

"AN UPRIGHT TORAH"

The focus of significance in any synagogue is the Ark containing the Torah. That this is so we learn, according to Maimonides, from a verse in this morning's Sidra. When the building of the Tabernacle was concluded, Moses performed a final act: ויקח ויתן את העדות אל הארון, and he took and he put the testimony into the Ark. The word edut, "testimony," refers to the two stone tablets, the luhot, upon which were inscribed the revelation of God. And, Maimonides teaches us at the end of his Laws of Sefer Torah, just as the tablets were placed in the Ark in the Tabernacle, so are we commanded to place the Scroll of the Law in the Ark in the synagogue: מצוה לייחד לס"ת מקום ולכבדו ולהדרו יותר מדאי . . . דברים שבלוחות הברית הן הן שבכל ספר וספר

"It is a commandment to designate a special place for a Sefer Torah, and to honor it and to embellish it even more than one thinks adequate. The words on the tablets of the covenant are the same words which we have on our Scrolls."

However, this tracing of the institution of the Sefer Torah in the aron in the synagogue to the luhot in the aron in the Tabernacle, presents certain difficulties. One of the commentaries on Maimonides' famous Code, the author of הגהות מיימוניות, records a question asked of his teacher: If indeed the scrolls in the Ark in the synagogue are of the same nature as the tablets in the Ark in the Tabernacle, then why is it that the luhot in the Tabernacle were placed in the aron in a prone position, lying down, whereas the Sefer Torah that we place in the Ark in the synagogue stands upright? If the source is the tablets in the Tabernacle, then why do we not store the scrolls in our synagogues too lying down?

There is compelling logic to this question. In fact, the author of this commentary records a responsum by the famous Rabbi Jacob Tam who said that he had realized this point earlier, when they were building his synagogue, he would have ordered a much broader and wider ark in order that he might have the scrolls lying down rather than standing upright.

Nevertheless, the force of Jewish Law and the weight of Jewish custom is against this decision to have the scrolls lying down. In all of our synagogues the Sefer Torah is stored upright; indeed, in some Sephardic synagogues the scroll is read while standing on the table. Why, then, do we keep the Sefer Torah standing up, unlike the Tablets?

A famous Talmudic scholar, R. David Ibn Zimra, known as the RaDBaZ, wrote a responsum on the subject in which he offered three alternative answers. All three answers are meaningful. They contain or imply insights into the nature of Torah and Judaism that are significant for all times, including our very own.

His first answer is that there is a fundamental difference between the luhot and Sefer Torah. The Tablets were meant as edut, as a testimony, as symbols; they were not intended לקריאה, for reading. Their very presence was important; but people did not come especially to open the Ark and to read the Tablets in order to inform themselves of the Law. Whereas the Sefer Torah was meant specifically לקריאה, for reading and for instructing; hence the Sefer Torah is kept in an upright position, always ready for immediate use.

What we are taught, therefore, is that the Torah must be for us more than a symbol, more than mere edut. It must be a guide, a code for conduct. The very word "Torah" comes from the Hebrew תורה

which means guidance, pointing out, instruction.

A symbol is revered; a guide is used and experienced. Because of its very sacredness, a symbol often lies prone, it is remote and is less prone to be involved in the turmoil and bustle of life. It is treated with antiseptic respect. A guide, a "Torah," is of course sacred; but its sanctity is enhanced by its involvement in life with all its complexities and paradoxes, its anxieties and excitements. A Torah, in order to fulfill its holy function, must stand ready -- literally stand! -- to be read and applied.

It is this lack of involvement in every day life that has caused one contemporary Jewish thinker to bemoan what he has felicitously called our American-Jewish "theology of respect." We American Jews are a very respectful people; we do not reject Judaism outright; instead, we are more delicate: we "respect" it. We have respect for the synagogue -- therefore we keep miles away from it. We respect the Rabbi -- hence we never consult him as to the judgment of Judaism on significant problems. We respect Almighty God and therefore would never think of troubling Him about the things that really bother us. We respect Judaism and Torah so much that we never think of taking them seriously in the rigors and hardships of daily existence. But respect alone is something which is offered to a symbol, to the Tablets which are merely edut, and which therefore lie prone. They are a symbol -- and that is all. It is only when we have transformed the symbol into the scroll, the theology or respect into תורה חיים, a Torah of life, that our Torah stands upright and ready for use.

This is important for Jewish scholarship in our days as well. Great opportunities are open for scholarship in the mid-twentieth century: the formulation of the attitude of Torah to the great

ethical questions of our day. There is a businessman who wants to know the decision of Torah on price collusion and the housewife who seeks instruction on how to treat her maid. There is a young man who is interested not only in the morality but also in the ethics of courtship, and the government employee who wants to know how far he may go in accepting unofficial gifts. Halakhah can yield such guidance; if we do not know all the answers of Halakhah it is because we need scholars to search more diligently and in greater scope and depth than has been done heretofore.

But nevertheless, the greatest majority of the problems that occurs to us can, without new halakhic research, be dealt with decisively and lucidly by Torah. Our Torah is an upright one when we make the decision to consult it in these practical problems. This, indeed, is the difference between an ideal and a principle: An ideal is an abstraction to which we offer our gesture of respect; a principle is that which governs our very real conduct. The luhot are symbols or ideals; the Sefer Torah is a principle or guide. We have no dearth of ideals; we are sorely lacking in committing our lives to relevant principles. If our Torah is to be a Torah, it must be upright, ready-to-use.

The second solution offered by RaDBaZ is to make the following distinction between the Tablets and the Scrolls of the Law. According to tradition, the engraving on the stone Tablets went through the tablets from side to side. Nevertheless a miracle occurred and these tablets were נִקְרְאִים מִשְׁנֵי עֲרִיכָם, they could be read equally well from either side. In other words, despite the fact that the engraving went through and through, you were able to read the message on the stone tablets according to the normal Hebrew system, from right to left, no matter which side you approached

them from. Whereas the Sefer Torah was written only on one side, on the inside of the parchment. Therefore, the Tablets could be placed lying down; for no matter how you laid them down, you could read them from the side you approached them. But the Sefer Torah had to stand with its face, upon which was written the text of the Torah, facing the congregation, so that it might always be ready for immediate reading and consultation and study.

There was a time in Jewish life when Judaism was such that it was נקראים משני עבריהם, that it could be approached from any point of view. In a total Jewish environment, even a semi-literate could be a good Jew. Where one's milieu was fully saturated with Jewish feeling and Jewish life, study and scholarship were not quite crucial. One could be unlearned and still sense the presence of God, the Shekhinah; at the very least, one could benefit from the Shekhunah, from the very Jewishness of one's neighborhood and surroundings. However, in a society depleted of Jewishness, ~~there milieu emptied of Jewish feeling and life~~, in a milieu emptied of Jewish feeling and life, Jewishness can be acquired only in one way: by study and by scholarship.

We do not live in a total Jewish environment. Our surroundings are secularized and often antagonistic to the goals of Judaism. Therefore, for us, Jewish scholarship, Jewish education, Jewish study, are not only paramount, but indeed the only way to acquire Judaism in the full sense of the word. It is our only guarantee of survival. It is interesting that when, two or three generations ago, very wealthy and philanthropic Jews founded our great philanthropic organizations, they acted according to the noblest precepts of Judaism. It goes without saying that charity or tzedakah is an all-important

mitzvah in our faith. Yet these people, who gave and worked so much for charity, who love their people so, completely neglected the study of Torah. And, tragically enough, today these founders of our Federation do not have one single Jewish survivor left! For indeed, Judaism without tzedakah is unthinkable; but Judaism without the study of Torah is impossible.

It is only recently that the day-school movement has won the approbation of larger sections of American Jewry. And not only Jewish studies for children, but also adult Jewish education has begun to show improvement. Only this week statistics were gathered that indicate that American Jews spend annually in the vicinity of three-million dollars on adult education. Of course, there is a question as to the results, the extent of its work, the methods employed. But nonetheless, it is encouraging news that we have finally come to understand the importance of a Sefer Torah which stands ready to be read and studied and researched. For that is why our scrolls are placed in a standing position: to teach us the need for immediate reference and education.

The third answer provided by RaDBaZ is a rather daring idea. The synagogue, unlike the Tabernacle, was meant to be primarily a House of Prayer, not one of revelation and sacrifice. Therefore, since the מְשַׁבְּחִים or worshippers come to the synagogue and stand facing the Ark, the Sefer Torah too must stand when it faces the worshippers.

In a sense, this summarizes the other two reasons advanced by RaDBaZ. The Sefer Torah stands because the worshippers stand. What a beautiful idea! There is a mutual and reciprocal honor exchanged by the Torah and its admirers. The Torah itself rises before the

מחפליים who take her seriously, who involve her in their daily life, and who study her assiduously.

We are told in the First Book of Samuel, that God says כי
מכבדי אכבד וכוזי יקל , "for I will honor those who will honor Me,
and those who neglect Me shall be disgraced." God honors those who
honor Him! The Torah stands out of respect before the worshipper!

One of the great and seminal thinkers of Hasidism, the renowned
Rabbi Shneour Zalman of Ladi, founder of the HaBaD branch of Hasidism,
has expressed this idea in yet another way. The Torah as the revela-
tion of God, and indeed even as an aspect of God Himself, is filled
with holiness and divine Light. It contains sublime, heavenly
illumination. When the student of Torah studies it sincerely and
selflessly, without any thought of personal gain, what he accomplishes
is the broadening of the absorptive capacity of Torah for this divine
light; he adds to Torah's lustre and brilliance. Whereas, if he
studies it for selfish and unworthy reasons, the lights of Torah are
dimmed and its brilliance is diminished.

What a bold idea! The fate of Torah depends upon us. The
sanctity of Torah is not a constant: its kedushah varies with the
sincerity and application of the Jew who studies Torah. If we honor
Torah, it honors us by being more sacred. And, Heaven forbid, if we
neglect Torah, it contains less illumination and sanctity with which
to bless our own lives.

That the destiny of Torah depends upon us we often see in un-
pleasant ways. Too often do we discover that Judaism is reviled
because of the personal conduct of individual Jews who are apparently
committed to Torah, but who act in a manner that is unbecoming, un-
attractive, and unethical. A thousand years ago, the great Gaon,
R. Saadia, at the end of his introduction to his "ספר האמונות והדעות"

offers eight reasons, all of them psychologically potent, as to why people reject God and Torah. One of them applies to our case: a man notices the obnoxious behavior of a Jew who believes in God, and he therefore rejects not only this inconsistent Jew, but also all that he professes, i.e. God and His Torah. It happens so often in our own experience. Let an Orthodox Jew misbehave, and people blame Orthodoxy rather than the individual. It is unfortunate, it is illogical, it ignores the weaknesses of all human beings no matter what their ultimate commitments; but-- it is a fact. And, it places upon us a heavy, yet marvelous responsibility. This very fact, whether we like it or not, reminds us that each of us possesses great risks and tremendous opportunities. We can, each of us, by our actions, influence the destiny of Judaism. We can, by our attitude and approach, either diminish or enhance the lustre of the Light contained within Torah. If we are עומדים, then the Sefer Torah too is עומד; if we stand upright, then Torah stands upright. Heaven forbid, if we lie down on our God-given duties, then Torah falls because of us.

This then is the significance of the position of the Torah in the Ark. It is upright because it must be ready for use as a guiding principle in our lives. It is upright because it must be studied and its message plumbed. It is upright because it stands in respect and honor of those who so use it and thereby enhance its own holiness and illumination.

Torah must never lie in state. It must stand in readiness. The Jew must never sink low; he must soar even higher -- and thereby contribute to the sublimity of Torah. For as Maimonides put it, in the passage we quoted in the very beginning, מצוה לכבדו ולהדרו יותר -- it is a mitzvah to honor and glorify and embellish the Torah even more than we can. For if we will not strive to be more than

merely respectful Jews, we will become less than respectful Jews. If we do not aspire to become more than human, we are in danger of becoming less than human.

The times we live in, the circumstances that surround us, and our ancient and hoary tradition all call out to us to stand up and live as upright Jews, and so keep our Torah in the ark upright as well.