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POLITICAL POLLUTION

Pornography in grocery stores. Loud music in recreation halls. Smoking in restaurants. Unkempt diners in restaurants. Drinking wine in restaurants. Necking in movie houses.

Should we pass laws against these activities? That's not a frivolous question; it has to do with the larger quo vadis question: whither are we drifting, and do we really want to drift in that direction?

Various people are variously opposed to the activities catalogued above. Esthetic reasons are offered: smoke is offensive, loud music is ugly, people with crumpled sweatshirts are not appetizing to behold while eating. Self-health is invoked: drinking wine corrodes the stomach, and cigars can't do the smoker's stomach any good, either. Then, there are reasons of public health - air, noise and moral pollution: cigar smokers don't do other people's stomachs any good; people with unsavory clothes don't help the digestion of other diners; loud music can create tension, a prime cause of heart trouble. A contagious immoral climate is established by pornography, public drinking and necking.

The validity of these propositions are not so important. It is not up to any of us to challenge anyone else's esthetic sensitivities. Most of the self-health arguments are probably accurate, to one degree or another. The propositions relating to air, noise and moral pollution are combinations of esthetic and scientific judgements.

The question, however, is what we want the government to do about them. There is, for example, a petition now in circulation which would have government regulate smoking in restaurants, etc. The alternative is the consumer or marketplace approach. The marketplace approach is to refuse to go into a grocery store which displays pornography, or into a recreation hall which has loud music, or into a restaurant which allows smoking or wine drinking or too optional dress, or in a movie house which does not crack down on necking. It is also a marketplace approach to tell the proprietors of these places about your intentions.

Then, there will result some grocery stores which carry pornography, and some which don't. There will be some restaurants and airlines which allow smoking, and some which don't - or some which provide different sections for these purposes. And matters will then sort themselves out so that people can pursue their desires without interfering with the desires of others.

There are, of course, monopolistic environments in which government may have no choice, such as banning smoking and loud music in Muni buses, for which there are no reasonable marketplace alternatives. But if government becomes too deeply involved in controlling personal behavior, or in interfering with marketplace solutions to personal differences of behavior, some serious problems are presented.

If the government is to become the arbiter of individual esthetics, or of self-abuse, or of personal management, then we begin to back into the very meaning of the word, "totalitarianism." If government has such prerogatives, why not prohibit

outward displays of Judaism, as corrupting and offensive to the rest of the population? Far-fetched? Scarcely. Enough governments in history have imposed exactly that prohibition.

Judaism was unique in the way it combined the concept of God's omnipotence with the concept of man's free will. "Everything is foreseen, but freedom of choice is given." The purpose of earthly government is to see that one person's free will is unfettered by others. That is as good a definition as any of political democracy; and it is a key to the way in which Judaism and Jewish life have interplayed with human history throughout the centuries.

In mass technological societies, it becomes increasingly difficult to find the line which protects one set of human desires against another set without unnecessary control. That is why mass technological societies both created the need for, and constantly threaten the existence of democracy. But, then, the imperative is to run away from government control, except as a matter of last resort, and to seek marketplace solutions; rather than to run towards government control, happily, at every puritanical impulse, or at every hazard glimpsed on the horizon. Sufficient unto the day are the petitions thereof.