

THE 'SUPERIOR DANCE' OF THE 'RELIGIOUS' JEW?□

by Jon Erlbaum

- This Week's **RRR** (Relevant Religious Reference): "...**Anyone whose wisdom exceeds his good deeds, his wisdom will not endure.**" - *Ethics of the Fathers (Avos)*, 3:12
- This Week's **SSC** (Suitable Secular Citation): "**Well isn't that Spe-e-e-ecial?**" - *The "Church Lady"*, played by Dana Carvey on "Saturday Night Live", shortly before breaking into her (his) celebrated "**SUPERIOR DANCE**"

DISSING THE DIVINE?

It's the Ultimate Experience! Abraham - at the peak of his post-Bris pain - has a transcendental encounter with the Creator of the Universe, Who "visits" in order to comfort him during his suffering. Amazingly, when Abraham sees that there are strangers wandering on the nearby road, he instantly reverts to his human hospitality mode, **LEAVES G-D HANGING**, and goes out to help the strangers. Most of us might assume that it **isn't wise to "diss the Divine"**! But Abraham realizes that the greatest thing he can do for G-d, so to speak, is to take care of His children. Unfortunately, Abraham's balanced model of religious behavior can occasionally be lost on even some of the very individuals who deem themselves the most "religious" (although I am certainly NOT suggesting that "imbalanced behavior" is the religious norm[1]), as the following story illustrates[2].

THE "SUPERIOR DANCE"

A visibly identifiable Jew, decked out in full traditional garb - long coat, dark hat, bushy beard, and swinging payos - sees a clean-shaven man walking on the sidewalk. Although the latter has no signs that would distinguish him from any other modern American male, the bearded man turns on his "Jew-dar" (Jewish RADAR) and accurately sizes up the clean-shaven man as being a "Member Of the Tribe"(i.e. Jewish). Leaving behind all tact and sensibility, our "Bearded Wonder" challenges his unsuspecting co-religionist in an accusing tone: "Jew - where's your beard?" Indignantly, the modern Jew turns and walks away, temporarily turned off to all things Jewish.

Many years later, providence arranges for another encounter between the members of this "oddball couple". They both pass away from this world at the same time, and as their souls ascend to appear before the Heavenly Court, each is privy to the other's Heavenly Hearings. The clean-shaven man is

the first Defendant. As he stands before the Tribunal, the Prosecuting Angel doesn't waste any time before blurting out, **"Jew - where's your beard?"** Looking on from the side, the identifiable Jew - in all his bearded bravado - shakes his head with a smug sense of vindication, thinking, "he should have listened to me when I told him back then!" When the clean-shaven man's Hearing is over, the bearded man struts up confidently and takes the stand as the next Defendant. The Prosecuting Angel takes one look at him, sizes him up, and says, **"Beard - where's your Jew?"**

OF BEARDS & JEWS

Not only does this story provide us with the priceless image of a comical caricature - i.e. a person's entire essence vividly described through the depiction of One Big Beard - but it teaches us a profound lesson as well. There are at least two broad categories of Mitzvahs for a Jew to focus on:

- 1) **Mitzvahs between a PERSON & HIS/HER CREATOR:** these detail the duties that DIRECTLY pertain to G-d - such as Shabbos, Kashrus, Prayer, etc. **And while having a beard is not a Jewish obligation - especially for women** - the beard in this story represents the value of using physical resources and symbols to keep us focused on our G-dly mission.
- 2) **Mitzvahs between a PERSON & OTHER HUMAN BEINGS:** these specify the obligations of human interaction - such as judging favorably, avoiding negative speech, paying a worker promptly, not misleading others, loving your neighbor like yourself, etc. And as written in a book that I highly recommend[3], **"A Jew is not 'religious' if he or she does not observe the Jewish laws of ethics and goodness. This statement is as obviously true as the statement that a citizen of the United States is not considered law-abiding if he violates half of the American legal code."**

A DIFFERENT DANCE

By asking the first defendant, "Jew - where's your beard", the Prosecuting Angel clearly confirms that since we are beings who relate to this world most noticeably through our physical senses, it is essential that we employ "ritual" commandments and even "external" symbols to help us forge a relationship with our Creator. But the punch-line of our story demonstrates that our connection to G-d is only genuine if it transforms us into greater lovers of people. Jews who pursue a relationship with G-d but neglect human-kindness will ultimately be asked, "Where's your Jew". Tragically, they will be held accountable for replacing their Judaism with a self-styled system of **SPIRITUAL SELF-INDULGENCE!** But hopefully those who fall into this trap will fall back into step, exchanging their "Superior Dance" for a more "Humane & Humble Hora"!

[***IMPORTANT NOTE: this article, and its Beard/Jew story, are IN NO WAY intended to imply that a significant portion of Jews who are "visibly observant" fit that description. On the contrary, many of them are indeed the genuine article: true pillars of virtue, and consistent, inspiring role-models. Rather, the article and story serve as an appeal to all of us to strive for integrity and consistency.]

Have a Wonderful Shabbos! Love, Jon Erlbaum & The Chevra

1. *IMPORTANT NOTE: this article is IN NO WAY intended to imply that significant numbers of "visibly observant" Jews are guilty of imbalanced religious behavior. On the contrary, many of them are indeed the genuine article: true pillars of virtue, and consistent, inspiring role-models. Rather, the article and story serve as an appeal to all of us to strive for integrity and consistency.]*
2. *I heard this story from Rabbi Wosner at Ohr Somayach Monsey. While I don't remember exactly how he told it and may have taken some "creative license", the upshot of the story is the same.*
3. The Nine Questions People ask about Judaism, p. 66 - Dennis Prager & Joseph Telushkin

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