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Fake Fat

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It is an exciting time, indeed, to be living here in Omaha, a center of ingenuity and industry. At this very moment, only a few miles away from here, scientists, dressed in sparkling white frocks, with the support of the large corporation, are working furiously to develop a product that they believe will be of the utmost benefit to each and everyone of us. What is the nature of their creation? Is it a cure for cancer? Some technical discovery that will improve our productivity. Or, perhaps, a new fuel that will clearly and cheaply power our industrialized society? Well, my friends, it is something the masses do crave, perhaps even more than clean air. The product is called olestra, which is a synthetic name for a synthetic material, otherwise known as "fake fat."

Such is the saga of our day. When the news broke that a product that would allow us to eat all the chocolate cake, French fries dripping with grease, and high-fat ice cream we want, without the guilty fear that we would be adding inches to our waistline, joy rang throughout the land. Now America could eat its cake. Well almost, the product has yet to be perfected, but the tumult that accompanied the announcement reflects an unhealthy phenomenon afflicting our civilization: the current predilection of substituting fantasy for reality, imitation in place of substance. Achieving the imaginary, has become the American dream – we want to look like the models on the cover of fashion magazines, live in a house like the Cosby family, and believe that we can simply grow out of the deficit – all this without struggle or pain. Elements in the media and government have capitalized on this attitude with the development of fake news programs like Gerraldo, Entertainment Tonight, and USA Today, fake political conventions staged solely for the television audience, as well as candidates who speak only in soundbites.

Joel Achenbach, a writer for the Miami Herald, wisely refers to this as a manifestation of creeping surrealism, in which we have "become comfortable with artifice" and "fond of the fake." We want to be convinced that the world is simpler than it seems. We want to believe that everything will be alright. Creeping surrealism represents our hope that fantasy can become reality and so we willingly accept the premises that a world turned

up-side-down is superior to our world, that the grass on the other of the looking-glass is really greener.

Creeping surrealism is actually nothing but a dangerous form of escapism. The price of such a pursuit can be alienation for existential reality, and ultimately alienation from the self. After fooling ourselves for too long, we stop being able to distinguish between fantasy and reality, the artificial and the authentic. The desire to realize the image rather than accept the reality becomes so strong that it can make us strangers to ourselves. **How many** millions of people are in therapy because they measure themselves up to a Madison Avenue conception of beauty, intelligence, and success, and concluded that they do not measure up? "I am so stupid," "I am so fat," "I am such a failure," these are statements often made by obviously intelligent, attractive, and successful people. And they invest time and money trying to mirror an illusionary image of reality with sometimes dangerous consequences. More and more people are getting their noses done, their fat suctioned, and their eyes surgically corrected without much thought of the danger involved. What they do not realize is that every year people die due to complications that arise during such surgery. And now even children are afflicted with anorexia and bulimia, because of the mixed messages that they have been receiving about how they should look, rather than how nice they do look. The peril for a civilization that allows such creeping surrealism to set in is clear, for by degrading the value of the real, in favor of the fantastic, we risk wasting our most precious resources.

For our own well-being we must discover a way out of this abyss, a road back to reality, and recovery of the self. But who can help us? Philosophy, which was traditionally devoted to the search for meaning and truth, has reached a dead end with its seemingly inexorable commitment to linguistic analysis. Government has become part of the problem. Even traditional religion, which has been the bastion of simple moral teaching and high ideals, has become suspect. Jim and Tammy Falwell and Swagart, Shneerson and the Chief Rabbinet of Israel have all seen to that.

Is there a simple panacea for our complex problem? Obviously not, because the quest for simplicity is in fact one of its causes. But one source of help has been near us all

the time, very close to our hearts. Much maligned, though at times justifiably so, and associated with the dreaded "l" word, this institution has managed to survive our society's struggle with traditionalism. I am speaking of liberal religion, more specifically in reference to our community, liberal Judaism – which despite its many blemishes, has much more to offer us than we sometimes realize.

William James wrote, "religion in the shape of mind-cure gives to some of us serenity, moral poise and happiness, and prevents certain forms of disease as well as science does, or even better in a certain class of persons." James argued that both scientific knowledge and religiosity are necessary for the maintenance of a healthy society. Unfortunately, we are in our present state partially because we did not heed James' warning and allowed science, and our fascination with the technical to dominate our lives. But science was not the only culprit. In the last few decades, liberal religion has taken a backseat to fundamentalism. In the face of those who claim to hold authentic religion, our leadership faltered. When compared to the simple, the complex seemed unattainable, and so liberal religion failing to disrepute became the domain of the old establishment. Those who wanted to experience so-called true religious meaning, Jewish catalogue Judaism, held Reform in disdain and sang the praises of the traditionalists.

But we know better. Liberal Judaism does contain essential meaning. Liberal Judaism invites the modern individual to rediscover \_\_\_\_\_, the spiritual self, to develop the holiness that is intrinsic to creatures formed in God's image, while encouraging the pursuit of knowledge and respect for reason. It demands that the individual avoid dependence upon simple answers to life's complex problems. The substitution of fantasy for reality, what we termed creeping surrealism, is an anathema to this belief system. The liberal Jew is asked to live within a dynamic moral and ethical framework while questioning everything, even God, in pursuit of the good, in search of truth. The model for the liberal Jew is the Abraham who challenged God at Sodom and Gomorrah and not Abraham who stood on Mount Moriah. The challenge of the liberal Jew is to change the world and not be alienated from it. By seriously advocating the promulgation of liberal religion – which by

definition accepts modernity – we can help restore balance to our world and meaning to our lives.

To do so, we must be committed to a re-vitalization of liberal Judaism. As Reform Jews we can present liberal Judaism as a path back to reality, a bulwark against creeping surrealism. For the modern age, a religion that asks of its followers to be critical, and to think for themselves, while they seek the spiritual, is not only authentic, but necessary. Our age cannot afford to permit a continued reliance upon imagination in place of reason. The Torah contains a warning of the dangers inherent in disregarding the on-set of such creeping surrealism. By hardening his heart in refusing to let the Israelites go, because he desperately wanted to hold-on to what was, Pharaoh ultimately lost control over his destiny. He had become a slave to his imagination, perhaps even believing that he was a god, and was, therefore, unable to respond to the Divine command. By the end of the story, God is in control and Pharaoh could not soften his heart, even if he wanted to. He paid a heavy price for his obstinacy. We, too, must watch carefully for it is still easy, even for the most powerful, to be enslaved by fantasy rather than guided by reality. The struggle to remain free requires constant vigilance. To avoid becoming slaves to the synthetic and to the fanciful, modern Jewry requires a vibrant and confident liberal Judaism.

But such vibrancy depends upon belief in self. If we are going to help our people rediscover the real in them and in their world, then we have to lead with self-assurance and believe in our program. Liberal Judaism is not as the Orthodox would have us suppose, an aberration, but the necessary consequence of Judaism's encounter with modernity. It can serve us as medicine for the soul-sick Jew who has lost touch with the spiritual significance of human life. It offers a healthy dose of substance to those starving from the consumption of the unreal. We have yet to realize its full potential.