what is the significance of shoes, such that the prophet thought it necessary to recall this ancient crime? My grandfather tz"l explains the symbol as follows: in the days of old, when poverty was almost universal, people would use shoes only rarely, only for special occasions, such as walking long distances or, more important, for going places quickly. Otherwise, they would go barefoot. Hence, shoes are the symbol of quickness and impulsiveness. To go barefoot, to expose your feet to the pebbles and rocks and splinters,

is a symbol of the sensitive, the slow, and the deliberate. Shoes signify impetuosity, heavy-handedness as well as heavy-footedness, the mind following the body, thought trailing action. Thus, the brothers of Joseph may have been right in condemning Joseph, but they acted too speedily, too impatiently, they were peremptory and not deliberate when dealing with the survival and destiny of a human being, of their brother. The shoe is thus the emblem of those who rush in where angels fear to tread.

Don't trample the sacred. When approaching the holy, take your shoes off, exercise sensitivity and reverence, care and caution.

This symbol seems to be consistent throughout the Torah. Thus, when giving the Jews the commandment to observe the Passover while they were yet in Egypt, God tells them to wear their shoes — to spur them on, to get them out quickly, *b'chipazon*. Even more important, when Moses receives his revelation at the burning bush, the message of God to him is:

וַיֹּאמֶר אֵל תִּקְרַב הֵלֶם שֶׁל נְעֻלֶיךָ מֵעַל רַגְלֶיךָ
כִּי הַמָּקוֹם אֲשֶׁר אַתָּה עוֹמֵד עָלָיו אֲדָמַת קֹדֶשׁ
הוּא.

... Remove your shoes from your feet, because the place on which you are standing is hallowed ground.

Shemot 3:5

Don't trample the sacred. When approaching the holy, take your shoes off, exercise sensitivity and reverence,

care and caution.

This was the fatal error of the Greeks which caused the rebellion which we celebrate on Chanukah. The revolution was not primarily a nationalistic assertion of Jewish independence as much as it was a reaction against the gross and stupid insensitivity of the Greeks in violating the religious feelings of the Judeans. We have learned to live without independence for a long time, but when the Greek-Syrians and the Hellenists insisted upon sacrificing to a pagan idol on the spot of the sacred Temple, at that time they were trampling with vulgar boots where angels fear to tread. The result was revolution and the rest of the Chanukah story.

I wish to make it clear that in advocating caution and deliberateness when dealing with matters of the greatest moment, I do not recommend paralysis or institutional inertia. I am pleading to remove shoes, not to plant one's feet in concrete. I am saying that with regard to the sacred, and *only* with regard to the sacred, we should adopt a responsible conservatism and not a stultifying and strangling reaction. Where Halakhah cannot be changed, it should not and must not. But even where it can, and when changed, even then — only when we are barefoot, with the greatest sensitivity towards the sancta and concerns of the past and keeping in mind the possible consequences for the future. Even sacred customs, important traditions, albeit that they do not have the sanction of Halakhah, must be approached with reverence and sensitivity. However, where we are not dealing with the sacred, with Halakhah, with important tradition

and custom, but where we are dealing with habits and institutional customs and techniques, or what the tradition itself has called *minhag sh'tut*, ordinary or sometimes meaningless custom — no such conservatism can lay claim to religious sanction. Human institutions can always improve — even synagogues. It is simply wrong to worship blindly on the altar of the past. A mistake is no less a mistake because it is repeated unquestioningly for 20 or 30 or 50 or 100 years. Error does not become truth because it has the sanction of long usage. Techniques, habits, matters of style all must be subject to intelligent criticism, rational analysis, and constant revision.

The same responsible, moderate conservatism holds true not only with matters directly dealing with religion and religious law, but also with what Judaism considers supremely sacred in another realm: Human destiny and the human mind.

For some time now, biologists have been undertaking great and promising research in genetics and have developed what they refer to as “genetic engineering,” by which they mean the ability to effect changes in a

man’s or the race’s genetic structure. By means of such genetic surgery they hope to weed out defects and thus improve the race. Similarly, psychologists, through the use of behavioral conditioning and psychopharmaceuticals, hope to control man’s mind and passions and direct them towards more creative ends. All of them intend the best for humanity. All those who make such proposals are unquestionably benevolent.

Now, I agree that it is sometimes necessary to poke around in man’s chromosomes or his mind, and thus cure heretofore incurable hereditary illnesses or psychoses. But there must be moral limits, codified in law, on scientific attempts to manipulate human destiny and the human mind. I admire the good intentions of a leading psychologist who, in the daily press, has recently been arguing for pills to be given to heads of state in order to calm them and prevent them from making rash decisions. But I do not trust that psychologist, and not only because of his obvious naiveté. I do not trust anyone who has such enormous power in his hands, because such power corrupts and destroys. The human mind, human

chromosomes — these are sacred, they are repositories of the *tzelem Elokim*, the divine image of man. I do not even place my trust in Nobel Laureates. The techniques of the laboratory which they have mastered with such great eminence, does not qualify them to make momentous moral decisions for all the ages. Let them and let us remove our shoes: humankind is hallowed ground.

To summarize, then, the Prophet Amos — according to our interpretation — teaches us what Jewish history in the Chanukah incident confirms: that the sacred must not be dealt with cavalierly and light-heartedly and impulsively. Rather, we ought to approach it with reverence, with sensitivity, with deliberateness.

Perhaps for that reason, the wearing of leather shoes is forbidden on Yom Kippur: as if we, by our practice, ask forgiveness for having been insensitive throughout the year.

So, let us now be sensitive before it is necessary to ask forgiveness.

For to be sensitive is to be human.

And to be human is to enhance and exemplify the holy.

