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INNER VS. OUTER DIRECTEDNESS

*And what does God demand of you except to do kindness
and justice and to walk modestly with your God.*

Micah (6:8)

IN THE IMAGE OF GOD

R. H. Tawney stated that “the essence of all morality is this: to believe that every human being is of infinite importance, and therefore that no consideration of expediency can justify the oppression of one by another. But to believe this, it is necessary to believe in God.”¹

Tawney is right, but he doesn’t explain why. He misses the key phrase, “the sanctity of human life.” For we can only consider the worth of man to be infinite if he was created in the image of an Infinite God (*tzelem Elokim*).² It is only when we contemplate the spiritual grandeur of man that we can begin to appreciate his worth.

God “blew” the spirit of life into man.³ In the words of the Kabbalists, “He who blew, blew from within Himself.” And so, man’s essence is holy and sacred. We don’t have to do anything to deserve our lives. God has already made our lives intrinsically worthwhile. Incredibly, we break the

1 See Michael Perry, *The Idea of Human Rights*.

2 Genesis 1:27.

3 Ibid. 2:7.

Shabbat to save a life even if we are certain the person will only live a few seconds longer.⁴ We do not measure how much life makes it worth it. Every second of life is of infinite worth. Life itself is holy.

We don't have to do anything to deserve our lives. God blew the spirit of life into man, and hence, God has already made our lives intrinsically worthwhile.

From this idea emerged universal human rights—that every human has certain rights just by virtue of being human. All democratic countries adhere to this idea today, as if it is something that should be obvious to all. (And, in fact, the idea of democracy itself is dependent on this assumption.) But, for thousands of years the Jews stood alone on this, proclaiming their truth until the rest of the world was ready to hear it.⁵ For they were dealing in a strange currency—the currency of holiness.

THE INNER-DIRECTED SELF

If I am in the image of God, and my life is therefore intrinsically worthwhile, I must draw my own feelings of self-worth from that idea. I am OK not because of what I have done or because of what I have, but because of what I am. I am OK not because of the recognition that others bestow upon me but because of my own inner sense of dignity. In other words, I am an inner-directed rather than an outer-directed person.

In *Ethics of Our Fathers*, we read, “Who is a wise man? He who learns from every man...Who is a strong man? He who conquers his desire to do evil...Who is a wealthy man? He who is happy with his lot...Who is honored? He who honors other beings.”⁶

The common denominator of these qualities is that they reflect inner-directedness. We learn from every person when we are secure, have a good self-image, and do not need to be reflexively right.

4 Talmud, Tractate Yoma, 84b; *Shulchan Aruch*, *Orach Chaim*, 329:4.

5 The Universal Declaration of Human Rights dates back only to the UN General Assembly on December 10, 1948.

6 *Ethics of Our Fathers* 4:1.

We are strong when we have the inner strength to control our own urges.

We are wealthy when we are filled up from the inside and don't have a need to try and fill ourselves up with money and material goods, for we know that these will never fill us up and that we will be condemned to trying to fill up with more and more and more.

We are honored when we overcome the need to be honored and have enough dignity to honor others.⁷

We need to internally generate our spiritual and emotional state, independent of external influences.

By filling ourselves up by our inner strength, we liberate ourselves. We liberate ourselves because we are no longer subject to the changing values of whichever society or era we happen to be in. We liberate ourselves because we are willing to take moral stands that are not popular. We become true Abrahamic Jews. Abraham was called the *Ivri* (Hebrew), "the one who stood on the other side of the river"; so too, we become his authentic descendants. Society usually focuses on externals. We are *Ivrim*, inner-directed people,⁸ the people willing to stand on the far side.

When we liberate ourselves, we sanctify ourselves. We sanctify ourselves by opening ourselves to being filled up with the only thing that really ever will fill us up—a spiritually meaningful life.

We also change the direction of our relationship with others. Instead of being needy and dependent, we generate our own internal peace. Instead of competing with others, we see how we can give to them. Instead of peaking at a certain age, we can continue to become great at any age.⁹ This is the lesson of *Ethics of our Fathers*.

7 Mahara! , *ibid*.

8 See Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, *Parashat Lech Lecha*: The Lord said to Abraham, "Go forth from your land, your birthplace and your father's house to the land that I will show you" (Genesis 12:1). Abraham was commanded to leave behind the sources of both tradition-directedness ("your father's house") and other-directedness ("your land, your birthplace"). He was about to become *the father of an inner-directed people*.

9 Mahara! , *ibid*.

THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN PLENTY AND EVERYTHING

Esau hated his brother Jacob for stealing his birthright—his right to be the firstborn and hence the leader.¹⁰ When they met as adults, Esau had a mini-army of 400 people, and Jacob felt his life was threatened.¹¹ Jacob prepared elaborately for his encounter with Esau. He prayed to God. He prepared gifts of animals for Esau, carefully grouped and spaced when presented. Just in case, he prepared for war.¹² When the two brothers do meet, the meeting is tense, but it goes well.

Esau at first turns down Jacob's gifts. "I have plenty," he says.¹³

Jacob persists, saying, "I have everything,"¹⁴ so take from me.

What is the difference between Esau's "plenty" and Jacob's "everything"?

Esau was wealthier than Jacob, but Esau felt only that he had a lot, implying that he could have more. And indeed, he accepts Jacob's gifts.¹⁵

For Jacob, it was different. Early on in his life, Jacob asks for God to give him bread to eat and clothes to wear.¹⁶ The body requires certain necessities, and that is all that Jacob wants. After that, he felt that nothing from the outside could add to his happiness.

In other words:

- Esau was outer-directed, and he thought that the gifts would do something for him.
- Jacob was full from the inside. Therefore, he had everything.

When we bless God after eating a meal with bread, we repeat Jacob's words, expressing the hope that God will bless us with *kol*—with

10 See Numbers 3:13, where the firstborn has a certain holiness and—prior to the sin of the golden calf—were originally the ones designated to serve in the Temple. See also Deuteronomy 21:17 with respect to inheritance.

11 Genesis, chaps. 32–33.

12 Ibid. 32:8–23.

13 Ibid. 32:9, "*Yesh li rav*" — יֵשׁ לִי רַב.

14 Ibid., v. 11, "*Yesh li kol*" — יֵשׁ לִי כָל.

15 Ibid.

16 Genesis 28:1: "And Jacob made an oath saying: 'If the Lord God will be with me, and will guard me on this path on which I am walking, and will give me bread to eat and clothes to wear.'"

everything.¹⁷ We pray that we will realize that what we have is already *everything*. We long to be blessed in this way—to always retain the capacity to feel full from the inside.

HOLINESS AND ROOTEDNESS

The Hebrew word for “secular” or “profane” is *chol*, which means “empty.” To profane something is to empty it of content. But the word *chol* also means “sand”—that which can be blown away by the wind. A huge sand dune in the Sahara can be there one day and gone the next. Hence, “profane” also means rootless and unanchored.

The righteous have roots. They are not driven by the winds of changing morality, or by sudden political or social swings. They stand firm. They grow. They bear fruit. They flourish. They do so because they follow their inner voice, not the changing vicissitudes of their environment. This is why Jews are still here, proclaiming their mission when so many other civilizations disappeared along the way.

PEERING BELOW THE SURFACE

In Hebrew, the word for “world” is *olam*. *Olam* (עולם) comes in turn from the word “hidden”—*he’elem* (העלם). This world is the world where spirituality and holiness are hidden below the surface. Someone whose entire life is lived according to an external definition of self—the world of achievements, of “likes” on social media, of competition and honor and wealth—will not develop the capacity to connect to spirituality because he is living on the surface of reality while spirituality is hidden below the surface. The challenge given to us by *Ethics of our Fathers* is to look deep into ourselves, to find our core, and to draw all our self-worth from there. This entire section has to do with how to identify and to generate that spirituality.

17 Toward the end of the *benching*, we say the words, “*Ba’kol, mi’kol, kol*.” The last word refers to Jacob’s statement.