

"WHAT IT MEANS TO LIVE"

Our Biblical portion of this morning contains one of the most eloquent and inspiring passages in a series of such magnificent verses delivered by Moses at the end of his life.

The old leader speaks to his people, assembled about the Holy Ark, calling to witness heaven and earth, he says to them: "I have set before you life and death, the blessing and the curse; therefore choose life, that thou mayest live, thou and thy children; to love the Lord thy God, to hearken to His voice, and to cleave unto Him, for that is thy life and the length of thy days... " (Dt. 30:19,20).

"Choose life, that thou mayest live." But what does that mean? People often say, colloquially, "he doesn't know what it means to live," or, "he really knows what it means to live." So, what indeed does it mean "to live?"

The Jerusalem Talmud (Kid. 1:7) offers us interpretations of these terms by two of the greatest Tannaim, Rabbi Ishmael and Rabbi Akiva. However, on first blush, they seem devastatingly disappointing, and apparently bring us down from the sublime to the ridiculous.

Rabbi Ishmael says, zu umanut, "that thou mayest live" refers to a trade or a craft. "From this the Sages learned that a man is obligated to teach his son a trade or craft." Rabbi Akiva

says that from this we learn that a man is required to teach his son the water-arts, how to swim and how to row.

What a let-down! How pedestrian the rabbinic interpretation sounds when compared with the majestic Biblical cadences ^{of the verses} which it purports to interpret! Is that really what Moses had in mind at the dusk of his life, at the climax of his Prophetic career, as he bade farewell to this people whom he had shepherded through forty years of the great wilderness? -- that heaven and earth are his witnesses that he sets before them the way of life, in the sense of how to make a living, how to be a real estate manager or insurance salesman or shoemaker or tailor or cloak-and-suiter or stockbroker or diamond cutter, or -- according to Rabbi Akiva -- a senior life guard licensed by the Red Cross?

The answer, I submit, is: indeed yes! Moses had in mind to call heaven and earth to witness that the way of God, the way of Torah, is the way of life, which finds expression in the way a man makes a living, in how he buys and sells and serves and swims. For the ancient and the medieval world knew of the monastic ideal, according to which true life, in its most exquisite spiritual essence, can be lived not in the hurly-burly of daily prosaic routine, not in the rot and the corruption and the competition of the marketplace or attention to the material development of the world, but rather in renouncing the active world, in retreating to a place of peace in which one can realize the ideal of contemplation as opposed to action.

Real, full, authentic life could be achieved only by the abandoning of the vita activa in favor of the vita contemplativa, the life of contemplation. And it is against this conception that Rabbi Akiva and Rabbi Ishmael offered their interpretation of the Biblical ideal: life in its spiritual essence can be distilled only out of life in the making, in the marketplace, in the office and the factory and the laboratory. To live and to choose life can be realized not at the edge of the silent and brooding pond, but in the middle of the river, swimming with the tide, or sometimes directly against it, but caught up in the currents of events. This is what Judaism understood as the blessing of "life" offered by the Torah.

All this having been said, I confess to the irrelevance of this polemic to this particular congregation. After a decade of service in this community, I have yet to come across the first case where my services were desperately needed to dissuade some noble soul in this congregation who was ready to liquidate his business and abandon his wife and children because he was gripped by an irresistible passion to go off into the wilderness, there broodingly to contemplate the glory of God in splendid isolation. If anything, we sin in the opposite direction. We are, especially in the way we raise our children, too vocation-oriented, too materialistic. Our major concern is with providing ^{the child} ~~him~~ with the means to make a living, to make a lot of money, to be a success, to grow in his profession.

We are extreme in ignoring the development of the art of contemplation, which alone, added to the active life, can bestow upon a person the grace of wholeness, of perfection, of a complete life.

However, if these words are not germane to the members of a well-established, middle-class, successful, "square" congregation, who are leaders in the business and professions, in society in general and in the Jewish community in particular, this Talmudic passage is immediately relevant to the members of the New Generation, often called the "Now Generation," whose representatives -- some 400,000 of them -- met several weeks ago at that ecclesiastical assembly in Woodstock in the Catskills. There, in this massive congregation of the youthful, the devout swayed (or, better, "rocked") in the presence of a new liturgical music, inhaled deeply of a new incense, and witnessed to a new faith and the greater glory of Hippiedom.

It is true that the rest of society learned a surprising and happy lesson about the Hippies: that they are not all evil, not harmful, not dangerous. Indeed, they were less ill-behaved and far more courteous than the same number of adults gathered to attend one of their typical silly conventions. Adult society, always unsure of its own achievements, has always been aghast at the innovations of the young who question the premises upon which society is established. We have been too extravagant in making demons of them, and therefore we were ever so pleasantly astonished at their civilized conduct.

Now, these are children of the affluent society, usually well-educated, and in their new culture and new style is a "way of life" -- the original meaning of the term halakhah. Therefore, we must consider them seriously (although it is my feeling that ultimately, in the judgment of history, they will not be taken seriously at all). This new quasi-religion does have enormous zeal, and, in addition, some lovely ideals: love, unity, fellowship, freedom, gentleness -- although some members of this generation may be amazed to learn that they did not invent them.

But ignoring whatever may be personally distasteful to us -- and who is to say that their clothing or lack of hygiene or strange idiom or rock-and-roll music is any worse than our life style? and who is to say that a decent youngster who is unkempt is any worse than a well-scrubbed rogue? -- and leaving aside for the minute their shocking amorality, Judaism must judge their fundamental claim: that the way to love and communion and fellowship in this stiflingly complex and enormously complicated society is by way of narcotics. The Now Generation has inverted the old Marxist formula, and its slogan might well be: "opium (or marijuana) is the religion of the masses." It is a religion in which theology has been replaced by pharmacology, duty by euphoria, truth by trance, action by feeling, the vision of the present as a continuation of the past and leading to the future by a vision of the present in and of itself without past and regardless of the consequences, a religion in which the only duty or command-

ment is to "do your own thing." In this popular, blossoming new culture, "therefore choose life" and "that thou mayest live" bear a new interpretation: what does it mean to live? -- to live it up! My pot and my acid, they shall comfort me. The easy fellowship of the stoned and the stupefied is the way to

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And it is to this conception that Rabbi Akiva and Rabbi Ishmael direct their hard-nosed, clear-eyed, prosaic interpretations: to live means to make a living, to earn your own bread, to learn to swim in the tide of events, to effectuate your ideals within the course of life rather than idealizing the escape from life. There are no easy solutions! Life, living, love, communion can take place not through pills but through perseverance, not through the pursuit of phantasmagoric visions, but through the hard grind of work and achievement, and even intelligence. It is only when a man must earn his bread by the sweat of his brow that he can appreciate the value of ideals that take him one step beyond himself, that lead him on to transcendence. It is only when one struggles in the currents of life, and slips on the hard edges of the rocks underfoot, that he can value the gift of life that the Lord above gives him. "For that is thy life and the length of thy days."

I know that certainly, for the greatest part, I preach to the converted. But in the presence of a new conception, which

we must not dismiss offhand, it is important to reinforce and to deepen our own understanding of Judaism's message. Judaism agrees neither with ancient monasticism nor with its modern reincarnation. Sinai cannot conform with this aspect of the teaching of Woodstock.

So we reaffirm to ourselves and to our children: to appreciate life you must make a living and involve yourself in living. And in the course of so doing, you must not stifle the great ideals but, on the contrary, enhance and realize them. It is through life and living and struggling, through observance of the mitzvot and the unceasing and arduous study of Torah, that we ultimately achieve genuine love of God and love of man, cleaving to Him and enjoying fellowship with His children.

On this last Sabbath of the year, as we enter the season when we pray constantly for hayyim, for life, it is good to remind ourselves once again what it means to live: "that thou mayest live, thou and thy children." May it indeed be a year, followed by many more years, of life and living and love and communion, for us and all Israel and all mankind.