

Sh'ma

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Thoughts about thoughts about attica-1

Seymour Siegel

The prisons and the prisoners of our country have suddenly become one of the prime challenges to our consciences. Some have known for a long time that our correctional institutions have not corrected and that our prisons were schools for crime. Now the whole country is aware of what is happening on the other side of the prison walls. The plea of the incarcerated to be treated like men rather than like a breed less than human comes with special merit and poignancy and with a urgency which cannot be ignored.

However, much that has been written about the prisons and the inmate population has been dehumanizing to the prisoners—even where there was ostensible defense of the prisoner's manhood.

The idea that a man who has a long record of crime is in jail because of his "race" or because he is "poor" or because of his "political beliefs" is ultimately demeaning to those who are seemingly being defended. Writers and columnists seek, as they say, to go beyond the surface of the facts and to penetrate to the "core" of what is wrong with our prisons. This penetration usually means shifting the responsibility from the individual criminal to "society" or to his "environment."

What is overlooked is that our true humanity consists in our assumption of *individual responsibility*. True, there are mitigating circumstances; true, that

we dare not tolerate conditions which brutalize and dehumanize. But humanness means the power to control conditions rather than letting conditions control us.

Humanness demands individual responsibility

The truth of the matter is that millions upon millions of men, women, and children of all races and creeds have suffered privation, prejudice, pogroms, and poverty. There are countless people who faced the same conditions that were the lot of those who are convicted criminals. These include millions of black people. They did not end up as felons and accused murderers—but as productive, law-abiding members of our society. The difference between those who allow conditions to make them criminals and those who are able to overcome the conditions under which they live must lie—at least in part—in the inner assumption of responsibility. The lack of such sense leads to criminality and self-destruction. The thrust of the argument of many who write and speak on the matter is that if the conditions are bad enough, then what happens, however heinous, is to be attributed to the deficiencies of our society rather than to deficiencies of will and character. It seems to me that this attitude represents the ultimate in dehumanization. It denies to man that which is most uniquely his—his freedom and therefore his responsibility.

By all means let us reform our prisons. They are a national disgrace. Let us humanize and speed up our system of justice. Let us improve our society where it desperately needs improvement—but let us educate our young and ourselves to recognize our own humanness and our own responsibility.

Thoughts about thoughts about attica-2

Haskel Lookstein

Concerning Attica, Mr. Agnew said, "To compare the loss of life by those who violate the society's law with a loss of life of those whose job it is to uphold it, represents not simply an assault on human sensibility, but an insult to reason."

This attempt to assign greater or lesser weight to the lives of guards and prisoners has been repudiated by many. But the fundamental idea came into our culture from rabbinic Judaism. Its view is best seen in