

"TWO QUESTIONS"

When we are introduced to Abraham in today's Sidra, we meet the greatest revolutionary in all the Western world, perhaps in all humanity. It is Abraham who taught the world a purified concept of monotheism, the idea of worshipping One Supreme God.

But we must not imagine that this greatest of all ideas occurred fully mature to Abraham in a sudden inspiration. Abraham, as we trace his story through the pages of the Bible, does not appear to us as a static individual. He undergoes development and growth. And even after he has discovered the authentic Jewish truth of one God, we find him proceeding from level to level, ever growing higher.

In the Sidra we read today, we find one passage in which Abraham addresses two questions to God, and these two questions symbolize two levels of faith and religion in the life of Abraham. And at the same time, they tell us, the descendants of Abraham in the twentieth century, how we must proceed from strength to strength in our religious insight.

The first question is posed after God promises Abraham that his reward will be very great. At this point, Abraham turns to the Almighty and says to Him, my Lord God mah titen li -- what will You give me? The second occurs shortly afterwards, after God has promised Abraham that he and his descendants will inherit the Land of Israel. Abraham says, my Lord God ba-mah eda ki irashenah -- literally, "how will I know that I indeed will inherit it?"

The first question, that of mah titen li, shows that Abraham has reached that plateau of religious understanding, where he is able to ascribe everything of any worth in the world to God. Abraham knows that, in an ultimate sense, it is God who provides and He who denies. He recognizes that the only Source

to whom to turn for the satisfaction of one's needs is -- the Almighty. No individual no matter how powerful, no government no matter how benevolent, can replace God as the Provider of man's greatest and most cherished needs. Therefore, Abraham turns to his God and asks, mah titen li, what can You give me? My greatest and most profound desire is for a son; give me, O God, a son. It is, therefore, a question <sup>that</sup> to symbolizes a deep religious awareness.

And yet, it is not the highest level attainable. For after all, the consequence of Abraham's new understanding is that God must give. Despite the fact that Abraham's request is a noble one -- a child -- nevertheless it is still a selfish one: God, what will You give me?

The second question marks the transition from the first to the second level.

The expression ba-mah eda ki irashenah does not mean, as it ordinarily translated, "how do I know that I will inherit it?" Abraham is not asking for a miracle, for a divine signature on an eternal guarantee. The Hebrew word yadoa means not only "to know," but also (as is pointed out by

R. Yaakov Zevi Meklenburg, in his Ha-Ketav ve'ha-Kabbalah) to love, to elevate, to make great, to bless. Thus, yedatikha be'shem means: I have elevated/by

My Name. When God says of Abraham ki yedativ, it means not that God knows Abraham, but that He loves him intensely. And when the Psalmist exclaims mah adam va-tedaehu, it means not "what is man that Thou knowest him?" but "what is man that Thou shouldst so love him and cherish him?" Therefore, Abraham's question ba-mah eda ki irashenah means: why do I deserve to inherit it? Or, as Rashi put it, be'eze zekhut yitkaimu bah - how shall I and my descendants prove worthy of this inheritance? By what means shall we prove deserving of it?

Thus, the first question, mah titen li, is a challenge to God: what can You

do for me? Whereas, the second question, ba-mah eda ki irashenah, is a challenge to one's self: what can I do for God, how can I prove worthy of His attention? And the answer to that second question is, as was given by God to Abraham: kebah li eglah meshuleshet ve'ez meshuleshet ve'egel meshulash ve'tor ve'gozal, take for Me a three year old heifer, and a three year old goat, and a three year old ram, and a pigeon and a dove -- give, sacrifice, offer. This is how you prove worthy of yerushat ha-aretz, the inheritance of the Holy Land.

Herein lies the superiority of the second question to the first. It asks not what can God give me, but what I give Him; not what is in it for me, but what is in me for Him; not: therefore what will I get, but: therefore what ought I do? It is that higher level where man poses to himself the great question: be'eze zekhut, by what right do I take advantage of God's world, how can I prove deserving of all His love and bounty? And the answer is kebah li - a life of service, of giving, of sacrifice.

Abraham himself demonstrated this teaching by living it. His life consisted of asarah nisyonot, ten excruciating trials, all of which he survived in order to become, as we read in today's Haftorah, Avraham ohavi - Abraham, the lover of God - or Avraham avinu, Abraham the father of the Jewish people. The higher conception of religion is one which does not shrink from the implications of kebah li, of giving as the greatest expression of devoutness. On this Sabbath dedicated to the Federation of Jewish Philanthropies it is not amiss to speak of Tzedakah as one of the distinguishing marks of our faith even amongst people who have far removed themselves from the origins of our tradition. { When we support Federation, which in turn supports 116 separate institutions, we show that the Jewish faith is one of kebah li, one of Tzedakah.

Indeed, in our days we have seen how yerushat ha-aretz can be achieved only through eglah meshuleshet, only through a threefold sacrifice of our best and our finest and most dedicated people. Without sacrifice, without difficulty,

without ten times asarah nisyonot, we never would have the State of Israel today.

And is not the same true in every facet of life? Even as Abraham and later Isaac and ~~later~~ Jacob had to go through all kinds of difficulties in order to raise their children successfully, so do all of us know: in order to have any measure of happiness and pride from children, one must go through difficulty, even suffering. In order to achieve success, whether in business or in profession, one must work and work hard. Le'fum tzaara agra, as our Rabbis taught: according to the work and the anguish and the labor is the later reward.

Perhaps in this distinction we have made between the two questions we can understand a passage in the Talmud. The Talmud (Berakhot 7b) teaches that from the day that the Lord created the world, there was no one to call him by the name of Adon, Lord or Master, until Abraham came and he applied this name to God. How do we know that Abraham called God Adon? And here the Talmud points, as its proof-text, to the verse in our Sidra, "O Lord God, ba-mah eda ki irashenah".

This, of course, is the second of our two questions. And therefore the Tosafot quite rightly ask: the first question too is preceded by the name of God as Adon, "my Lord God mah titen li?" Why, then, does not the Talmud point to this verse, which comes first in the Bible, as proof that Abraham was the first human being to call God by the name Adon?

According to our interpretation, however, the reason the Talmud skips the first question where the name Adon appears, that of mah titen li, and singles out, instead, the second question, that of ba-mah eda ki irashenah, which <sup>also</sup> is preceded by the invocation of God as Adon, is thoroughly understandable. It is true that God was referred to by Abraham as Adon when Abraham said mah titen li. However, this was only a transitory, ephemeral state which was soon transcended and surpassed by Abraham himself as he grew to a higher understanding and a higher orientation towards God -- that which he expressed in the famous question, Lord God ba-mah eda ki irashenah, how can I prove deserving of what You have given me so far. It is this question, with the answer of kehah li, of giving and offering and sacrificing, which is the higher, and true Abrahamitic conception.

Permit me to make one thing clear. I do not mean that the highest conception of Judaism is one in which we assure ourselves that it is worth being a good Jew even though sometimes it is difficult. It is not a matter of weighing the good life as over against the difficult life. What I mean is that the old Yiddish expression, "es iz shver tzu zein a Yid," is not only a statement of fact, but also one of theology. The difficulty is in itself part of the virtue of the good life. I mean that the easy successes and the simple triumphs that come painlessly and bloodlessly, are perhaps not worth the effort in the first place. It is not merely a matter of making a virtue of necessity; it is that there is a redeeming value, an ennobling value, in the anguish of trying to live according to the word of God in a society gripped by evil and a world of falsehood.

If this is true of Judaism in general, than it is doubly true of the highest expression of Judaism: that is, the study of Torah. Thus, the famous Gaon of Vilna had nothing but contempt for those whose intellectual victories came without effort. A student of the Gaon, R. Hayyim of Volozhin, records the following experience. The Gaon was not only a great master of Talmud and Talmudic Law, but also a genuine mystic, one who had authentic Kabbalistic experiences. During these mystic visions, there would appear to him Angels known as Maggidim. What was the purpose of their visit? ~~to provide him with answers to some of the thorny problems with which he had wrestled throughout the day.~~ Often the Gaon was beset by very difficult analytical problems in his study of the Talmud and Kabbalah, and at night an Angel, a Maggid, would appear to him and tell him that he had come from Heaven to give him the answer to his difficulties. When that happened, amazingly, the Gaon would banish the Maggid from his presence. He would chase the Angel away, and ~~pass the information on to~~ <sup>instruct</sup> his students ~~that they should~~ <sup>to</sup> do likewise, because Torah that one acquires without suffering, without mental anguish, without agonizing intellectual<sup>y</sup>, is not Torah. The Gaon mistrusted and distrusted easy solutions. Unless there is



kebah li, unless a man gives up his sleep and his peace of mind, unless there is a sacrifice of time and energy and effort, then one does not have the zekhut to acquire the mastery of Torah.

The same thing is true of Rabbi Hayyim of Volozhin, himself. Rabbi Hayyim developed a whole theory of amal in Torah: the doctrine of diligence. Effort, application, concentration, diligence -- these are integral parts of Torah. Rabbi Hayyim taught that more important than the knowledge of the Torah, is the process of learning it - and the process includes the painful difficulties of creative thought. Rabbi Hayyim later institutionalized this doctrine of diligence, of amal, into his great Yeshiva of Volozhin. He taught the world that it is more important to study than to know.

This whole outlook which emphasizes the fact that man must work and make his way through a hard and difficult road in order to reach the glory of Torah, in order to deserve God's revelation, is expressed by another great Sage who was a contemporary of ours, Rabbi Abraham Isaiah <sup>A</sup>Karelitz, known by the name of his major work, the Hazon Ish. In responding to a letter of a student who complained of many hardships, the Hazon Ish writes, with enchanting simplicity and directness: kol ha-inyanim hamurim, ve'kalim ki me'at she'lo pagashti,

"I have found that everything is difficult, and I rarely have come across anything in my life that is easy and simple!" This confession of intellectual difficulty from one of the greatest Sages of generations!

Indeed, the road of Judaism is a hard and tough and difficult one. Often it is a lonesome one; the wayfarer on the road of Torah sometimes feels isolated and in solitude, as his path winds away from the main highway on which the masses of people tread without a care in the world. It is hard underfoot; the discipline is a rigid and tough one. One stumbles often, and stubs his toe on the rock of self-doubt and diffidence. Sometimes we are caught in the underbrush of thorns which make us skeptical as to whether we shall ever reach our destination -- indeed, whether the road leads anyplace at all. All too often there are cynics

who stand at the side and mock those who try to make their way onward. Yet there is something within the Jew, a spirit that moves him onwards and onwards and onwards against all difficulties and against all discouragement. And ultimately he discovers that it is worth the journey; difficult as it is, the end justifies the effort. For at the end lies the glory, the beauty, and the holiness of a full Jewish life in the eyes of God.

When Abraham was about to begin his exemplary life of Judaism, filled with asarah nisyonot, all kinds of difficulties for the sake of his Adon, his Lord and God, he was commanded: Lekh lekha, go on to this noble life. Lekh -- go; lekha -- for yourself. For, as Rashi puts it, le'hanaatekha u-le'tovatekha, ultimately your going is for your own good and your own benefit.

What is true for Abraham is true for us. Let us go forward on the path of Judaism, for despite all the difficulties we know it is le'hanaatekha u-le'tovatekha, for our own everlasting good and immortal benefit.