

## PURIM 1999

When I arrived in Amsterdam last Fall on our 10 year wedding anniversary, I expected to renew some very traditional feelings about being Jewish. Holland was known to me as a haven for Jews who fled from Spain or Portugal after they were booted out in the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries. In 17<sup>th</sup> century Holland, unlike so many other places throughout the world, Jews were formally allowed to practice their religion. They created a stable community composed of men and women who were depicted as noble souls by such masters as Rembrandt. But just as a flourishing Jewish community came to an end in 20<sup>th</sup> century Germany, so did the 300 year old Dutch Jewish community. In the Holocaust, 90% of its members were killed.

Jews who visit Amsterdam are exposed to many sights that strengthen the bond between themselves and other members of their people. This bond takes the form of sympathy with others who share a memory of injustice, and pride in the accomplishments of their common ancestors. Then, there is that matter of the 614<sup>th</sup> commandment. The Bible identifies 613 commandments. But Emil Fackenheim has added a 614<sup>th</sup> — thou shalt not grant Hitler a posthumous victory by allowing the Jews to die as a people. To Fackenheim, simply being Jewish after the Holocaust is itself an honorable state of being, because it represents a statement against those who would commit genocide to deprive a group of its right to exist.

Exposure to Amsterdam had all the potential to reinforce these feelings about my Judaism. On the day after our anniversary, we visited the Anne Frank House. It is difficult to imagine a more vivid contrast between the quiet dignity of the Jewish families who hid in the top of that house and the vicious inhuman people who persecuted them and their kin throughout Europe. Fackenheim's 614th Commandment never seemed so profound as when one contemplates the terror of families spending hours during the daytime literally motionless like mice in a house of cats, lest they alert the people below of their existence. A few days later, my wife and I were treated to still more chapters of Dutch-Jewish history when we visited the Jewish

Quarter of Amsterdam. Tourists there can visit a 17<sup>th</sup> century synagogue and a modern museum detailing the history of Dutch Judaism. We learned that the shtetl was at times the poorest part of Amsterdam. But the community also produced many leading businesspeople and scholars until, after hundreds of years, it died an unnatural death at the hands of the Nazis. A Jew cannot help but feel pride at the resourcefulness, the discipline and, yes, the unity of the community living under such economically oppressive conditions.

I was no different. I experienced the sensations of pride and compassion when I toured that synagogue and museum. But something was rubbing against those feelings. And that something stemmed from the trip that I took on the previous day. You can call it Spinoza day; a pilgrimage to the former homes of my favorite dead person, the 17<sup>th</sup> century Jewish philosopher Baruch Spinoza. It began with a trip to Spinoza's house in The Hague where he lived for the last six years of his life. Then we went to the two-room museum at the house in the Leiden suburb of Rinjburg where Spinoza lived before he moved to the Hague. Another Jewish disciple who made the same trip in 1920 was Albert Einstein. And, finally, we went to the Amsterdam shtetl to the place where Spinoza was born, a stone's throw from the house into which Rembrandt moved when Spinoza was six or seven.

A portrait of Spinoza was displayed at the Jewish museum. He was, after all, an Amsterdam Jew, a biblical scholar, and the most famous Dutch philosopher to ever live. To its credit, the museum acknowledged that Spinoza was excommunicated by the rabbinate for his heretical views. But the museum did not attempt to convey the horrific manner in which he was treated by the community. It was against the law for a Jew to stand within four cubits, or six feet of Spinoza's body. This was ordained by the heads of the community, the rabbis, when Spinoza was in his early 20s. The rabbis felt the need to protect this "People of Priests" as the Jewish people is known, from contamination by Spinoza. What was his crime? At root, it was nothing more than teaching that the rabbis didn't go far enough in preaching against idolatry. And it was this same aversion to idolatry that prevented Spinoza from embracing Christianity. He simply believed that organized western religions were not pure enough in their monotheism.

The unity of God, he believed, extended to the unity of all life, indeed of all reality. His world was not manufactured by God from the outside but naturally expressed by God from the inside. In other words, his world was simply the unfolding of a single divine being. For such “blasphemous” teaching and for criticizing the literal truth of Biblical conceptions and the prevailing notions of free will, Spinoza was martyred by his own people. And his ideas were hardly popular with the mainstream of Dutch society. In view of his reputation, it should not be surprising that all but one of his famous books were published posthumously. The exception, which he published anonymously, was formally condemned by Holland’s government as “heretical and atheistic.”

To a modern mind, Spinoza could appear as a silly man because of his belief that metaphysical doctrines can be proved with certainty based on principles of mathematical logic. But despite such antiquated thinking, Spinoza remains a role model. Rather than discussing his ideas, allow me to say a bit about his life. He was a lens crafter by day and a philosopher by night. He was the center of a group of intellectuals who looked up to him as a man and often discussed his ideas. Yet he possessed neither wealth nor honors, having turned down invitations of both in favor of an ascetic lifestyle. For example, he rejected a chair in philosophy from the University of Heidelberg, claiming that such an official position would limit his ability to write what he truly believed. Spinoza prided himself in following the truth where it led him, and invariably it led him to heresy. He can perhaps be described as an extremely courteous version of Star Trek’s Mr. Spock. Like Spock, Spinoza’s rationalism masked a world of deep melancholy. A review of his correspondence illustrates just how easily his feelings could be hurt whenever someone with whom he shared his ideas rejected them in favor of traditional theology.

Historians were able to identify Spinoza’s home in Rinjburg because of a poem that was engraved on the front of the house. Translated from the Dutch, it read “Alas. If all mankind were wise. And were benign as well. This world would be a paradise. Whereas now, it often, is hell.” When I left that house, I couldn’t help reflecting on those simple words. While there is no such thing in Dutch as a simple word -- all their words seem to have at least 10 letters -- the

message of that poem was as clear to me as was the message of the Anne Frank house. Here was a community, a People of the Book, devoted to love and wisdom above all else. And what did their leaders do when they came across in their midst a free thinker whose devotion to similar ideals took him on a slightly divergent path. They hardened their heart and closed their mind.

It seems that whenever a collection of powerful people come together and deliberate on a challenge to their hegemony, a benign outcome is always the last thing to expect. Such a committee invariably, it seems, opts for self protection. When a voice in the committee raises high minded principles to encourage acceptance of radical ideas or conduct, that voice is so often trivialized, if not mocked. After all, powerful people so rarely attain their status by high mindedness and appeals to universal values. Rather, acceptance to the halls of power is gained by those who learn how to express the narrow interests of the group in which they seek power. Once invited to power, it takes true courage to risk those interests in the name of principle.

Reflecting on Spinoza in Amsterdam, I experienced a rare bout of humility about my Judaism. For once, the Jews were not the victims. Instead, they were the perpetrators. Yet my humility was based on much more than the sense that a Jewish community persecuted a single individual more than 300 years ago. Rather, I began to reflect on the topic of the Jewish attitude toward another famous poor, free-thinking, heretical Jewish thinker — Jesus of Nazareth. Let us not exaggerate — Jewish people respect, indeed venerate Jesus. But there remains a feeling of resentment for the religion with which he is associated. These resentful attitudes are largely understandable. Millions of Jews have been persecuted or murdered as a result of anti-semitism that was ultimately fueled by Christian hatred of Judaism. And this hatred itself stemmed from a combination of the present-day Jews' refusal to convert to Christianity and their ancestors' alleged persecution of Jesus himself. By dissing Christianity, and minimizing the value of its founder, Jews psychologically cope with their fateful choice of refusing to enter the religious, and perhaps even the cultural mainstream of their society. Many Christians almost demand the resentment they receive insofar as they persist in telling Jews that conversion to Christianity is indubitably in the self-interest of all Jews concerned with their personal salvation.

While I respect the reasons why Jews might viscerally resent Christianity as a rival religion, I could not help but think in Amsterdam how closed we Jews can be to accepting the truths that Christianity has to offer. To be sure, Christianity affirms many principles, which I will not attempt to rank according to their worth. But among the most profound is the importance of role modeling to the development of a religious soul. In particular, Christianity demonstrates the value of having a common role model to which all humans can relate.

The Old Testament God, Christians would correctly argue, is a difficult role model upon which to build a religion for the masses. It is true that such a God, much to Spinoza's dismay, was granted a personality and was viewed as the source of all admirable values. But Jews were also told that we cannot truly know God's essence; we may never, to use the Biblical metaphor, see His "face." Further, Jews also learn that the Biblical God is capable of wreaking great destruction and subjecting good people like Job to grand torments. We are informed that this God works in mysterious ways that often seem impossible to approve of, let alone understand. In short, this God is a tad hidden and remote to serve all but the most philosophically inclined and mentally disciplined as a role model that guides our actions and inspires our trust.

So a void was left for Christianity to fill, and boy did it. In Jesus, the Christian perceives a figure that exemplifies ethics in a way to which humans can relate. We learn about his lifestyle -- his encounters with priests, prostitutes and paupers. We see him cope with the best and worst of fortune. And we are told that he represents, above all, the love and mercy that is at the heart of Torah ethics. Through many centuries, Christians have attested to the strength of spirit that they gain from the example of this role model. They benefit from the simplicity of picturing Jesus as a man encountering many of the same trials and tribulations that they face in daily life. Currently, their adherents need only go to their local grocery store to purchase a "WWJD" emblazoned bracelet and remind themselves: "what would Jesus do" if he faced the same choices they face? With the development of the Catholic Church, saints, pontiffs and other religious figures comprised a secondary level of role models whose virtues reinforced those of Jesus.

Jews cannot be expected to join in the deification of Jesus. But one need not deify Jesus to benefit from his example on how to lead a religious way of life. Cannot a person who perceives the downsides in deifying an ostensible human being nevertheless gain inspiration, not mere knowledge, from the life of a person whom we can admire? And is there no value to a culture when certain historical figures are widely known to exemplify virtuous conduct and to inspire similar conduct in others? These are questions that all Jews must ask themselves next time they snicker at their rival religion.

Is Judaism devoid of role modeling? Traditionally, the answer would have to be “no.” There might not have been one unifying personality to take the place of Jesus. But any religion as spiritually gripping as Judaism could not survive without common inspirational figures. The role assigned to Jesus and his contemporaries in Christianity has traditionally been assigned to Biblical characters in Judaism. To our ancestors, individuals like Moses, Jacob, Abraham, Rebecca and Ruth were endowed with personalities resulting from legends that expanded upon the text of the Bible. They were more than literary characters to the Jewish people but flesh and blood heroes, whose imperfections only make them that much more real. And in many Orthodox Jewish communities leading up to the present, the importance of role modeling was not left to figures from the distant past. Leaders of communities, like the rebbes of the Satmar and Lubavatcher sects, evoke snickering among the Reformed and Conservative Jews. After all, these rebbes are treated as inerrant fonts of wisdom by their adherents. To the Reformed mind, this is true blasphemy, akin to treating them as a God. But, as was said earlier about Christianity, the spiritual strength that the followers of these rebbes receive from the examples of their heroes cannot be overestimated.

Say what you will about role modeling in Orthodox Jewish communities, but we live in a society where “traditional” Jews are a small minority. For the Reformed and Conservative Jews who represent mainstream Jewish America, the lack of role models is a serious problem. Ask these people to talk about the personality of Jacob, and they will recount perhaps a handful of

brief stories, but hardly enough to paint a portrait of an inspiring presence. Ask them about Talmudic rabbis, and few will recall more than one or two maxims credited to their names. What about the rabbi at the local synagogue? Equally doubtful. There is little about the lifestyle of the local rabbi to separate him or her from, say, the local pediatrician, dentist, or law professor. Many are paid six figure salaries, endure few apparent sacrifices for their profession, and create no obviously-inspired work of scholarship or wisdom. The sermons they deliver to throngs of affluent congregants rarely offer the challenges that were experienced, for example, by the congregants of southern black Baptist churches in the early 1960s. The rabbi of modern America typically leads a risk-averse life. Fine members of the community they may be. But inspiring presences? Heroes? Unlikely.

So who then are the role models in this community? Earlier in the century, when many American Jewish families had already made clean breaks from Orthodoxy, the answer was quite clear: your role models were your parents. That was a time when the community was anything but affluent. Young adults, for the most part laborers rather than professionals, struggled for long hours every day to provide basic sustenance for their children. What did these adults receive for their long hours in non-glamorous jobs? Mainly, the satisfaction that they could somehow create the opportunity for their kids to gain what they never could: a college degree and a passport to prosperity. Jewish kids could not help but appreciate the sacrifices made on their behalf. It was not merely that adults were providing kids with the kinds of benefits that the adults themselves were given when they were children. No. These adults were poor immigrants or children of immigrants who were never given much of anything except the right to live in this country. To all outside observers, they were little more than schmoes. But their children would become professionals, businesspeople; in short, recipients of the American dream. What sort of message, I ask, does this create for the recipients of such largesse? Simply that they owe whatever they have to their parents, and they will strive to live a life that expresses the values that they were taught as children. Then, and only then, will their parents be vindicated not as schmoes but as mensches.

Needless to say, times have changed. In American Reformed and Conservative families today, affluence is commonplace. Parents work in well ventilated office buildings at jobs that often command, if not outright prestige, then at least respect. They drive home in their Japanese cars or vans to well stocked houses and apartments replete with multiple televisions, stereos, and other modern appliances that both they and their children can use. They vacation at resorts, sometimes overseas, with their families. They send their children to colleges, just like the ones they attended. In short, while they typically can be commended for being upstanding citizens and decent people, their lives have been easy, their characters scarcely challenged. It is difficult for the child to discern what principles such a class of people stand for other than the value of playing by the rules of society if one hopes to enjoy a life of prosperity. And it is questionable that a child can be expected to look up to their parents as heroes so much as see their parents as mere reflections of their future selves.

Don't get me wrong. Parents today can be wonderful influences on their children. They remain the most important influences on a child's life. Yet if they want their children to develop strong moral values, and if they want these values to be inspired by the examples of heroic, outstanding individuals, additional role models are needed as much, if not more than ever.

So far, I have been discussing the importance of role modeling exclusively as if it were a modern Jewish phenomenon. Yet the trends cited above apply similarly to the American population as a whole. Traditional religious symbols and figures have for decades been losing their influence over our nation's culture. The majority might still claim that they believe in a Supreme Being, but their lifestyles — their day-in day-out choices — reflect a widespread secularism. Further, the affluence that I have attributed to Judaism has become commonplace throughout much of our society, making it difficult for children to see in their parents the sacrifice, altruism and principled conduct necessary for optimal role modeling. In addition, during recent decades, the nation has been blessed by a period of comparative peace. While we can generally rejoice in this fact, it remains the case that we have been deprived of the heroic feats that commonly energize a nation's spirit during times of war.



For all of our economic and militaristic successes, our nation is in need of positive influences that we all can rally around as exemplars of what we as a nation would choose to become. This way, when children wish to gain inspiration and cannot find it from remote theological symbols or all-too-mundane personal experiences, they can draw upon the examples of other human beings. And they can express the value of such role modeling not only to themselves but also to others, who are exposed to some of the same outstanding models of human behavior. I am not suggesting that we develop some kind of national church, God forbid. But from some walk of life, people must emerge as heroes who form the pantheon of our civil religion. Traditionally, many such people have come from the world of politics.

This has been an interesting year for role models in politics. According to a January 1999 poll, Bill Clinton was the most admired man in America — garnering more than 2 ½ times as many votes as the Pope, who came in second. Yet only weeks before, Clinton was impeached. Jefferson, one of the American Patriarchs, also had a banner year. The evidence is now fairly persuasive that he fathered children with a slave, surely an offense that to future generations would smack of sexual harassment if not rape.

The Clinton scandal in particular has focused much of the American public, indeed much of the world, on a number of interesting issues. One such issue is whether presidents should be expected to serve as moral models? In their zeal to defend the President, many Democrats have advanced the position that people who demand role modeling from presidents are missing the point of the office. According to this perspective, a president's job involves exercising sound judgment in his public actions concerning, primarily, the economy and, secondarily, foreign policy. How he behaves in his private life is irrelevant. And expecting him to serve as a moral example to American citizens is a pipe dream. He is, after all, a human being whose public responsibilities are demanding enough without the need to add moral responsibilities on top of them.

Many Republicans have taken exception to this perspective. And I must say that though I am a lifelong Democrat who did not support the President's impeachment, I agree with them. Democrats often cite reactions overseas to support their position that this was all much ado about nothing. But people overseas do not understand the unique role that the presidency has traditionally played in the spiritual strength of this country. Living in countries where church and state have traditionally been combined, they have not required as much spiritual leadership from their political leaders. That role they granted to clerics (like the Pope) who, as partners in the ruling regime, were empowered to exert moral leadership and a limited amount of political power. With the existence of such unifying symbols of spiritual leadership, the prime ministers and kings were left with the job of making sure that the country is secure from war and prosperous economically. These leaders have been encouraged to exert moral leadership, but there is no gaping void in the nation's soul when they chose to abandon that duty.

In the United States, presidents have been treated as religious figures. More specifically, in the American Civil Religion to which all public school students in this country have been exposed, the Founding Fathers and their successors like Lincoln and the Roosevelts, serve as the analogues to the Biblical Patriarchs in Judaism. Students come to know the personalities of the men who made this country great through political leadership. And their names are associated with other men and women who fought for similar ideals. Harriet Tubman of the underground railroad fame is spoken of as a crusader for justice and human dignity and as an exemplar of unparalleled courage. As such, she has inspired millions of Americans to follow a virtuous life. Might she have also been a promiscuous, alcoholic shoplifter who beat her dogs? Perhaps. But none of that stuff (which, by the way, I made up), or many other negative facts about her life, have ever been disseminated to the public.

Any American who went to school prior to Watergate recalls the mythical way in which our historical figures were portrayed in history and civics class. Washington couldn't tell a lie, our teachers informed us. Neither, presumably, could honest Abe Lincoln. Roosevelt was fearless. And the other members of the American pantheon were similarly virtuous. Yes, we

were never told that these people were more than human. But little time was spent on their foibles. Certainly, few if any characteristics were unearthed that could cause us to doubt them as role models.

Ah, Bob Dylan might say, but we were so much older then, we're younger than that now. Now we sacrifice wisdom for knowledge. And when it comes to the imperfections of our presidents and national heroes, boy are we accumulating knowledge. Books abound about every possible scandal that has befallen an American President, and every rumor that has not yet created a scandal. This is particularly true of modern presidents. The minute a person decides to be president, his entire life is now fair game for investigation. Once a president is elected, tax dollars may be spent on investigating conduct that occurred two decades ago. Why anyone in their right mind would subject themselves to such scrutiny is beyond me. But perhaps the greatest damage is done when the investigators hit on something truly scandalous. Each time this occurs, the public finds more and more difficulty treating their national leaders as moral role models. Presumably, one need only look under the surface of a Washington and a Lincoln and one will find a cheatin, lyin, philanderin, woman-abusing jerk.

We no longer care to see these individuals as somewhat mythical characters who inspire our patriotism and our virtue. Now, we want all the facts about them, as dirty and as private as they may be. Inquiring minds want to know. And journalists as well as historians are happy to serve it up as if they care not about the indigestion they are creating. Surely, they say, there is something valuable in the knowledge that even our heroes are, what is the word, "human."

Fine. Let them be human. We all are taught in Hebrew school that Moses was human, that his sin against God prevented him from entering the promised land. But do not deprive us of our role models. And this admonition goes not only to the journalists and historians who want us to wallow in the scandals, but also to the politicians whose reckless behavior invite the scandals to be unearthed. Now, politicians like the President are armed with new arguments to defend even the most sordid personal conduct. We are told that to expect politicians to be virtuous

while in office is simply ridiculous — politicians are people, and people have dark sides, and none of this has anything to do with the offices for which they are elected. In the words of Bill Clinton, what he does in the Oval Office with an intern is between himself, “the two people I love the most — my wife and my daughter — and our God.” That was as maddening a statement as any that he made under oath. Once a president is elected, once he is in office, he must not shirk his obligations as a role model. If he does not want to bear them, he has no business running. For a president to take office amidst a sexual scandal, for him later to face a sexual harassment suit, and for him still later to engage in repeated sexual episodes with a young woman he hardly knew — wholly apart from any lies that were told about these episodes — reflects a profound misunderstanding of the duties of his office. This patently reckless conduct sends a powerful message to the public about the importance of marital vows. And it is ironic that this message was sent by a regular church goer whose religion champions love above all else. Nowhere is a person more able to demonstrate one’s commitment to love than to honor a promise not only to God and to one’s own spouse but to all who would ever aspire to a lifelong love affair with another person that one will never put the passions of the flesh above the demands of the heart.

Role models are moral men and women. People who exemplify virtue in their private lives, in the way they treat not only their loved ones but also those who are in no position to help them attain some grandiose dream. According to Jewish values, it is nice to be intellectually gifted, courageous, or even “effective” as a leader. It is nicer still to be a menshe, a person with a good name, a person who practices what he or she preaches. These are the kinds of heroes we need. Some of us are lucky enough to find such heroes in their own families. Others have the good fortune to find them as fictional characters in books. Yet if we hope to find shared heroes, people from whom we as a society can gain common inspiration, we must find them in real flesh and blood people. With journalists, historians, conspiracy freaks and other peddlers of scandal roaming about, this task will remain difficult. For our next generation to do honor to the ones before it, our society must get to work to ensure that we do not lose our ability to find these role models both in our past and in our future.

Depending upon the depth of the bond, gaining a role model can be like falling in love. We ought not worship our role models, any more than we worship our beloved. And when we elevate them too much, we invariably are poised for a letdown. But it is better to try to find these heroes or lovers than to turn off our hearts altogether. Try to remember how silly it sounded when an adolescent friend whose heart was broken swore off romance permanently. That's how silly it sounds to me when our society rejects the value of searching for real life heroes who can serve as role models that we all can share.