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9-15-1989 Basic Jewish Values Rabbi Aryeh Azriel

Values are the standard for the conduct of our life. For a Jew, the highest value is fidelity to our covenant with God. Traditionally that covenant includes 613 commandments. Jewish values are embodied in those commandments. The Torah itself tries to reduce the list of 613 to something basic, so we get the Ten Commandments. The prophet Micah reduced the list to three general commandments: What does God require of us? "Only to do justly; to love mercy; and to walk humbly with God." Some "only!" Tonight, let's examine other lists of "basics" which our forbearers have derived from the Torah and see if we can come up with our own list.

In Palestine during the second century, Emperor Edrian forbade the Jews to observe the Torah. Study of Torah and observance of its commandments was punishable by death. The rabbis met in this moment of crisis and asked themselves: What are we going to do? We love life, we don't want to forfeit life but, are there any commandments which are so basic and so important that we should even be willing to die for them?

They debated and debated and finally concluded that to save our lives we can violate all the commandments of the Torah except three. The first is the commandment "Thou shalt not murder." A rabbi explained the matter thus: if a Roman general comes up to you and says: "You see that man over there? You kill him or I am going to kill you." You must not obey that order even at the risk of your own death because "what makes you think your blood is redder than his?" In other words, he has as much right to life as you.

The second commandment you should be willing to die for rather than violate is the prohibition of incest. Certain fundamental taboos are at the heart of preserving the integrity of family life. You must be prepared to die rather than violate them.

And the third act you must not do at risk of forfeiting your life is the flagrant act of idolatry. That which so totally profanes all that you are intended to stand for as a Jew. So, all commandments can be violated to save your life except three: the prohibition against murder, incest and idolatry.

If one does study our tradition, one finds again and again the Torah commands: "You shall not oppress the stranger. You know the heart of a stranger because you were strangers in the land of Egypt." It was hateful to you to be an oppressed stranger; therefore, be sure you do not impose such oppression on others.

Now, we are getting closer to a fundamental Jewish value at the heart of our Covenant. Rabbi Akiba and Rabbi Ben Azzai asked: What is a basic

principle in the Torah through which we can understand the Jewish value system? Akiba said: "I find it all in that verse in Leviticus, 19 "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." Rabbi Ben Azzai said: "I find it all in the Chapter 5 of the Book of Genesis. "These are the generations of men. In the day that God created many in the image of God was he created."

Actually, much of what we have been talking about so far – you shall not murder, what is hateful to you do not do to another, love your neighbor as yourself, remember that all creatures are created in the Divine image – all these are embraced in a basic principle contained in the Talmud: Kvod habriyot, respect for the dignity of all God's creatures. So, act that you affirm the dignity of God's creatures, including your own dignity.

What are the implications of this dignity principal? Rabbi Joshua, the son of Levi, was born in Lida some seventeen hundred years ago. Rabbi Joshua was a leader of his people in his generation. He would sometimes represent the Jewish community before the Roman government. Once Rabbi Joshua traveled to Rome. He was thrilled by the magnificent splendor of the capitol city, of the secular world: its glorious buildings, its impressive castles, its beautiful statues covered with costly tapestry to protect them from the winter cold and summer heat. He stood in awe before the splendor of Rome.

Just then a man tugged on his sleeve and, as he turned, he beheld a beggar in rags, cold, hungry, emaciated. The beggar pleaded with him for a coin in order to buy a crust of bread. Joshua said: "Here is a building of stone, cold, lifeless, yet protected and watched over, and here is man, created in the image of God, clothed in tattered rags."

I thought of that rabbinic tale the other day when I sat with other clergies and we heard one of our colleagues speak of the experience of spending the night on Omaha's streets. That Talmudic tale returns to haunt us, we who live in the most powerful, most prosperous nation on earth. In the shadow of our gleaming skyscrapers, under the overpasses, huddles in alleys are the homeless we hear about. Yes, some are there because they are alcoholics, some because of mental instability. Some are there because they live on the margin and when things get rough, they fall first. And some are there because they did not have the luck (the *mazal*) to be born in a loving, nurturing household.

Yes, there is only so much government can do, so much we can do, but after all the reasons and realizations, one thing is certain: such a scene, whether in ancient Rome or modern Omaha, should give us Jews an uneasy conscience. How we respond to the least glamorous ultimately tests the seriousness with which we take the principal Kvod habriyot, the dignity of all God's creatures.

Our search for basic Jewish values takes us from the Torah and the Talmud to the Siddur, the Jewish prayer book. Every morning a praying Jew is invited to recite these words which are not, strictly speaking, a prayer: "These are acts for which you reap reward in the world and an even greater reward in the world to come." (Which means these are acts especially precious in God's sight.) And what are these acts?

Honoring father and mother; doing deeds of loving kindness; studying diligently in the house of learning; bringing guests into your home; visiting the sick; helping the bride to enter the bridal canopy; accompanying the dead to their last resting place on earth; sincere prayer; bringing peace between man and his neighbor; and the study of Torah is greater than all the rest (because it leads to all the rest.)

The principal is again kavod HBRIYOT-- the dignity of God's creatures. Honoring mother and father, (and I would add, the honoring of children by mother and father) – this is the command to respect the dignity of each person in the family.

Hospitality – bring guests into your home, especially on Shabbas and holidays. During the holidays, people without the capacity or opportunity to be with other people feel especially lonely. Bringing people into your home to share your family fellowship is also an affirmation of the dignity of God's creatures.

Visiting the sick – It is a way of reaching out in love to a person whose dignity is being assaulted by the ravages of illness. Incidentally, there is a guidance in our tradition for how you visit the sick, what you do when you enter a hospital room. Don't stand over the patient. Sit beside her on a chair or stool, so as not to be on a higher level. If the patient is stretched out on the ground, one must act reverently and sit on the ground. What a profound principal! Be sure to respect the sick person even in his/her most vulnerable state. Don't stand over them and dramatize your mobility and power. Be on the same level when you visit the sick.

Helping the bride to enter the bridal canopy – This meant: See that no person is denied the dignity of a worthy marriage because her parents cannot afford the dowry.

Accompany the dead – See that no person is denied a decent burial because of financial circumstances. If there is no family to mourn, be sure you attend and give that person a dignified passage from this world to eternity.

Make peace between a person and his neighbor – Peacemaking honors God's intention in this world. Quarreling, violence, grudge bearing, all tarnish the image of God within us. To help make shalom is a mitzvah of the highest order.

What motivates us to uphold the dignity of God's creatures? To visit the sick. To seek shelter for the homeless. To share the joy of a holiday beyond our own household. To be concerned with persons on the margin of our comfortable lives. To engage in acts of loving kindness. Our Torah, our heritage, teaches us so to live.

That heritage is passed on through parents and teachers from generation to generation. Now we will all not be serious, bookish, students of Torah and that's not required. But we must know and cherish that heritage and want to pass it on to our children. That's a basic Jewish value. "You shall teach them diligently to your children."

The statement that Torah study is greater than all because it leads to all may mean ONLY if it leads to the rest. Judaism respects brain power. We know that. We talk about it often. Judaism celebrates the life of the mind but let us not misunderstand the Jewish value system. Being a student, being an intellectual is not an adequate value: only if our learning leads us to know the good and strive to do the good, only if Torah study ultimately motivates us to visit the sick and feed the hungry, is it a positive value. Brain power and cleverness are no substitute for goodness.

On the basis of all the lists we have considered tonight, I am now prepared to make my basic list of three core values: 1) know and cherish our heritage of Torah and pass it on to our children; 2) Kvod Habriyot, sustain the dignity of all God's creatures; and 3) Tikvah, hope, believe in the promise of life, believe that by being a mensch, and by respecting human dignity we can make a difference for blessing in God's world.