

Part VIII

Skeptic: You say that unless man achieves inner harmony and perfection he cannot hope to eliminate conflict on the global level. If that is the case, the human race will probably not survive long enough to do so...

Believer: I'm not saying that we cannot do anything to change our world before we're all perfect. On the contrary: the more we unite, the more we achieve harmony between diverse and differing peoples, all the more does our world become a place that is conducive to unifying our splintered selves. What I'm saying is that what we do achieve on an interpersonal level must be augmented by our inner makeup. For what is "the world" if not us? What is "humanity" if not the sum total of its individual members? Since our relationships with others are based on who and what we are, they can never be perfect and enduring as long as we are plagued with conflict within. We may make great advances in world peace and the alleviation of suffering, but soon the selfish and ugly side of man will rear its head. In order to create a harmonious world in the absolute and eternal sense, we must bring unanimity of purpose to our internal worlds.

Skeptic: So all the good that we do is hypocritical?

Believer: That's the third time you brought up the subject in our discussion. What's so terrible about hypocrisy?

Skeptic: Surely you don't think that hypocrisy is a virtue.

Believer: At times it is. Say that I hate someone with a passion. Should I be a hypocrite and act decently toward him, or should I have the "integrity" to smash my fist into his jaw? If I fall in love with a woman who happens to be married to someone else, should I seduce her, or should I hypocritically restrain my inner feelings? If I find a wallet stuffed with cash, should I return it to its owner, or should I be true to my deep-seated desire to keep the money? Let me tell you a story that's told of the founder of Chabad Chassidism, Rabbi Schneur Zalman of Liadi. Once, a certain individual was condemned before Rabbi Schneur Zalman as a hypocrite. "He considers himself a chassid," the Rebbe was told, "and has assumed all sorts of pious customs and practices. He acts like this real holy fellow. But it's all superficial--internally, his mind and heart are as coarse and unrefined as ever." "Well," said the Rebbe, "in that case, may he meet the end that the Talmud predicts for such people." The "informers" were taken aback. They had only wanted to warn the Rebbe about this individual; but now, what sort of calamity had the Rebbe called down upon him? So Rabbi Schneur Zalman explained to them what he had meant. In the final mishnah of the tractate Pe'ah, the Talmud discusses the criteria for a pauper to be eligible to receive charity. The section concludes with the warning: "One who is not in need, but takes... one who is not lame or blind but makes himself as such, will not die of old age until he is indeed as such." "In the same vein," said the Rebbe, "one who makes of himself more than he is in matters of righteousness and piety will eventually find that these traits have become ingrained in his character and in his very being."

Skeptic: Make up your mind. Do we first try to perfect the world, or do we first deal with our inner selves...

Believer: Since when is life such an orderly enterprise? We must work on both fronts. We must strive to build a better world, regardless of where we stand in the development and perfection of our inner selves. At the same time, we must realize that only when we have achieved harmony within will our external efforts be met with complete and eternal success.

Skeptic: But isn't that like trying to simultaneously build a building and dig its foundation?

Believer: In a way, it is. But ultimately, the true foundation is already in place. G-d created a world that is, in essence, perfect and harmonious, and forged the soul of man in His image. So only a negative act can be hypocritical--indeed every negative act is hypocritical--whereas our positive deeds are always consistent with what we truly are. The challenge is to overcome the divisive drives and tendencies that

superimpose and distort our true, intrinsic will and to express this will on all levels, in our character and behavior.

Skeptic: Still, you're building the second floor before the first.

Believer: That's the way we human beings are structured. At times a "second floor" rises out of the foundation and the "first floor" is filled in later. A person may do something which is totally "out of character" for him but which, in truth, reflects an even deeper will that has yet to be developed as a conscious thought or feeling. In Judaism, this is more than a philosophical or psychological principle---it also translates into a pragmatic approach to life. It even has legal implications. For example, Maimonides, the famed 12th century codifier of Torah law, writes in the second chapter of his Laws of Divorce: "If the law mandates that a person grant his wife a divorce and he refuses, a Jewish court, in any time or place, may beat him until he says 'I am willing' and writes the writ of divorce (get). This is a valid divorce [although according to Torah law, a divorce must be granted willingly]... Why is such a get not deemed 'coerced' and invalid? Because an act is not considered to be 'coerced' unless the person has been forced to do something that he is not obligated by the Torah, for example, if a person was beaten until he agreed to sell or sign away his property. But one who has been overpowered by his evil inclination to negate a mitzvah or to commit a transgression, and is forced to do what is right, he is not considered 'coerced' --- on the contrary, it is his evil character that has coerced him, against his true will, in the first place." Maimonides concludes: "In truth, this individual wishes to be of Israel and wishes to observe all of the commandments and to avoid all of the transgressions of the Torah; only his evil inclination has overpowered him. So if he is beaten so that his evil inclination is weakened and he says 'I am willing,' he has divorced willingly."