

I. CHANGING PATTERNS OF MORALITY AMONG TODAY'S STUDENTS

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I

In speaking of today's students and their morality, a few caveats are required:

(1) We must distinguish between attitudes and behavior. All studies indicate that more "radical" attitudes are not necessarily matched by similar behavior. Moreover, behavior can stem from a whole series of attitudes, some of which are not readily ascertainable.

(2) Though many of us are accustomed to speak of student culture, youth culture, or counter-culture among the young, there is a wide range of attitudes and behavior on our campuses, reflecting not only the home backgrounds of the students but also the different university settings, each with its own ethos, and the campus sub-communities with their pressures upon the individual student.

(3) Most of us are post-youth chronologically. Some of us have tended to distance ourselves from our young people, being critical and defensive about our values and our behavior. Others have over-identified with the young people -- a common American habit. Again, the parents among us may tend to do both, either at the same time or in an alternating way irritatingly well-known to young people.

II

The youth culture is a product of the sixties, a decade during which more young people entered universities than in all previous decades of American history. The media began featuring elements of that youth ethos and behavior, but frequently in a slanted way. The students who are on campus now were essentially pre-adolescent before some of the central events of the sixties; but they quickly identified with their older peers during that decade of Civil Rights ("I have a dream" was over ten years ago), the period of the least popular war in American history, the time of violent confrontations with the

"establishment" wherever targets could be struck on campuses, and the era of extraordinarily bitter interfacing in Washington and in Chicago just five years ago.

The rapidity and the intensity of the changes in American life find expression in subtle ways in the world of our young people. They are evident in their attitudes towards the nation-state, the political enterprise, violence, sexuality, pornography, marriage, the family unit, career and vocation planning. Likewise, the events of the recent Presidential crisis -- the attack upon Israel, the danger of another world war -- have all been deeply felt by our young people and found expression in their values and behavior.

Some of these values and behavior are similar to what we can find in the adult world. In many cases, however, the sensibilities of the older and the younger generations are polarized. An extreme case of this polarization was put by one writer as follows:

The old culture, when forced to choose, tends to give preference to property rights over personal rights, technological requirements over human needs, competition over cooperation, violence over sexuality, concentration over distribution, the producer over the consumer, means over ends, secrecy over openness, social forms over personal expression, striving over gratification, Oedipal love over communal love, and so on. The new counter-culture tends to reverse these priorities.

Would that it were so simple!

III

There are, however, some real differences. I would stress the following:

(1) Many young Jewish people have, as one observer put it, been made into psychological adults by our society while still being compelled sociologically to be adolescents. Hence there often is a divergence of view as to when a person is mature and, indeed, for

what. At what point does one begin to control one's own leisure, assume responsibility?

(2) As has been true from time immemorial, there is a conflict between the vertical and the horizontal -- between the inherited traditional culture with its values and today's spontaneous experience. Young people have always prized their autonomy, and they retreat to those private arenas where they can express their freedom in an unfettered way.

(3) More than in previous generations, a significant number of young people question the educational enterprise. Frequently, there is little respect for apprenticeship in vocational preparation. There is doubt as to the personal fulfillments one can find in professions, even in those free professions so esteemed by young Jewish people in the past. This may, however, be changing among the students who are on campus today, and who in their way may be seeking to avoid the drift that was characteristic of previous student generations.

(4) There is an ambivalence, if not hostility, towards technology, science and their fruits. If you are going to make something, many seem to be saying, "make love, not war." Consequently, we see a new and special interest in ecology, in de-urbanization, even in farming, crafts, sandal-making, and similar occupations.

(5) Forty years ago, there was talk in America of the need for "trial" marriage. Now there are young couples on campus who are openly living together. This is not necessarily sexual promiscuity. Two sociologists recently reported that they had interviewed fifty couples and found that most of them "do not see living together as an alternative to marriage, but a state preceding it." For them, marriage is a serious business, we are told, and they claimed that "living together can help them make the right choice before the contract is signed."

A major advantage of living together was the chance for "individual growth" that was unlike any experience to be found in a dormitory, fraternity or sorority house... While most had no interest in legal alternatives to marriage, some couples saw advantages. They believed that legalizing cohabitation would reduce friction with their parents, reduce problems with legal contracts, and bring

them tax benefits. Such an arrangement would eliminate some of the hardships of cohabitation but retain the desired freedom.

(6) A British philosopher has written that "moral skepticism and moral perfectionism combine to discredit all explicit expressions of morality" and yield "an angry absolute individualism." Events of the sixties and seventies have indeed introduced a large measure of moral skepticism, if not cynicism, in our youth. Nevertheless, many young people will, "in a beautiful way," strive to express, in word and deed, integrity and honesty in one-to-one relationships so as not to live in a world of complete nihilism. They place a special premium on candor and loyalty in friendship. This may be accompanied by an apprehensiveness towards marriage, that permanent liaison of fidelity, as we indicated previously.

Retained from an earlier phase of the youth culture may also be a moral perfectionism, which ultimately is apolitical inasmuch as it is so concerned with the utopian world that it is unable to deal with the proximate steps necessary for social change. Here too one finds many young people looking for "new political alternatives" such as the commune or a new sense of the family unit, and a new intensified attraction for vocations such as medicine, social work, public interest law, and community organization, which feature public social service in circumscribed areas which, hopefully free from political interference, hold the promise of personal satisfaction in the use of one's talents and skills.

IV

I have sought to remain descriptive in this brief generalized report. To evaluate these changing patterns of morality is difficult but necessary. Individuals, both adult and youth, will be striving for integration. Those who take seriously the task of being heirs to a Jewish tradition and culture will have the additional task of integrating new value stances and new behavior with inherited ways of understanding Jewish character and destiny.