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"ON HAVING A HEART"

In the Bible's description of the seventh of the ten plagues which God brought upon Pharaoh and his Egyptians, the Torah employs a style which is somewhat different from the usual, and which therefore seems to indicate some special intention.

The seventh plague, you will recall, was the Barad, the plague of hailstones which fell upon the Egyptians, their servants and their cattle, and killed all life that was unprotected. Now, before Moses stretched forth his rod and caused the hail to fall, he warned the Egyptians of what he was going to do. He warned them to withdraw indoors in order to save their lives. The reaction of the pagan Egyptians was to laugh at Moses, and, though six times previously he had predicted the act of the Lord, they ridiculed him, and most of them -- excepting the very few who did believe in God -- exposed themselves to the plague.

Now here is how the Bible describes the actions of these two classes of Egyptians, those who took Moses seriously and those who did not: Ha-yarei et devar ha-shem, those of Pharaoh's servants who feared the word of God, gathered their slaves and cattle indoors and saved them. Va-asher lo sam libo el devar ha-shem, and he who did not put his heart to the word of God (i.e. he who did not pay attention to God), left his cattle and slaves outdoors to be slain by the hailstones. Notice that the two classes of Egyptians are not described in the same kind of terms. If the first Egyptians are Ha-yarei et devar ha-shem, God fearing, the second should be described as Lo yarei et ha-shem (not fearing God), or Sonei ha-shem, (God-hating), or Aino Maamin (non-believer) or Chotei (sinner) or something similar. Instead, the Torah describes this second, evil, anti-God class as Lo sam libo, the kind that "doesn't put his heart to God." Why this stylistic awkwardness?

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The answer is that it is by no means awkward. It is people who are awkward, who are being criticized by the Torah. What the Bible means to tell us by this choice of words is that indifference, not "putting your heart to it or into it," is the cardinal sin of mankind. Centures later, George Bernard Shaw repeated the same idea when he wrote that the greatest sin of mankind is not hate but indifference.

Certainly -- and despite the apparent signs of a return to religion in some general way -- our generation's greatest religious defect is an abysmal indifference and horrendous apathy to religion, to morals, to ethics, to Torah, ... in short: to God. It is purely a matter of Lo sam libo: we do not pay attention to God's word, we do not put our hearts into His service. Not anger at God, not rebellion against Torah, not resentment at religion -- these are not the sins of our generation. Ours is a greater, subtler and deeper sin: Religious Neutrality.

We do not absent ourselves from the synagogue because we are actively atheistic. It is just apathy. We do not desecrate the Sabbath because we dislike it. We are just religiously phlegmatic. We do not deprive our children of a solid Jewish education because we are in principle opposed to it. It is just that we never get around to it because of a spiritual supineness, a lackadaisical, lazy unconcern with anything that does not directly concern immediate physical well-being. We are, thus, more than Aino yarei devar hashem, Chotim, Sonim to God; we are Lo sam libo, people who are so inured to God that they do not even consider Him in the first place. An atheist, an agnostic, a Communist has at least given God the courtesy of thinking about Him. The indifferent Jew doesn't even do that.

And what is the practical result of this spiritual indifference? It results in inhumanity and wastefulness, in social and economic indifference.

What happened to the Egyptian who was Lo sam libo, who did not take God seriously? Va-yaazov et avadav ve'et miknei hu ba-sadeh, he left his slaves and his cattle to die in the fields. A slave is as much a human being as a master, and cattle are food for hungry children. But a person who is indifferent to God is indifferent to them, for they are only the Creatures of God. Our fellow men and our respect for private property are the casualties of our indifference to God.

In the translation-interpretation of the Torah known as the Targum Yerushalmi, the Jerusalem Translation, the translator adds some interesting notes to this matter of the reaction of Egypt to Moses' warning about the hailstones. For the first class, the Yarei devar ha-shem, the God-fearing Egyptian, the Targum gives, as an example, Iyov - Job. And as an example for the Lo sam libo, the indifferent one, the illustration is: Balaam.

How beautifully the Aramaic translator was able to detect this moral from the Torah's literary style, and then transmit it through an apt and cryptic illustration! Job, remember, was the man who complained against God. He ranted and he raved, he complained and he resented, he objected and he protested. At times his outbursts against God's supposed injustice were so strong that one of our Rabbis was moved to exclaim: Afrah be'pumei de'Iyov -- Job deserved to have his mouth stuffed with dust! Balaam, on the other hand, never said anything untoward, anything offensive or protesting to God. When called upon to prophesy, he prophesied. He saw Israel as the chosen of God, and so, even though himself a pagan, he praised Israel as such.

Yet here was the great difference: Job objected -- but he took God seriously, he thought about Him, he sought Him, he demanded of Him, he offered to Him, he questioned Him. He put his heart into Godliness. Balaam, on the other hand, Lo sam libo, never really took God in earnest. When Balak, the king of Israel's enemies, said: go curse Israel for me, Balaam wondered

not whether the God of Israel would be happy about such an arrangement. He just didn't care. And so he went to curse. He was a religious Hessian, a spiritual mercenary. When in his vision, the beast he was riding on halted, he beat it mercilessly. He didn't wonder why it halted, for, being indifferent to God, he was indifferent to all of life. Va-yaazov et avadav v'et miknei hu ba-sadeh. He just didn't care. That is why he is known as Bilam Ha-rasha, Balaam the Wicked. Because he didn't care, because he never considered the wishes of God.

Medical doctors know that indifference can allow a small growth to develop into the kind of thing that kills. Marriage counsellors know that more marriages are broken by indifference than by differences. The indifference of the great powers to the plight of European Jewry resulted in the loss of one third of our people. The terrible indifference of religious Jewry to Palestine, in years gone by, cost us years and years in attempting to give Israel the kind of spirit and leadership it needs. And religious teachers are therefore similarly alarmed when they approach parents or children -- especially teenagers just blossoming into maturity, in an attempt to engage their attention and interest, and the response they get is "I don't know, I guess I just don't care." What future can they have when they are possessed of the evil demon of ennui, boredom, of lo sam libo. With listlessness of this kind you can do absolutely nothing. Hatred can be converted into love. But apathy can not be moved or converted into anything.

This thought is summed up in a superbly powerful and beautiful capsule of wisdom in the Midrash (Sh. Hash. Rabbah 2:13). It is a remark so sage, and concerns a word so familiar, that I hope all of us will remember it. Commenting on the verse in the Song of Songs in which Israel signs of God, diglo alai ahavah, "His banner over me is love," Rabbi Achah indulges in a typical Midrashic play on words and says dilugo alai ahavah -- God announces,

"his mistake is beloved by Me." What does this mean? He explains: If an am ha -aretz, an ignoramus was reciting the Shema and came to the words ve'ahavta et ha-shem elokekha -- "thou shalt love the Lord thy God," and mispronounced ve'ahavta to read ve'ayavta -- "thou shalt hate" that error too is acceptable to God! Dilugo alai ahavah -- God loves such mistakes!

What a powerful and incisive comment! God is willing to accept even ve-ayavta instead of ve'ahavta, even hatred and rebellion in place of love and loyalty, but never lo sam libo, never that deadly indifference that chokes the soul and poisons the spirit. Better to complain against God and be angry with Him and protest against Him, than to shut your eyes and ears and heart to Him. Better to shake your fists at the heavens, than to shrug your shoulders and turn up your palms and say "don't bother me -- I'm not interested." Better a bitter exchange with the Creator than no dialogue at all. For ultimately ve'ayavta is based upon am ha-aratzut, upon ignorance, and with the study of Torah and the acquisition of wisdom and learning there will come instead ve-ahavta -- true love and devotion and loyalty to God. But apathy, lo sam libo, has no future whatever. Indifference marks the end of any dialogue between God and man. It condemns a man to eternal suspension in a heavy cosmic nothingness, where he is enveloped in a thunderous silence which keeps him at an infinite distance from God -- a distance which he cannot and God will not ever bridge.

This, then, is the message implied in the stylistic eccentricity of our Sidra. The antonym of yirat ha-shem, of reverence and awe, is lo sam libo -- not putting your heart into Synagogue, Torah, Judaism. In order to achieve that glorious reverence before God, we must learn sympathy and empathy, not apathy; yearning, not neutrality, passion, not indifference.

In short, the Torah presses each of us this day with its demand and its challenge: Have a Heart.