

FUN AND RELAXATION

Reexamined

BY RABBI MAYER SCHILLER

It has long been the assumption of many segments of the Torah community that a comfortable participation in American society can only lead to a weakening of our bonds to *emunah* (faith), Torah and *mitzvot*. Frequently those advocating the establishment of firm barriers against the penetration of the surrounding culture point to its heresy, overt violence and explicit sexual illicitness as the primary dangers motivating their self imposed social segregation. There is a great deal of truth to these fears, but they leave unstated the far more subtle dangers inherent in contemporary society. These dangers although not as overtly evil as the above, tend to envelope their victims in a world view, life style and general consciousness which are all antithetical to those of Torah. In the long run they create a value system both reductionist and cynical but more than anything else frivolous. It is this value system, largely shaped by post World War II America, which distorts the lives and thoughts of all mankind, but in particular God's chosen servants, the Jewish people.

What, in fact are the core dogmas of American culture? Generally they are left unstated. In all probability, this is due to a lingering sense of shame which most would experience should these beliefs ever

be exposed to the scrutiny of self-clarification. Like some vile creatures of the night, light would not deal kindly with them.

Despite the reluctance of advanced consumer society to identify itself clearly, there is little doubt as to its real goals. These goals are, simply stated, to produce and consume ever more sophisticated "types" of "fun" and "leisure." It is the underlying assumption of these goals that the fondest dream of all men and women is to have "fun" and "relax," and that all their workday activities are geared to improving the quality and quantity of both the above. Accordingly, it comes as no surprise that Americans seek to spend as much time as possible in heavy pursuit of better "fun" and "relaxation" via the seemingly never-ending assortment of entertainment (music, television, movies, videos, shows, concerts, sports, etc., etc.), food and drink (restaurants, bars and clubs), and vacation (of all sorts to all imaginable climates to ski, to swim, to dance, to go to the track, the arcade, the jai lai, the gambling hall or to sit or lie on the beach, the boardwalk, the mountains, etc.) These activities are not seen as means to some other end, but as *the end*. It is in order to "go out," "get away," and so on, that we work, go to school or endure whatever home-bound drudgery is our particular sorry lot.

There, when pursuing "toys" and frolic, we are doing what we want. The assumption is clear, that would the structure of society be somehow different, allowing us to avoid work, school, etc., then we would endlessly have "fun" by "going out" and "doing things" forever until the day of our death.

God And "Americanism"

Now, the only question which a Jew must ask when confronting this large amusement park, which stretches over much of the contemporary West, is what does God think of it? How does our Creator view the just mentioned pursuits for us as the recipients of the Torah? Are "fun" and "relaxation" part of a Torah life? May a "Kingdom of priests and a Holy Nation" be functional Americans?

Clearly, the question is not merely academic. To the extent that an Orthodox Jew is open to "Americanism" all the above norms seep into his lifestyle and psyche. (Even among those Torah Jews who have eliminated, or strive to eliminate the effects of general society from their culture, the question still lingers to what degree are leisure, fun, luxury, etc. part of what they may partake in?) Yet, it is primarily those Jews who choose to be a part of American low culture (Is there an American high culture?) who must seriously ask themselves how does God view their non-ceasing pursuit of dining out, vacations, shows, sports, and indeed, the whole *mythos* symbolized best by that great icon of 1990's America, the shopping mall.

Alternative Approaches

There are several ways to approach this question from within a Torah framework. The first and most obvious is to note that the Torah calls upon us to care for our physical well being by eating, sleeping, walking, etc., as is required to maintain our health. Obviously, this will only get us so far. A healthy diet and proper exercise certainly, but not much further. However, this preliminary consideration may be somewhat expanded by reference to the oft quoted *Gemara* in *Bera-chot* that, "a beautiful home, a beautiful wife and beautiful objects expand the mind of a man" (57b). Here we are clearly going beyond mere physical health by positing that the emotional state of a person can or conceivably should be enhanced by exposure to beauty and, perhaps, physical comfort. Finally, there is the notion that activities not necessitated by our physical or emotional well-being may be seen as positive provided that they lead to a greater "love and fear" of God or at least if they are received in humble gratitude from Him. In order to evaluate the plethora of modernity's means of both frolic and lethargy by these standards, it is necessary to examine some of the sources for all the above in our sacred literature.

Both the *Tur Orach Chaim* (231) and the *Shulchan Aruch* (231:1) quote extensively from Rabbeinu

Yonah's comment on *Avot* 2:12 which reads, quoting R. Yose, "... and all your deeds should be done for the sake of Heaven."

Rabbeinu Yonah notes on this, "... even permissible things such as eating, drinking, sitting, standing, walking, sleeping, sexual intercourse, talk and all other bodily needs must all be done for the service of the Creator or for something that will cause His service.... The general rule is that a man ... must carefully weigh all his deeds, when he sees something that will bring him to God's service he should do it; if it will not, then he should abstain from it."

This approach (basically assented to by the *Meiri* on *Avot* (2:12) who describes it as "an important saying that encompasses much") is codified as law by the *poskim* and explained in great detail by the *Shulchan Aruch* basically along the lines we outlined above, that the world may be engaged in order to insure our physical well-being provided that we do so in order to gain the strength necessary to serve God via explicit Torah and mitzvot. (The *Birkei Yosef* 231:2 suggests that before the performance of all worldly actions, we declare that our intent is to do them, "for the sake of God.")

Fun For Its Own Sake?

Following this approach, the *Aruch Hashulchan* (231:4) describes the pursuit of the physical for any reason other than the above as "an animal act" concluding that "all the aspects of this world are short, worthless and empty" unless done in order to better return to Torah and service.

The *Hinukh* is most clear on this point offering a powerful condemnation of those who pursue "fun" for

its own sake. (*Mitzvah* 387) "Whoever...sets his heart to increase worldly delights without intending thereby...in order to be healthy in order to work hard in the Creator's service but only to take delight in pleasures, whoever follows this path transgresses constantly this negative commandment ('not to follow one's heart and eyes'), constantly whenever he engages in any activity." As stated before, the most one can derive from the foregoing is the imperative to pursue a sound diet, exercise and, possibly, an occasional change of scenery in order in all cases to better return to

to "delight in pleasant smells, warm baths, small amounts of spicy, well prepared food in order that it (the food) be pleasing and the soul capable of desiring less of it." A novel approach which seems to allow for limited but real bodily luxury.

Following this tradition, it would seem that, in moderation, even those pleasurable experiences (both physical as well as aesthetic) not required for minimal physical sustenance may be engaged in. We must carefully note, however, that all the above seem to be saying that any such activities must be geared

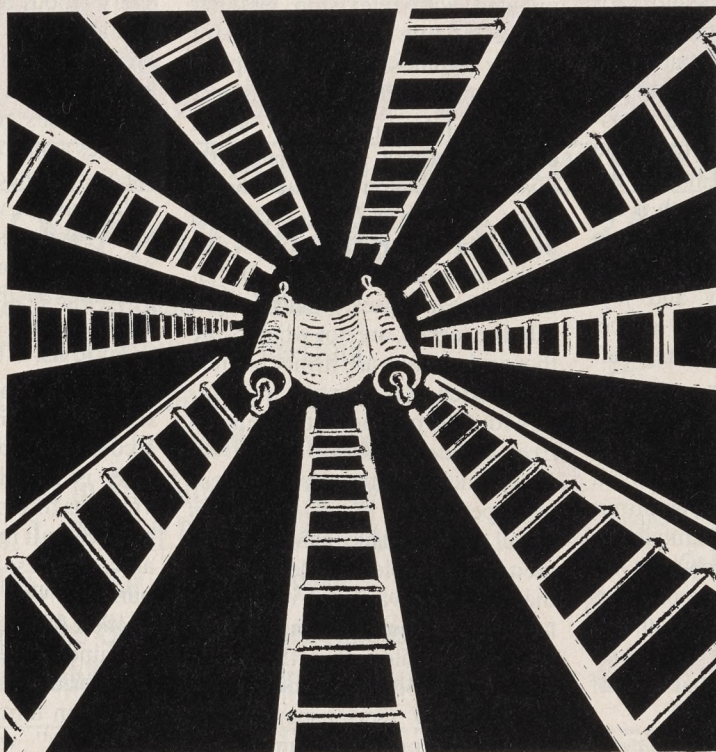
to establishing man's inner harmony in order that he be better equipped to pursue his primary task of God's service.

To God Through Creation

Lastly, there is the notion of delighting in the world not merely to restore or maintain our balance but in order to come via seeing or partaking in natural or human phenomena or activities to love/fear of, or gratitude to God similar to the Rambam's call to engage in the "contemplation of the acts and creation of God" in order to come to "love

and fear Him" (*Hilchot De'ot* 2:1-2). This would certainly implore us to engage in a passionate contemplation of the natural world but could, perhaps, be extended to man-made beauty as well in the sense of achieving a mood of awe at the treasures God has allowed man to create.

One of the finest works in the subject is a little known and long out of print work *Ha-tov Ve-Ha Tahklit* by Rabbi Zvi Aryeh Twersky (a grandson of R. David Zlatopola (d. 1915), the oldest son of R. Yohanan of Rachmistrivka <d. 1895>). The Rebbe, after a long period in Vi-



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Torah, prayer and good deeds.

The Rambam in *Hilchot De'ot* (3:1-3) does subscribe to the whole anti ascetic tradition which we associate with R. Eliezer Hakafir's condemnation of the *Nazir* for abstaining from wine (*Ta'anit* 11). In fact, in his *Shemoneh Perakim* (4), the Rambam suggests that we have recourse at times to "pleasing designs and the joys of beauty" in order "not to become ill."

Indeed in a work generally associated with Torah asceticism, the *Reishit Hochmah*, we find reference to the Ravad who exhorts us to "limit bodily pleasure" but also

enna, arrived in the Holy Land in 1939, passing away in Tel Aviv in 1968. His work was published only once in Vienna (in 1933) and deals directly with many of the questions we've raised. It is worth quoting at some length (pps. 6, 7, 38): "Those who believe in God and fear His word they too know the value of knowledge and beauty, they also value strength and deep feeling, they too know, what nature is, what nationalism is, what *Eretz Yisrael* is....They love natural beauty but with their profound minds they dig deep and with their clear eyes they see far. They see in beauty the Creator of beauty...for beauty is but one of the ladders which stands on the Earth but whose top reaches into Heaven....But it is proper to note that joy and pleasure are but one...light from the source of Absolute Light... the crown of *mitzvot* and Torah is the achievement of the joy of joys from the Highest Worlds. There one finds love and fear, beauty and joy, strength and respect and peace, there it all exists in Absolute Reality."

There is room for the pursuit of joy, beauty, etc. provided that the ultimate purpose of such a pursuit be God in some way. Our litmus test must be as the Rambam in *Shemoneh Perakim* expresses it (5), "That a man should have one purpose, the realization of God...He should see to it that all his actions lead to this one goal so that none of his deeds be worthless...."

With the foregoing in mind, we return to the lifestyle of 1990's America. Is the purpose of those Jews who pursue the entertainment, and vacations, who frequent the expensive restaurants of the upper class to better appreciate God or to refresh themselves before plunging, once again, into His service through Torah study, prayer and good deeds? Is that the way television, movies, sports, Miami Beach, Vale, etc. are done?

Unfortunately, in almost all such cases, the answer is a resounding no. Large numbers of Orthodox Jews have simply accepted America's quintessential dogma that "fun" and "relaxation" are ends to be pursued for their own sake. A lifestyle of this sort is one both

base and ignorant and deserving of condemnation.

In frank terms the basic question confronting the advocates of "open" or "Modern" Orthodoxy is whether it is possible to dress, frolic, and entertain oneself and one's family as 1990's Americans do without becoming *fargoyished* in thought, speech and deed. My own personal experience is that it is largely impossible. We are called upon as Jews to be totally devoted to God's service twenty four hours a day. This is our only task. We know of no other either as a community or as individuals. Can this task be pursued with television, popular music or while standing in line for twenty minutes in order to spend one hundred dollars on our dinner?

(The rightist critique of "Modern" Orthodoxy has consistently missed the boat on this question. It is not Zionism or *Torah U-Madda* or "umbrella" organizations that calls into question "open" Orthodoxy. These causes, whatever their relative merits, are not what excite those whose feet are firmly planted in America. It is not studying biology for God or mass settlements in *Eretz Yisrael* or *kiruv* of Reform Jews which threaten anyone. These tasks performed by *ovdei Hashem* are all commendable (although good men may quibble over details), but they are irrelevant and incomprehensible to card carrying American suburbanites. It is the severance of the "open" Orthodox from the *ernstkeit* (seriousness) of a normative Torah environment via Americanization that cripples them, not any ideological constructions.)

SANCTIFICATION OF THE MUNDANE

Can some of modernity's frolic be sanctified? Perhaps, but only by those immersed in Torah and *mitzvot* who know the "how" and "why" of "worldliness" and are, therefore, capable of discussing the "when." Possibly, those rooted in *Hachmat Ha-Torah* and *Avodat Ha-Tephilah* can show the way to a proper approach to appreciation of God's world. Those devoid of these qualities can only debase the world as they pursue it and themselves in the process.

Essentially the question is where is a Jew fundamentally rooted? Who is he in the depths of his heart and soul? We are called upon to "place God constantly before us." If this is done via Torah, *tephilah* and *mitzvot*; via a profound sense of revulsion at decadence and frivolity and of a commitment to serve God as we "rejoice in trembling" then we may, at times, partake of the world following the Torah methods of sanctity outlined above.

In the *Yerushalmi* at the end of *Kiddushin* (Chapter 4) R. Hezekiah is quoted in the name of Rav, "Man will have to stand in judgment for every (food) that his eye saw, but he did not eat." The *Korban Ha-eyda* sees the evil here to be "needless asceticism." However, the *P'nei Moshe* goes considerably further. He sees a man who "does not enjoy species created by God for man's delight as one who denies the Creator's goodness." In other words, withdrawal from legitimate worldly pleasures is indicative of ingratitude to the One who has given them to us.

Of course, this assumes that our reception of God's goodness be in a conscious spirit of thankfulness. This is a task which requires a vigorous disciplining of one's mind and heart. It means to some degree an awareness of God in all our pursuits. This is a lofty ideal of *avodah* for the Torah learned pure of mind and heart. Immersion in the normal hurly burly of what Mencken termed "the Americano booboisie" while glibly tossing about phrases derived from the *derech avodah* of *kedoshim* is as blasphemously false as it is deceitfully pretentious. On the other hand, the splendid spiritual potential of the Jewish soul enables the *ben Torah/yora shamayim* to reverentially partake of a world that is most assuredly "full of his glory." The awareness of this "glory" is the *only* goal of Jewish life. It is approached via strenuous effort in Torah, *tephilah* and *mitzvot*. A heart so uplifted may savor in gratitude the Creator's works.

And in the end we can say with the psalmist "joyous is the heart of those who seek God."

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