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"WHERE ARE OUR VALUES?"
by
BRO. RABBI APPLE A.M.

A paper presented to the Conference Sessions during the International Masonic Festival
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The Masonic Craft has many virtues. Chief among them is its ancient system of allegories and rituals, which symbolise and stimulate ethical conduct. It is an impossible thing to estimate exactly how effective a force Masonry has proved to be in terms of reinforcing and raising the ethical standards of the brethren, but on the other hand it is impossible to deny that in ways great and small the craft has had an influence.

The problem however is that Masonry shares with a range of other movements and institutions a fundamental loyalty to traditional values and standards in a world that is increasingly confused and no longer certain that the old-time ethics are helpful, meaningful or relevant.

A recent writer has put it this way, that "the dazzling economic and social transformation, the popularisation of scientific method and the cynicism bred of world wars, the observation of foreign societies and exotic customs, the growth of relativism and hedonism in philosophy, and the development of a sophisticated semantics - all have challenged the established landmarks and eradicated the familiar lines between moral and immoral. A society changing at an unprecedented pace has simply brushed away the inhibitions of the past. In their place, there seems to be only doubt ..."

Values and standards are easier to maintain if society is stable. In a sense, no such society ever exists; every age is an age of transition. But earlier ages were relatively more stable. The changes are now more rapid (within ten years half or more of what you knew about any subject is already out-dated) and more evident (because of the communications revolution we see things happening as they happen).

Traditionally, when you had a responsible decision to make, you could find guidance in certain basic assumptions, which were accepted as axiomatic by Masonry as by other movements which likewise advocated ethical conduct with a base of belief in a Supreme Being.

Among these basic assumptions were notions such as that it was human nature to see to behave responsibly; that the proper relationship between people was that of mutual respect and concern; the human personality was sacred – both the other fellow's personality and your own; and that ultimately we were all answerable to a higher authority.

These assumptions are today threatened. As M.V.C. Jeffreys suggests in his book, "Personal Values in the Modern World", by three major developments:

1. The world is more complex and difficult to understand; it is harder to 'take responsible decisions because most of the factors involved in any given situation - political, economic, technological, etc. - are so intricate as to be almost incomprehensible.

As Jeffreys comments, "The citizen is expected to understand (or at least it is implicitly assumed that he can understand) political and economic matters most of which elude the grasp of all but the experts."

And even the experts can be at a loss: "It is a matter of speculation to what extent our political and industrial leaders really understand the problems on which they have to make important decisions."

Let me simply mention three out of very many illustrations. In terms of international politics, there recently commenced a flare-up in Vietnam. How many people really understood what happened, why it happened and its implications for the world as a whole? Technological advances have opened up remarkable possibilities in terms of what computers can do for human beings; but how many people have even the most basic idea of how computers work? Staple commodities or services are rendered unavailable quite frequently by industrial action; how much of the intricate interplay of factors and forces involved can the ordinary person hope to understand?

In making a choice, coming to a decision, or reaching an opinion, therefore, how can one apply the traditional values and standards when so much of a situation is so confused?

2. Our sense of values is confused; moral problems take on ever-newer forms, and the old answers no longer automatically fit.

Some illustrations from the economic revolution. This is a consumer society, which advocates and supplies instant gratification - it is enough to quote the ethic of careful saving ("It's smart to be thrifty," was once the well-known slogan) and planning for the future? It is a welfare society where governments of all political shades more or less expect and are expected to provide for their citizens - where is the point today in stressing the ethic of self-respect, self-sufficiency and voluntary care for others?

It is a commercially diversified society in which business dealings demand an intricate degree of ingenuity - how far can one apply old simplistic ethics such as honesty and truth and loyalty and correct weight and measures?

There is a sexual revolution. Today momentary gratification is easily separable from procreation - is it so easy any more to talk of the ethic of deep and lasting commitment to a partner? And if a pleasure seems attractive and therefore right at a given moment, should one not say that everything depends on the particular situation and there are no longer any rights and wrongs that apply in all cases.

The medical revolution has prolonged life and made it possible to have an organ transplant or to freeze a dying person - what guidance can we derive from old notions concerning man not assuming Divine prerogatives of decision concerning who shall live and who shall die? And how does the teaching that all human beings matter equally help us in determining whose life we shall seek to save by heroic measures and who shall by implication be considered as of lesser value to society?

And the knowledge revolution has enabled us to manipulate nature - what now of the ethic of safeguarding the environment? And to manipulate people - what of the ethic of the integrity and authenticity and dignity of every human being? Has one a right to know? Has one a duty to tell? Have the media an ethical responsibility? Must advertising tell the truth? (Is it really true that "you can catch your man if you care about personal freshness, keep him by opening the right tins, and make a real home by picking the right brand of carpet"?)

3. Our popular culture is increasingly standardised. Says Jeffreys, "we live in an age of mass culture which is not only increasingly standardised but also manufactured and synthetic. More and more we look at the same things listen to the same things, think the same things, and passively receive the same services as they come off the conveyor-belt of the Welfare State."

Modern means of influencing opinion are unique in nature and degree. The media of communication are intrusive, effective and powerful; and so many people are susceptible to the influence of the media - Jeffreys' theory is that "the most susceptible victim is the semi-educated person (the well-educated person is forearmed, and the quite uneducated person is comparatively immune); and never before have there been so many semi-educated people in the world - people who are educated enough to be got at, but not educated enough to understand what is being done to them" (p.57).

The result? Many people do not bother to make their own decisions, whilst others seek to be noticed by espousing some bizarre liberationist cause which over-emphasises or perverts one particular value or area of values.

One has to have values to live by: "Human life," says Will Herberg, "individual and collective, is a dynamic structure of values. Without existential commitment to some system of values, which, despite an inescapable element of relativity, is felt to be somehow anchored in ultimate reality, human life in any significant sense is simply impossible. Man lives by values; all his enterprises and activities, insofar as they are specifically human, make sense only in the terms of some structure of purpose which are themselves values in action."

If the old traditionalist values do not automatically fit the new problem, as so much is so confusing, what advice can one give to the person who wishes even unconsciously to make a responsible choice?

The advice I propose as appropriate for the situation is, firstly, not to abdicate or purport to suspend judgement. That would be untenable and unrealistic. What Nels Ferre wrote concerning agnosticism applies to all abdication or suspension of judgment: "Agnosticism is not open-mindedness, it is culpable inaction. Tentativeness in morals and religion, except in terms of a humble and teachable positiveness, is not a matter of humility and fair play; it is a matter of stabbing the good in the back by treachery; it is an insidious alliance with evil" ("Faith and Reason", 1946, p.5).

Nor should one adopt either of the extremes - either to accept as good everything that is new, or to dismiss it all out of hand and pretend that one can continue to live in a pre-modern world that is now gone for ever.

The right approach is threefold - to assess, to influence, and to integrate.

The first aspect is to assess everything that is happening in the world of today in terms of eternal verities. True, the society in which the old ethical teachings were cultivated and developed was very different from the world of today. But that does not mean that the old ethical teachings are outmoded simply because they are old; an ethical principle which is sound is both timeless and timely.

Like the Biblical prophets, we must be prepared to use the old ethics as our yardstick and to measure against them the events and changes of today.

Take for example the unfortunately ubiquitous experience of the strike weapon. When is a strike moral? I for one am convinced that significant help is supplied by the traditional principles the moment one tries to grapple with the question. (Let me explain that in this and other illustrations, which I give, I am influenced by the specific ethical tradition of Judaism, which may or may not accord completely with that of others, but the voice of Judaism is worth hearing because it was after all the pioneer of ethical monotheism).

The Jewish ethical tradition clearly upholds the right to organise in unions and associations to enable people with common interests and problems to speak with strength. It accords the same right to management as to labour, favouring neither one nor the other. Certainly, the early sources stress the duties of management to labour because in those days the employer was powerful and the employee needed protection. Thus there were discussions as to whether a labourer might eat some of the food he was engaged in producing and the basic approach was to permit this because it led to increased productivity; there were also discussions as to whether the employer might delay paying his workers' wages and the answer was in the negative – "why should the worker risk his life if you do not pay him? The employer was challenged.

But in his turn the employer had his responsibilities and was bound by implied or explicit obligations. His major obligation was that he might not wilfully cause his master loss or damage. He might go on strike to draw attention to his grievances and to ensure that they would be brought before a court of arbitration, but if he had what one might call a "life-long" role in society (for instance, as a doctor or a teacher) and his striking might cause real suffering, then a strike would be immoral and he must seek another solution.

In this manner one particular situation might be assessed in the light of old principles. The old principles do not purport to have ready-made answers to every ill, but I suspect that if they were studied more thoroughly their basic assumptions can still provide powerful general guidelines by which to judge even the more complex and apparently confusing changes of this rapidly changing society.

As well as assessing, one must find the way to influence the changes to ensure that swords will be beaten into ploughshares and spears into pruning-hooks.

The new society needs to be assessed and criticised for many things; but it must also be recognised as providing remarkable opportunities for improving the lot of human beings and arising their levels of ethical conduct.

Thus Archibald MacLeish has written, "The development of the instruments of mass-communication make it possible for the first time in human history to reach great numbers directly and peacefully and vividly and humanly with an expression of the lives and manners and histories and the arts of people of other nations. Our technology, wiser than we, has given us the unforeseen and unforeseeable means of worldwide understanding at the moment when worldwide understanding is the only possible means to lasting peace."

Political and economic democracy make it possible for every citizen to have visible value in the scheme of things no matter what his creed, colour or convictions.

Medical advances make it possible for life to be saved, prolonged and made meaningful. Leisure-time which will become increasingly the ready privilege and right of every human being makes it possible to find new opportunities for service and fellowship, as well as for discovering new intellectual and cultural worlds. (There is a Jewish teaching that one should devote to one's occupation enough time to enable one to make a living, and spend the rest of one's time, more or less, in savouring the delights of study of the holy books).

The more there are people possessing ethical education and conscience who have the courage and imagination to apply their ethical ideals to the areas of life in which they are involved, the more will the new developments in those and related areas be shaped to promote ethical advance. What we need to do however is to intensify the facilities and the skills necessary for ethical education. It will not surprise you at all to know that over the centuries Judaism developed a remarkably effective ethical education system. system, on their own or in groups, would sit poring over the classical books, taking up the sound of the traditional debates, exercising heart, mind and conscience in the basic issues that tend to arise in society and becoming instinctively aware of how the Lord required them to do justly, love mercy and walk humbly.

In its own way, and learning from its own rituals and allegories, the Masonic Craft has seen it as its role to be another type of training-ground in ethical sensitivity, and its effectiveness will be seen in years to come to the extent to which its brethren, engaged as they are in almost every area of human activity, can exemplify the ethical teachings of the Craft and utilise them in shaping events around them.

The third and final proposal I would put before you is that we do not only seek to assess and influence, but also to integrate.

What I mean by this is that we seek to present a picture of ethical man as an integrated person maintaining a balance between the varied values and ideals for their own reasons on one specific virtue, which becomes an inflexible obsession, neglecting or disdaining the other ethical ideals, which provide checks and balances.

Take the idea of freedom. What crimes have been committed in the name of a sloganised freedom by the so-called liberation movements? What distortions have resulted in an over-emphasis on liberation - so much so that one hears of a group of students claiming to have liberated a case of beer.

Our century hardly needs to be reminded of the damage caused by an overemphasis on the word "peace". For the sake of a supposed chance of peace, many shameful compromises and concessions have been considered, sometimes demanded and on occasion actually made.

In Jewish ethics there is a fascinating area in which the relationship between major ethical concepts is explored, and the discussions have an uncannily topical ring. Questions are studied such as, for instance, the extent to which the truth can ever override peace, or peace truth, and the criteria whereby ethical ideals are enabled to co-exist.

For us who in the Masonic Craft acknowledge that there is a Supreme Being who is the great unifying Force in the Universe, the integration of our ethics is a fundamental axiom.

For us too there is a basic motivation towards ethical values in our acceptance of the belief in a Supreme Being. Our human might bring us to ethical conduct, but of this there is no guarantee. As Bertrand Russell said, "I find myself incapable of believing that all is wrong with wanton cruelty is that I don't like it." If the criterion is reason alone, this makes right and wrong subjective, a matter of personal opinion.

One might say, "I know deep down what is right and wrong"; but where does the "deep down" recognition of right and wrong come from if not the spiritual spark implanted by religious influences?

Further, reason cannot compel moral behaviour; even when it tells you what is right, it does not necessarily have the power to make you choose the right - a power that comes from belief.

This week it is our privilege to celebrate the opening of an impressive new Masonic centre. It is good that the event be marked by renewed dedication to the ideals symbolised by the Craft and its ritual. It will benefit our society as a whole if, having clarified our ethical responsibility; we can carry it into every area of human life and endeavour