

THEY DON'T LIKE ME

Baruch Cohon

A schoolboy kills himself because other kids scorned and bullied him, and a distant memory comes to mind in vivid color. Here it is:

A small boy enters the kitchen door of an old Cincinnati house moping, complaining. Why is he here in the middle of the afternoon, when he usually plays ball until the sun goes down?

“They don’t like me,” he whines.

What brought on that conclusion? Maybe I didn’t get chosen on the backyard team I wanted. Or maybe I threw wild and got laughed at. I don’t remember. What still echoes in my ear, however, is my mother’s answer:

“It’s all right. They don’t have to like you.”

Those simple words impacted my childhood with the surprise of meeting the real world.

Out there things are that way. Nobody has to cater to you, or to accept your whims, or even to like you. If they think you are silly they have every right to laugh at you.

Frequently the very drive to be liked backfires and provokes contempt, hatred, violence.

Lessons like these take time to learn, but somehow they were easier to absorb with my mother’s brief words of wisdom. Even the sting of prejudice loses some of its acid when considered in the light of “they don’t have to like you.”

What she didn’t say, and what necessarily follows is: “You have to like yourself.” When the Torah instructs us to “love your neighbor as yourself,” it assumes that you feel positive about yourself. After all, if I despise myself, my love for my neighbor can’t be worth much. Self respect on the part of any individual, any group, nurtures backbone and attracts respect from others – even others who may not like that individual or group. Observant Jews working in 7-day businesses, for example, arrange to work on Christmas and Easter, and take off on Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur. And they achieve mutual respect. Even find themselves liked.

And who wants to be disliked? It takes someone really ill to seek other people’s dislike. Just a few years ago a former mental patient, on trial for molesting and murdering children, was revealed to have gone to court and taken a Jewish name because he “wanted to know how it feels to be persecuted.”

Healthy people have no desire to feel persecuted. But it is always good to be liked. And that likeable quality starts from inside each of us. No, they don’t have to like you. But if you like and respect yourself, they just might.