

## Vice and Virtue: Today's Vice-Versa

It has finally come to this. Headline writers please note this announcement: For immediate release: *Tradition* comes out foursquare against adultery.

Adultery? Big deal, say most Americans. Let's not be prudish and puritanical. Everyone is involved in it. Even the chairman of the House Judiciary Committee, Henry Hyde, who sat in judgment of the president, did it. Even Bob Livingston, once and future Speaker of the House, who pressed the impeachment proceedings, did it. Of course, to hear them say it, they were not involved in real adultery per se. They were guilty only of "youthful indiscretions." At most, they were guilty of "indiscretions."

It is normal and commonplace, says everyone, so why all the fuss about Bill Clinton? Why can't we be like the French, whose late President Mitterrand was publicly mourned both by his wife and his mistress? (Appropriate enough, for this is why France, which gives political support both to Iraq's Saddam and Libyan dictator Quaddafi, holds the title of world's oldest professional.) Why can't we be sophisticated like they are?

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Of course, it is unnecessary to belabor the fact that in Judaism, the normal and the commonplace are not necessarily permissible. On the contrary, Judaism takes all the normal and commonplace impulses—the instinct to murder, to lie, to steal, to wound, to destroy—and tries to help us discipline and control them. This is the very underpinning of Torah: *Barati yetser hara, barati Torah tavlin* (*Kiddushin* 30b). The Torah is the antidote to the evil inclination.

But contemporary society maintains that if everyone engages in an act, then that act is acceptable. Everyone drinks Coca-Cola, therefore Coca-Cola is good. Everyone drives a GM car, therefore a GM car is good. Everyone commits adultery, therefore adultery is . . . well, if not good, at least it's not that terrible. So many customers can't all be wrong.

In his syndicated column, Richard Cohen of the *Washington Post* decries the sentiment of certain House members that just because the Hon. Mr. Livingston had committed adultery he is unfit to be Speaker of the House. And then Cohen writes the following line that I had to read twice to make certain I was not hallucinating: "It was as if he had committed a crime," lamented Cohen.

Why adultery is less of a crime than, say, pick-pocketing is not made clear. If everyone were to begin stealing from other people's pockets, would that, too, having become normal and commonplace, cease being a crime? If the honorable Messrs. Livingston and Hyde were to admit that they had been common thieves, but that this thievery was a youthful indiscretion, would there not be demands for their resignations? But they only admit to adultery. Big deal.

Admittedly, the act of adultery is in one major respect different from stealing. Sexual temptation is much more difficult to withstand. (See the commentary of R. David Kimchi to Psalms 51:7: *Hen be-avon holalti, u-ve-het yehemasni imi* / "Behold, in iniquity was I brought forth, and in sin was I conceived.")

This may account for today's permissive view of adultery as opposed to piddling little sins such as theft. Sex is difficult to resist. Theft is relatively easy to resist. Therefore, in our perverted scale of values, we condemn stealing but condone sexual impropriety. That which is difficult to resist we make no effort to resist; we simply call them "indiscretions," cluck over them a bit, and continue our indiscretionary ways.

So does society slide down the slippery slope of contemporary morality. There are no absolutes. All is relative. Even religion itself is no longer a matter of strong belief and of absolutes, but of preference and choice. I prefer chocolate to vanilla. I prefer Judaism to paganism. Do you wish to know what is right and what is wrong? The answer lies not in your Bible but in the latest polls. In our time, the old joke about Moses and the Ten Suggestions has been apotheosized.

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We are experiencing the strange phenomenon of a society that

instinctively senses that what the president has done was morally wrong, but does not know precisely why. For a generation we have been taught that nothing is really wrong per se, that it all depends on the circumstances, that all is relative, and that one must not judge others. We must not repress our instincts or be prudish about sex; unrestricted sex is acceptable and even desirable as long as it is consensual, discipline is for nuns and monks, adultery is not so terrible and in fact is sometimes helpful to a marriage, and nothing is intrinsically wrong as long as no one gets hurt. We must not be intolerant of homosexuality, people must be given free choices, and abortion on demand will help free women from the chains of feminine bondage.

For a generation we have been taught by our opinion makers that anything goes, and for a generation the courts have codified this. Before our very eyes there was revealed a topsy-turvy world in which right became wrong and wrong became right: marriage, family, home, self-reliance, accountability, and discipline all became vices, and in what may be termed a manifestation of "vices-virtue," self-indulgence, hedonism, sexual license, and a no-holds-barred "self-actualization" became virtues. And so when the president behaved in ways that shamed us and offended our deepest instincts of decency and morality, in our confusion we continued to give him high marks as president while at the same time proclaiming our distaste with his actions.

It was not, as so many have theorized, that because the economy was good we were willing to overlook his behavior. Rather, it was the inability to frame our discomfort in any articulate manner and to place it in any specific context that forced us to look the other way. To state that his violation of his marriage bonds was a violation of religious principles and of essential Biblical morality would be intolerant, benighted, judgmental and—worst of all—fundamentalist. It would be to impose our personal standards of behavior on others, and this, we have been incessantly taught, is the worst sin of all. We knew within us that something was not right, but somehow no one ever bothered to tell us that morality was not a reflection of how things are but of how they should be.

There are, in other words, no absolutes.

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In the midst of all this, Torah in its anachronistic way tells us that adultery, like idolatry and murder, is one of the three sins for which one must be prepared to surrender one's own life before violating them: *ye-hareg v-al ya-avor*.

How quaint of the ancients, how very bizarre—to demand that one choose death rather than enjoy what his instincts and his society tell him is perfectly acceptable. I mean, religion is a good thing and all, but to surrender your life rather than commit adultery? Please!

Judaism demurs: Why these three and no others? Because each of these three, more than any other *mitsva*, represents a rebellion against the essence of God.

The taking of life from someone to whom God granted life is an act of rebellion against the Giver of life. We are not God.

The worship of idols is an act of rebellion against the One God. When other deities are substituted for Him or allied with Him, this represents an assault on the very essence of the One God.

The breaking of the marriage bond is a rebellion against the gift of creative power which God has granted us. This gift, which transforms us into a potential creator like the Creator, is God's most wondrous gift to us, for with it we become partners in the very act of creation. But it is given with certain restrictions and safeguards. Marriage is one of these restrictions. To use one's sexual power outside of marriage is to distort and misuse this most powerful gift of God, and is a rebellion against His conduct of the universe.

There are other reasons why these three are such a formidable triad of transgressions. The murderer says: There is no other beside me. The idolater says: There is no Other above me. The adulterer says: There is no Other above me and there is other beside me; it is only I who matters, and therefore there are no restraints upon my impulses, and whatever I desire I can do. Thus is the *ein od mi-lvado* of *Devarim* 4:35, "There is none other than He," effectively changed to *ein od mi-lvadi*, "There is none other than I."

From every perspective, the three go together. Murder may be commonplace, and various forms of idolatry widespread, and adultery widely practiced, but to violate them is to encroach

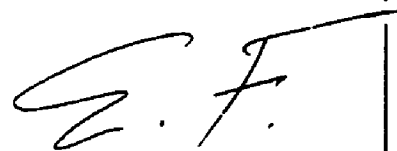
upon God's essence and to challenge Him frontally.

Better to surrender your life.

For a tiny minority of the world's population—the Jews (*Lo merubb-hem mi-kol ha-amim . . .*)—these are the three restrictions that represent subservience to God and our acceptance of His sovereignty. As such, they impinge on the essence and nucleus of a holy society. And more than any other *mitsvot*, these three affirm that there are absolutes in life.

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So it has finally come down to this. At a time when no one is shocked by it, when it is considered a normal part of life, when Congressmen shrug their shoulders at it, when the president of the United States trivializes it, when the citizenry is not sure how to deal with it, an Orthodox journal must underscore its continuing belief that there are absolutes in life. As R. Moshe Chaim Luzzatto states in the Introduction to his *Mesillat Yeshtarim*, "... the more widely something is known, the more does it tend to be ignored." And so this journal makes a bold and courageous statement: adultery is a cardinal sin, and we are definitely and clearly against it.



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