

Bertrand Russell's Autobiography

Three Passions in Life

Rabbi Beerman retained this fragment from the philosopher Bertram Russell's autobiography on a typed piece of paper on his desk. He kept it close to him because it embodied three of his animating passions in life: love, knowledge, and concern for the suffering of others. Beerman was a deeply devoted family man and friend whose patience and loyalty were legendary. He also was a ceaselessly curious intellectual who loved to engage in rigorous debate. And perhaps his most profound sense of service in life was to alleviate the suffering of others. In this sense, the excerpt from Russell represented a life credo parallel to—and even in lieu of—the well-known refrain from the Ethics of the Fathers (Pirke Avot 1:2) that “the world rests upon three things, Torah, avodah (worship), and gemilut hasadim (deeds of loving-kindness).” Indeed, Beerman was as informed by contemporary literary and philosophical sources as he was by classical Jewish texts and precepts.

Three passions, simple but overwhelmingly strong, have governed my life: the longing for love, the search for knowledge, and unbearable pity for the suffering of mankind. These passions, like great winds, have blown me hither and thither, in a wayward course, over a deep ocean of anguish, reaching to the very verge of despair.

I have sought love, first, because it brings ecstasy—ecstasy so great that I would often have sacrificed all the rest of life for a few hours of this joy. I have sought it, next, because it relieves loneliness—that terrible loneliness in which one shivering consciousness looks over the rim of the world into the cold unfathomable lifeless abyss. I have sought it, finally, because in the union of love I have seen, in a mystic miniature, the prefiguring vision of the heaven that saints and poets have imagined. This is what I sought, and though it might seem too good for human life, this is what—at last—I have found.

With equal passion I have sought knowledge. I have wished to understand the hearts of men. I have wished to know why the stars shine. And I have tried to apprehend the Pythagorean power by which number holds sway above the flux. A little of this, but not much, I have achieved.

Love and knowledge, so far as they were possible, led upward toward the heavens. But always pity brought me back to the earth. Echoes of cries of pain reverberate in my heart. Children in famine, victims tortured by oppressors, helpless old people a hated burden to their sons, and the whole world of loneliness, poverty, and pain make a mockery of what human life should be. I long to alleviate the evil, but I cannot, and I too suffer.

This has been my life. I have found it worth living, and would gladly live it again if the chance were offered me.

COMMENTARY BY DR. JOAN BEERMAN

These were the first words Leonard read to me in the earliest days of our loving each other. He was introducing himself with words that he cherished—that touched his soul. Not until later did I speculate as to why someone else's words, rather than his own, seemed to him better able to reveal his deepest self. For they do, of course. He could have written those words himself, and anyone who knew him would have agreed that these were his values, his yearnings, and his joy.

Language had such great power for Leonard, and he labored hard over every elegant and stirring word he chose. But I suspect that he never fully understood his extraordinary gift, and so preferred to present himself to me—as a loving man, as a questing man, as a Jew—through the words of Bertrand Russell.

When, many months later, I first heard Leonard's own words in a Yom Kippur sermon, I was awed. I had never heard someone speak with such passion, turning the thoughts of his deep intellect and profound moral sense into poetry. What I learned that day, and over the years that we were together, was that Leonard did not need Bertrand Russell's writings—did not need anyone else's writings—to reveal himself. He was seamlessly that person—in his public life and in his private life: one who passionately loved, one who tried to make sense of the world, and yet finally one who could never escape suffering for the pain and injustice that he witnessed.