

JEWISH EDUCATION IN ONE BOOK

by Shmuel E. Brog

Every human being longs to be himself. There is nothing remotely comparable to the joy one experiences when he activates his potential.

The Torah tells us that whereas everything in creation was made in quantity (herds of animals, schools of fish), God made only one man to teach that every person is unique. To experience this uniqueness is to enjoy the bliss of God.

To make each and every child aware of his personal uniqueness, of his essential greatness; to treat each child as he really is, a world unto himself; to teach and train him to savor his own true being; in short, to help him know himself -- this is Jewish education.

The Talmud (Shabbat 31a) relates that a non-Jew once came to Hillel and asked him to teach him the entire Torah while he, the non-Jew, stood on one foot.

Hillel answered, "What you find hateful do not do unto your friend. This is the entire Torah; the rest is commentary. Go study it."

Hillel meant to imply: Just as you despise being belittled in any manner; just as you would not want people to mention you or your family's shortcomings, to rudely ignore you, or to judge you without the benefit of the doubt -- so too do not treat others in those negative ways. All people detest mistreatment and abuse as much as you do.

Hillel issued a call for fairness, restraint and a recognition that others also deserve a quality of life.

Let us examine some of the profound ramifications of Hillel's statement:

What God requires of us is a self-evident truth. What man can argue that he has every right to be

unappreciative of what others do for him, or that he may be unfair and hurtful to others, but that they cannot reciprocate in kind?

Thus, it follows that Torah observance is not an act of piety, as is commonly believed, but an act as necessary to human existence as eating. Isn't it perfectly clear that without gratitude and fairness people must eventually destroy themselves, victims of their ever-increasing strife?

Hillel's whole point is that people are the essence of creation, not things. For those who know that the world depends on people, life depends on peace; for those who believe in things, life depends on manipulating and enslaving others. To reject the supremacy of people is to destroy the world. Alas, it is this diminution of man that western society is presently witnessing.

The Sages say (Midrash - Eichah Rabbah 2:17): "The nations have wisdom, but not Torah." Wisdom is sufficient to build things, but only Torah can create people. People who rely entirely on "wisdom," on the analysis of the material and quantity of "things," see the shell, the superficial, the inanimate. Such people have reduced human beings into things, totally ignoring their inner being. In fact, the word "reality" comes from the Latin word for "object," for it is all just a thing. Similarly, the word "person" comes from the word for "mask," for in that view, man too is inanimate. Such people see the necessity for things and have shown great wisdom in building them.

Unfortunately, without concern for the humanity of people and their higher aspirations as taught by the Torah, man's greatest creation, the machine, can destroy its inventor. Nuclear bombs have made man impotent. The computer has rendered him irrelevant, and the surfeit of material gadgetry aggressively entices him to flee from true reality. In pursuit of the unnecessary, man curses intelligence and normal human life. In such a world without spiritual values, uselessness, cruelty and nonsense have become gods; truth and traditional morality the new demons.

Superficiality is so destructive that it seeks to distort truth and to turn it into falsehood.

All nations have some form of expressing the world's greatest principle, "love your neighbor as yourself." Some have claimed that their morality is superior to Hillel's, that they preach pure love that transcends all bounds while Hillel "lowered it" somehow, by making it situational, dependent on what someone would not want done to him. But they fail to understand Hillel -- or the nature of true love.

Of course, our ultimate goal is to literally "love your neighbor as yourself." But the only way to

achieve this is by applying Hillel's teaching. One can reach the inner chamber only via the outer one.

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