

"CONFRONTATION: A PARABLE"

While the external problems of the State of Israel today agitate the minds and hearts of all those who love it and are committed to its welfare, an even more crucial story is developing in its internal life. Religious tensions, which have been present from the beginning of the State and even before it, now appear to be reaching the danger level. Irritations and hostilities between the Orthodox and anti-Orthodox element are growing all too rapidly. To a large extent, denunciation has taken the place of argumentation, and enmity has begun to replace amity in Israeli society. Sometimes differences of opinion are a challenge and a spur to greater creativity. Unfortunately, this does not appear to be the case at present; instead, Israel is threatened by the long-dreaded "Kulturkampf," a pitched battle of ideologies in conflict with a deep divisiveness that can split Israeli society asunder.

These internal problems of the State of Israel are not the exclusive concern of the citizens of Israel; just as issues in American-Jewish life are legitimately of interest to Jews everywhere. Our Rabbis taught us: כל ישראל ערבים זה בזה, "all Jews are co-responsible one for the other." It is this principle which is based upon, and in turn guarantees, the fact that we are all one people.

Furthermore, American Jews have had these problems brought to their attention quite forcibly in recent months. Not too long ago we were invited by the Israeli government to make use of its facilities aboard the new flag-ship, the S.S. Shalom. Therefore its character

and its kashruth became of immediate concern to American Jews. A few weeks ago, the eminent columnist of the New York Times, Mr. Brooks Atkinson, wrote an article which astounded and hurt many of us: a report that was patently based upon wrong information and prejudicial to the ideals and the sentiments of Orthodox Judaism. Recently too, a Zionist quarterly (Midstream) contained an article by its editor which was so clearly vicious and malevolent in its contempt for traditional Judaism, that had it been written by a non-Jew this same editor would have dubbed it anti-Semitic. Every great national American weekly magazine has discussed these internal problems of Israel, and we have been exposed to an almost exclusively anti-Orthodox campaign.

Under such conditions, it becomes desirable, and even obligatory, for the pulpit to analyze these problems and to attempt to explain the point of view of religious Jewry.

In examining these contemporary issues, let us refer, for guidance, to a historic confrontation about which we read in today's Haftorah, and which may serve as a parable for our predicament today.

When King Ahab ascended the throne of Israel, he inherited a state which was by no means committed to Torah. The people wallowed in idolatry. Had a vote been taken then, probably God would have been evicted and the Torah vetoed by a democratic vote of the majority. Yet Ahab outdid all his predecessors. He married a Phoenician woman, Jezebel, who set about persecuting all the prophets of the Lord, condemning them either to exile or to death. Ahab made loyalty to Torah a matter of high treason to the state. The worship of the pagan idol the Baal was introduced to Israel as the official state religion.

In a society of this sort, the titanic figure of the prophet Elijah loomed larger than life. In sheer revulsion against what had been done, he told Ahab that henceforth the Lord would deny his land טל ומטר, any dew or rain, and that Ahab would be brought to his knees economically. Elijah retired to the wilderness, away from civilization and society. After three years, Ahab neared the point of desperation. He went about to seek Elijah. At the same time, the Lord commanded Elijah: לך והראה אל אחאב, go and appear before Ahab.

There then takes place the great confrontation between the King and the Prophet, the rebel against the Lord, and the Lord's spokesman. When they meet, Ahab turns to Elijah and, in words mixed with sarcasm and underlying fear, he says to him: האם אתה זה עוכר

ישראל, "is that indeed you, the one who troubles Israel?" To which the prophet answers לא אני עכרתי את ישראל כי אם אתה ובית

האם אתה זה עוכר ישראל, "not I have troubled Israel, but you and the house of your father when you abandoned the commandments of the Lord." Each accuses the other, in this confrontation, of being an עוכר of Israel. The word עכר is interesting. The author of the Talmudic dictionary, the ערוך, tells us that it means: to stir things up. The expression מים עכורים means "muddy waters." In other words, each accused the other of muddying the waters of Israel, of stirring things up unnecessarily, of being a trouble-maker.

With a little imagination, one can fill in the missing details. Ahab flung an accusation at the prophet. You are a fanatic. You are overzealous. Why do you threaten the whole state with your extremism, why do you burden us with your חומרות ואימורים, your unnecessary strictures and harsh and rigorous religion? If you want

to worship the Lord, why not go off into some corner and do so without bothering the rest of us? Have I not satisfied you by forming a "coalition government" and including Obadiah, a God-fearing prophet, in my cabinet? Why do you want to coerce the majority of our people, who reject your religion, to abide by it? You are a troublemaker!

And Elijah returned the charge against Ahab: It is you who are the troublemaker! It is you who are responsible for the situation when you decided to turn "modern" by assimilating Israel into the pagan world around you, by shopping about for the most contemporary idols and most fashionable fetishes in order to bring our country "up-to-date." You threw vile dirt into the clear, living waters of Israel. If I stir things up, it is because I want to clarify those waters; if it is muddy, it is your fault.

What is most important in this confrontation is that it is not essentially a personal battle. The two might even have been great friends. There was no question of the personal piety of Ahab or the patriotism of Elijah. What was involved was an issue that transcended this. The Bible tells us, immediately before the episode recounted in today's Haftorah: **וַיֹּסֶף אַחָאב לְהַכְעִיס אֶת ה' אֱלֹהֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל**, "and Ahab continued to anger the Lord God of Israel." The Talmud relates that this **לְהַכְעִיס** was accomplished by Ahab coming to the gates of his largest city, his capital, Samaria, and inscribing thereon the legend: **אֶחָאב כּוֹפֵר בִּה' אֱלֹהֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל**, "Ahab denies the Lord God of Israel." In accordance with some of the commentaries of this Talmudic passage, we may interpret this to mean that what angered the Almighty was not the brazenness and effrontery of Ahab's public denial of God, but something quite

different. It is even possible that Ahab himself believed in God, and that he had no intention of stopping any other individual from believing in God. The core of his sin, his **להכעיס**, consisted of his attempt to introduce a split between **ה'** and **אלקי ישראל**, to introduce a divorce between the Lord -- and the God of Israel! Ahab was quite satisfied to have any individual who so desires worship the Lord. What he sought to deny was that this Lord shall be "the God of Israel." Any individual may worship God according to his own conscience; but I will never allow, said Ahab, to have this God and His worship and His Torah become the "God of Israel." The collective character of the people will never be one of Torah. So that the great issue in question in this confrontation between Elijah and Ahab was the character of the Jewish state, and hence of the Jewish people, for all eternity.

It is this which is in issue today as well: the spiritual character of the State and the people of Israel. The anti-religious in Israel do not care whether the Orthodox will practice more or fewer mitzvot. The Orthodox, in turn, are not primarily concerned whether the anti-Orthodox will conduct their personal lives according to the principles of the Torah. The ultimate and overarching question is: what character will this State assume -- a Jewish or a non-Jewish character?

Certainly it should be understood that there is here no problem of coercion. No one desires that any individual shall be forced to act against his conscience. It is not the individual but the State that is in question. And if securing the Jewish character of the State of Israel requires some restrictions, ~~some~~ laws and

regulations which will curb the freedom of its citizens in some manner, then it is certainly worth it. That is precisely how we preserved our identity through two-thousand years of bitter exile. Every country imposes its basic cultural character upon its citizens. For instance, in this country of the United States of America, bigamy is illegal. Unquestionably this represents an incursion of government into the private lives of its citizens. It is a limitation on a man's individual freedom. Yet in a famous decision, the Supreme Court decided that a Mormon may not take more than one wife although his religion urges him to do so. I am not aware that there is any agitation in this great democracy for permission to commit bigamy on the basis of the democratic rights of individual citizens. So must we view the laws of marriage and personal status which, in Israel, follow the pattern not of Anglo-Saxon culture, or European society, but that of the Halakhic tradition. The goal of the endeavors of religious Jewry in Israel <sup>is</sup> ~~are~~: the Torah character of our people. We seek not only the acknowledgement of 'ה , but the reality that

ה' אלקי ישראל -- that the Lord be the God of Israel.

This will explain the response of Orthodox Judaism to the issue of the Shalom. This flag-ship of the Israeli merchant marine symbolizes the State. We therefore were not able to accept the institutionalized flaunting of sacred Jewish law on this vessel. Those who are opposed to us offered economic reasons as the motivation for non-kosher facilities on the Shalom. This we cannot accept. During our long and miserable exile we sacrificed not only economic interests but the interests of life itself in order to preserve our sacred Jewish tradition. Shall it be said, paradoxically and painfully, that then we were not free but proud, but now that we are free we are no longer proud? It is bad enough that in the United



States, certain national American-Jewish organizations will sponsor non-kosher dinners and banquets, and condescendingly oblige their Orthodox constituents with special "non-trefah" meals -- ghetto tables! Unfortunately some of us swallow our self-respect and attend such events. Shall the same be true in the State of Israel, the Jewish state? In engaging in the polemics concerning the Shalom, we affirmed that ה'אלקי ישראל, that the Lord must remain the God of all Israel -- and he who denies this is an עוכר ישראל -- a troubler of Israel who muddies its waters.

The same principle is an issue with the latest incidents, that concerning a lady named Rinah Etani of Upper Nazareth. The issue is fairly simple. The lady's passport and identification papers recorded her as Jewish. Indeed, she and her family had been interned as Jewish by the Nazis before coming to Israel. Yet it was discovered that her mother was not Jewish, and she had never been converted. Hence, she was not eligible to acquire her citizenship in Israel under the "Law of Return," under which all Jews may become citizens of the State automatically. She therefore had two alternatives: to apply for citizenship as a non-Jew, and receive it through channels; or, if her conscience permitted it, to apply to the Rabbinate for conversion to Judaism. Clearly what was involved is an elementary principle of law which declares that certain procedures must be followed in order for a person to be either a member of a certain body politic or a certain religious group. Nations, such as the United States or England or France, have such rules for citizenship, and religious communions likewise

have special rules for conversion or entry into their group. Yet the entire case of the lady from Upper Nazareth suddenly became a national, or even international, scandal because of the entry into the picture of an organization called "The League for the Abolition of Religious Coercion in Israel." Despite its liberal-sounding title, this group has recently been described by two American Jewish commentators writing from Israel, and who have not heretofore been distinguished for their advocacy of Orthodox positions, as the Israeli counterpart of the "American Council for Judaism." They are, speaking conservatively, a group of leftists and atheists, who desire nothing less than the extirpation of Torah from Israel. Mr. Brooks Atkinson was misled by this propaganda, published in The Jerusalem Post and other such organs, and did not realize that all Israelis favor the inherent discrimination in favor of Jews in the "Law of Return" -- which declares that just as Jews have heretofore been expelled from other countries merely by virtue of their being Jewish, so the same qualification will now permit them automatically to become citizens of the State of Israel. The question then is: "who is a Jew?" -- and, Mr. Atkinson and others notwithstanding, this is far from an irrelevant, technical medievalism. And the answer that any conscientious Jew must give is that of Jewish law -- not Turkish law, or American law, or even that of simple self-determination by the person in question.

Let us further declare openly: it is not the Orthodox who are the עוֹכְרֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל, those who muddy the waters. American Orthodox rabbis did not speak or preach on a far more painful question in Nazareth than the affair Etani -- namely, the forcible closing of synagogues before new ones were built, the prohibition by



the city council against the Rabbi of Nazareth to preach in the synagogues, the threats of unemployment against religious immigrants who registered their children in religious schools. The reason for this silence is that we regarded the situation as local -- as, essentially, was the whole Mrs. Etani matter -- which, unhappy though it is, is to be expected in a society in transition and beset by so many problems, but which can be solved with good-will, intelligence, and mutual respect.

However, the question of "who is a Jew?" is too big, too national, too historical and fateful, to be dismissed as simply a local issue. It is those who have introduced anti-Halakhic criteria who are the **עוֹכְרֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל**, who have muddied the waters of Israel. The issue between us is not simply that of accepting or rejecting an individual halakhah. It is the question of whether or not **ה'** is **אלֹקֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל** -- whether the Lord shall remain the God of Israel or the private Deity of some individual citizens.

In addition to securing the Jewish character of the State, religious Jewry has a second objective in the State of Israel. We consider Israel not only a place of refuge for homeless Jews; not only the place where the collective image of the people will be formed for many generations; but also as the place where there should be created a natural environment of Jewishness. If we strive for the prevalence of Torah in public life, it is because we need it so that our own religious lives may become meaningful and not discordant.

We Jews in the Galut -- except in the intensely Jewish areas -- cannot appreciate what a simple, natural Jewish environment is. Like a man who subsists on a bland diet and who cannot, therefore,

appreciate or even imagine culinary delights, we do not realize how bland and emaciated and spiritless our own observance is, no matter how loyal, when the street is antagonistic to us, when our whole society is affirmatively indifferent to all we stand for. When we observe Shabbat, the rush and bustle of traffic and shopping about us desecrates our innermost thoughts. When we celebrate Purim, the prosaic cheerlessness of our environment mocks us. When we feel elevated because of Yom Kippur, the mundane business -as-usual atmosphere of our neighborhood casts a pall over us. When we mourn on Tisha Be'Av for national tragedies, the cold indifference of our entire milieu makes us doubt ourselves. For this we have always sought a remedy in Israel. That is why we seek the establishment of Torah as Israel's way of public life.

And here too, we may find in today's readings, this time in the Sidra, a parable of confrontation. The importance of the religious environment arises from the encounter of Moses with his people Israel.

The story is simple enough: Moses, at the top of Mount Sinai, is told by the Almighty that his people had sinned with the Golden Calf. He then descends and breaks the tablets of the law.

However, there are a number of difficulties in this episode. First, why did Moses break the tablets at all? Is it the fault of the Torah that the people abandoned it? Secondly, if there is merit in breaking the tablets, why did Moses not do so when he was told about Israel's defection by the Almighty? Why did he wait until he came down from the Mountain? Finally, why is it that according to the testimony of the Torah, when Moses was up on the mountain he was able to hold the two heavy tablets in one hand -- ושני לוחות בידו ,

"and the two tablets in his hand" -- whereas when he came down to the bottom of the mountain he had to carry them in both hands --

וַיִּשְׁלַךְ מִיָּדוֹ, "and he threw them down from his hands?"

A most revealing answer is offered to us by one of our medieval commentators in the volume מוֹשֶׁה זְקֵנִים. He tells us that the letters of the tablets were like the נֶשְׁמָה in a body: the letters were the soul and the breath which buoyed up the tablets so that they were light and Moses could carry them in one hand. And indeed, the fact of Israel sinning with the Golden Calf is no reason, intellectually or abstractly, for Moses to break the tablets. However, when Moses actually saw, with his own eyes, the deterioration of his own people, something happened! וַיְהִי כַּאֲשֶׁר קָרַב אֶל הַמַּחֲנֶה וַיֵּרָא אֹתוֹ -- "and it was when Moses came close to the Camp and saw the Calf and the dances" -- that the tablets suddenly began to weigh heavily on him. In the words of our commentator: מִיָּד פָּרְחוּ כָל

הָאוֹתוֹת וְנִמְצְאוּ שִׁידוֹי שֶׁל מֹשֶׁה כְּבִדִּים, at that moment when Moses actually beheld the degradation of Israel, the letters, which were the life of the tablet, as it were, flew away, and suddenly the tablets weighed heavily on the hands of Moses. So heavy did they suddenly become that Moses was afraid that they would fall upon his feet and crush them; and he therefore threw them from him as they were falling!

Indeed, in an environment when one sees other Jews worshipping a Golden Calf, one's own Torah becomes too heavy, his observance lifeless, difficult, uninspired. What he could before do with one hand, he now cannot perform with two. Hence, the tablets break, one's Torah falls of its own weight.

That is our problem. When we see the total neglect of Judaism all about us, the antagonism and hostility of our environment to all that we consider sacred, then our נמשך leaves our observance, our Torah becomes literally unbearable, and our faith too heavy a load for us to carry.

Hence, what loyal Jews have hoped for in Israel, in addition to all else, has been: a place where Torah will feel at home; where observant Jews will not feel alien; where the letters will return to the tablets, life to our Jewishness, naturalness to our religious observance; where, therefore, Judaism can be lived in love and joy.

These, then, are the objectives of Orthodoxy in Israel. The tensions concern the character of the state, not the conduct of individuals; and they reflect our desire for a more Jewishly compatible society.

Unfortunately, the discussions have not always been conducted on the highest level. They have often been obscured by politics and personalities and by extremist tendencies. It therefore becomes incumbent upon us as Orthodox Jews, indeed upon all Jews through all the world, Jews of all persuasions, to transform the confrontation to dialogue, the "Kulturkampf" to cultural co-existence, and to substitute education for altercation.

If we look hard enough we shall find the methods for this transformation of our own contemporary situation in the redeeming features of the confrontations we have mentioned; that of Elijah and Ahab, and that of Moses and Israel.

With Elijah, the very fact that he responded to the divine command to break out of his self-imposed isolation and go and seek out Ahab, indicated ~~that~~ a feeling of responsibility for the totality of Israel, and a desire to save the collective unity of the

people and prevent it from being split into two. When Elijah speaks to Ahab one also feels that he accepts the sovereignty of the king. And Ahab, despite his hostility, respects and inwardly accepts the prophetic mission of Elijah. The vital spark of Jewishness burns even in the heart of Ahab; indeed, Ahab ultimately returns to the Almighty in תשובה.

And in the confrontation of Moses and Israel, despite the impatience of Israel and the rage of Moses, Moses loves his people, and risks his whole posterity to secure their safety. In heroic protest he turns to God and says: spare this people, ואם לאו , מחני , for if not, blot me out of Thy book which Thou hast written! And the people, despite their backsliding, ultimately return to God, Who allows them to receive the Torah a second time.

The issues are far from being exhausted in this one talk. But we must certainly know our own point of view even as we try to respect that of others. On the one hand, we must not ignore or refuse to discuss these matters because of some mistaken notion that such discussion represents a kind of disloyalty to Israel. Ignoring a situation has never made it go away. On the other hand, let us always seek to contain the tensions, and look for the redeeming features which one can always find.

With patience, with good will, with tolerance, with understanding of both our sacred tradition and the temper of our times, and above all with אהבת ישראל -- love of Israel -- we shall yet be able to solve the great problems of our people peacefully and respectfully.



We began this talk with the articulation of the great Talmudic principle that: כל ישראל ערבים זה בזה, all Israelites are co-responsible one for the other. Let us close with a Hasidic interpretation of this same passage: the word ערבים implies not only the legal term, "responsible," but also the word "sweet." אלע אידן זיינען זיס איינער צום אנדערן -- all Jews must be sweet one to the other!

We Jews in the Diaspora are beset by great problems of ethnic survival. Jews of the State of Israel are surrounded by powerful enemies. Now is the time to emphasize the points that unite, rather than the points that divide us.

But if we cannot avoid, even at the present, discussions of the nature of the state and the place of Torah in it, let us at least do so with kindness, with patience, with good will and generosity of spirit; above all -- with sweetness.