

The following essay has been adapted from a presentation at the annual conference of the Rabbinical Council of America in 1969. Rabbi Grunblatt is spiritual leader of the Queens Jewish Center in Forest Hills, New York and lecturer in Jewish Philosophy at the James Striar School of Yeshiva University.

JEWISH PERSPECTIVES ON CAMPUS UNREST

Youth is in a state of "cultural rebellion." I use the term cultural advisedly, discounting the manifestations of violence and overt hostility which can be attributed to a minority. But, the ferment and dissent which trigger these impetuous outbursts reach far and wide into the rank and file of the young, particularly the campus population. Patently the character of this dissension is negative, rejecting the established society's values. Goals are often hazy and uncertain giving rise to numerous causes and strange cults. Certain key words are detectable amidst all this chaos, such as, "honesty," "love," "personal freedom," and "concern." These are words meaningful enough to motivate but not precise enough for concrete goals.

Many of the underlying currents of the massive unrest are easily recognizable. The Vietnam War will undoubtedly go down in history as one of America's, and the world's, most traumatic experiences. It will be remembered less for its casualties and its cost in billions than for the impact it made on the youth of our time—exploding the traditional ties and loyalties to the nation and to the State. The extensive corruption uncovered almost daily amongst those institutions and individuals who ostensibly further and protect the "law and order" of our society, is greatly demoralizing. There has always been a gap between principles professed and practices executed. While these lapses in morality have in the past been acceptable as what Kenneth Keniston calls "institutionalized hypocrisy" the gap has become so great and intolerable that it can no longer be "institutionalized."

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There is, however, a deeper existential anguish and a critical situation in the human condition that goes beyond revolt against specific evils or social problems. The entire tidal wave with its protest, its absurdities, its cults, its grave social concerns, its search for cause, true or false, reflects a deeper human need, particularly amongst the younger intelligentsia.

Judaic anthropology sees man in his fullness and its theology accepts him in his fullness. The Midrash puts it quite succinctly: "And God saw all He did and it was very good. Good — that is the good inclination; very good — that is the bad inclination" (*Bereshit Rabah*⁹). The Midrash explains the creative value of both *yetzer hara* and *yetzer tov* for man's survival and technological progress. *Yetzer tov* urges man on in his dimension of spirituality, in his capacity of transcendence and the *yetzer hara* urges him on in his biology. Nonetheless the *yetzarim* are not separate and distinct specialized functions. Man, the moral agent, decides the use and goal orientation of the energy within him. Just as man may use atomic energy, for example, to destroy cities or cure diseases, so, too, he may apply his *yetzer hara* for debauchery or for human creativity. "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart: with both hearts; the good and bad inclinations" (*Mishnah Berakhot* 9:5). The Rabbinic Sages thus make two very important propositions:

1. A truth that is very similar to the much later Freudian discovery of the "sublimation" of the libido — that *yetzer hara* can ultimately be utilized "to build families, houses, and cities, *leshem shamayim* (for sake of God)."
2. Libido is not the only source of psychic energy we possess. We have a *yetzer tov* that naturally favors God and the transcendental and that is thrilled with the performance and experience of the good as *yetzer hara* is thrilled with the fulfillment of the bio-instinctual.

Great modern psychologists have gone beyond Freud in recognizing "higher" sources of psychic energy than the libidinal. Carl Jung made "God awareness" much more respectable as a legitimate, unique psychological quality though his psychic gnosticism of the collective unconscious and the animus are a far cry from either our concept of God or our concept of *yetzer*

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tov. Coming much closer to a “Jewish *yetzer tov*” is Victor Frankel both as a psychic faction and in the objective validity of *yetzer tov* cognition. He says in *Man’s Search for Meaning*: “Man’s search for meaning is a primary force in his life and not a secondary rationalization of instinctual drives” (p. 154). And in contrast to Sartre and other existentialists he states: “However, I think the meaning of our existence is not invented by ourselves but detected” (p. 157).

If the preceding is tenable, then *yetzer hara* energy can be diverted towards *yetzer tov* goals, *yetzer tov* energies could be routed to further *yetzer hara* goals! That is, *yetzer tov* energy can be used to transform the bio-instinctual into a value system and into a perverted transcendental experience.

The Talmud speaks of a *Yitzra D’avadah Zarah* — “a *yetzer* for idolatry” (*Yonah* 695). Many attempts have been made to explain the *yetzer* of idolatry. It is paradoxical to associate *yetzer*, which connotes the instinctual, the passionate with what is seemingly a false theology. The most common interpretation given for connecting *yetzer* with idolatry is that ancient pagan cults were replete with sexual orgies and other forms of indulgences and perversions provoking the *yetzer hara*. This is a very unsatisfying *derush*. If this is true you are in essence dealing with the more definable *yetzer* of sexuality. When sex or any other biological need or drive is converted into the cultic that is *Yitzra D’avadah Zarah* it becomes an ideology, a commitment, a form of worship. The demonic is the transcendental gone animalistic. Furthermore, *yetzer tov* is similar to *yetzer hara* generically, i.e., a source of psychic energy, and if Freud is correct in his theory of neurosis and undue repression of the libido, it should follow that there could be a form of neurosis resulting from “repression of *yetzer tov*.” And, this is what Frankel is saying: neurosis is frequently caused by a “lack of meaning” and value orientation.

The academic world has turned with a vengeance against the former dominance of religion. The erstwhile “handmaid” has successfully and with relentless fury replaced its former “mistress.” Positivism and empiricism are the absolute tyrants of the university campus. It is self evident that truth is superior

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over non-truth. Truth is that which is experimentally demonstrable; the transcendental is not demonstrable; therefore the transcendental (even though not proven false either) is non-truth and inferior. The very same can be said about commitment to values. Mental hygiene has replaced morals and social engineering has replaced ethics. It became highly unfashionable for an academic to display any kind of faith and commitment other than in the absolute truth of scientific investigation. Faith and personal commitment could become legitimate objects of academic study but never legitimate subjects of academic concern. This steady, persistent and highly successful extirpation of the transcendental has led to what we will call, utter *yetzer tov depravation and repression!*

Much of what is happening on campus today can be viewed as a result of this *yetzer tov* depravation. The widespread concern with issues of social justice, its intensity, its violent manifestation are repressed urges breaking through. The students are exemplifying this when they turn to university authorities and demand the removal of R.O.T.C., or when they disrupt Dow Co. recruitment. They are exhibiting this *yetzer* when they petition their universities to be concerned with and involved in community needs and problems and when they ask that moral considerations for underprivileged students should temper the objective considerations of educational requirements. They are stating unequivocally that the academic world ought to be concerned with right and wrong, with commitment to principles and value judgments and not only with the existentially sterile world of the laboratory.

A careful study of Hippies and all their manifestations on one side and many of the wanton outbursts of violence and irrationality on the other, would reveal that it is *yetzer tov* neurosis rather than an unbridled *yetzer hara!* What is even more striking and significant is the apparent resurrection of the *Yitzra D'avadah Zarah* — the comeback of the Cultic and even the Occult on the campus.

Most revealing is a recent article by Andrew M. Greeley in *The New York Times Magazine* (June 1, 1969), which discusses candidly the widespread appearance of cults and even

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“witchcraft” on university campuses. Writes Greeley:

Furthermore, the “return to the sacred” has happened exactly where one would least expect it — among the elite students at the best colleges and universities in the land, precisely those places where secularization would presumably have been more effective and most complete . . . The first reason that young people give for the “return to the sacred” is the failure of science. One graduate student told me: “Let’s face it, science is dead. While the newspapers and magazines were giving all the attention to the death of God, science was really the one that was dying.” The extent and the depth of the revolts against positivism come as a considerable shock to those like myself whose training in the positive sciences took place in a time when they were totally unquestioned at the great universities.

Traditional Judaism has always believed that man’s need for the transcendental experience is not only the subjective psychic experience of Jung nor even merely the existential way of looking at things. It is rather, also, a cognitive faculty attuned to real existing objective transcendence — namely the presence of the Divine — and a need that will not be met unless this objective transcendence is concretely and historically encountered. It would follow, if our preceding analysis is correct, that traditional Judaism stands a very good chance of success with the youth that seemingly eschews so much that is sacred to us. Traditional Judaism offers an experience in transcendence that is neither mythological nor mystical, but rooted in the here and now and buttressed by the historical concreteness of the people of Israel. Israel’s development and existence since the days of Abraham, and particularly the last 2000 years through the creation of the State of Israel, is neither a myth nor a mystery.

A precedent and guideline to rapproachment with our alienated and aroused youth may be found in the famous and oft-told story related in the Talmud concerning Hillel. It is the story of a “stranger” who came to Shammai and said: “Convert me on condition that I learn the whole Torah while standing on one foot.” Shammai drove him off with a rod. The stranger then went to Hillel and Hillel converted him. Hillel said to him: “What is hateful unto you do not do unto others; this is the whole Torah, the rest is commentary. Go and study.” The lessons

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learned from this story are manifold:

1. The deep concern for our fellowman and that which involves us with the welfare of others is indeed the fundamental principle of the Torah. The prospective convert was not foolish enough to think that he could acquire the knowledge of Torah in its entirety in such a short period of time. What the convert obviously wanted was the overriding, outstanding and all encompassing principle of the total Torah demand on us as human beings.
2. It is our belief that ultimately, despite occasional and temporary occurrences to the contrary, these values of self transcendence and brotherly love can only be achieved and made normative in society through reaching for the objective transcendental God.
3. Hillel demonstrated methodology for reaching one who comes from the outside world, and who seeks the special dimension of Torah and *kedushah*. He opens the door by demonstrating concern for the human being.

In the today's quest for spiritual *Gerim* we should take Hillel literally. For if we can show our youth how much God and the Torah care for man, we can eventually get them to care for God and Torah.