

"THE SABBATH OF GREATNESS"

Many reasons have been offered as to why this Sabbath before the holiday of Passover is known by the name Shabbat Ha-gadol. Allow me to commend to your attention one such reason which I find particularly significant.

The author of the Tur, one of the greatest legal codes of Judaism, maintains that our Sabbath is known as Shabbat Ha-gadol, lefi she'nasseh bo nes gadol - because a great miracle was performed on this day. It was on this day of the year the Jews were **liberated** from Egypt, that they summoned up the courage to take the lambs that were tied to their doorposts and slaughter them as sacrifices to Almighty G-d. This act outraged the Egyptians, for whom the lamb was a divinity. They were stunned by the effrontery of these miserable Hebrew slaves who dared, in the presence of their masters, to exert their own religious independence. And yet, ve'lo hayu rashain lo'mar la-hem davar - the Egyptians could not and did not say a word in al attempt to stop the Israelites. Because of this nes gadol, this great miracle, the Sabbath was called Shabbat Ha-gadol, or the great Sabbath.

This is, indeed, a beautiful explanation. But there is something troubling about it. Granted that the silence of the Egyptians, their sudden paralysis, was a true miracle. But what makes this a "great" miracle? Why gadol? This was an era which saw the miracles of the Exodus from Egypt, the ten plagues, and the splitting of the Red Sea. Were these miracles not at least equally great? How does one measure the size or significance of miracles?

I believe the answer can be most instructive. For nes gadol refers not to the silence of the Egyptians, but to the miracle of Jewish character. What we celebrate is not a great miracle, but the miracle of greatness. And I refer not only to the courageous defiance exercised by the Jews in Egypt, but to an even more significant fact. The other miracles of which we read and which

we celebrate, allowed the Israelites to escape and survive, but in the process the Egyptian enemy was hurt, injured, or killed. The plague caused a great deal of pain for the Egyptians, and the splitting of the Red Sea was followed by the drawing of the hordes of Pharaoh. This miracle, however, involved no injury to the enemy. The Jews grew and rose in stature, but no one was hurt. It was not the kind of bravado or courage that is expressed in doing violence to one's neighbor. Shabbat Ha-gadol celebrates nes gadol, the magic and the miracle of genuine greatness achieved by our people. This was real gadlut: greatness ^{at} from within, not/someone else's expense.

The story is told of the great saint and sage, Rabbi Israel Salanter, who was walking in the street one day and encountered two boys who had been fighting with each other. The stronger had thrown the weaker into a ditch at the side of the road. What is going on?, asked the rabbi. The stronger boy answered, "we had an argument as to which of us is taller. So I threw him into a ditch to prove to him that I am taller than he." "Foolish boy," replied the rabbi, "could you not have achieved the same purpose by standing on a chair rather than throwing him into a ditch?"

What the rabbi was teaching was a secret of true greatness. Gadlut consists of achieving eminence without crushing another human being.

And O how rare is that quality of nes gadol, the miracle of greatness. Everyone wants to be great, and so few know the Jewish secret of greatness. The big powers all want to appear great and acceptable in the eyes of the uncommitted bloc of the Afro-Asian nations. It is a national policy of our government to try to gain in popularity amongst the new nations. It is not for us here to decide the validity of this principle. But I know that many Americans were saddened when the American Ambassador to the U.N. this past week chastised the State of Israel for defending itself against Syrian attacks. He seems to be afflicted with what has become a traditional liberal

blindness - the inability or unwillingness to discriminate between the hooligan's attack and the victims defense. It is of one piece with a popular liberal attitude that expends much more energy and sentiments in defending the murderer from punishment, than in preventing the victim from having suffered in the first place. We were saddened and disappointed when Ambassador Stevenson - who, according to the British press, acted without authorization of and to the chagrine of the State Department - attempted to act big in the eyes of the Arabs and their friends by reproaching the loneliest of all nations. No eloquence and no humor can disguise the katnut, the smallness of spirit, of a man who rather than standing on a chair will throw Israel into a diplomatic ditch.

And the same lesson holds true for all^{of}/us. It is true for the State of Israel, which also often finds that it suffers from over-politicization, with the partisanship of its political parties often exceeding all bounds. Political consciousness of the citizenry is good, but when each individual party - and this holds true for all of them - tries to gain in prestige and power at the expense of all others, by belittling and scandalizing others, then the State itself begins to suffer.

It holds true for American Jewish organizations, where the progress of American Jewry is all too often stifled because of the unwillingness of the various organizations to unify or at least cooperate, not so much to protect their own autonomy as to make sure that the other organizations do not receive credit and power.

As individuals, Shabbat Ha-gadol reminds us that the way to greatness in business should never come by crushing competitors. In our professions we should not attempt to achieve prestige by hurting colleagues. The concept of nes gadol teaches each of us not only how to act but also how to think: in our innermost hearts we should measure our own success or failure not relative to our neighbors, but by absolute standards; we must,

each of us, attempt to grow great by ourselves, not only by comparison to the smallness of others.

But granted the negative aspect of this definition of gadlut or greatness, that it must not come at the expense of others, what is the positive or affirmative definition? What do we mean when we say that one must grow big by himself and through himself?

Perhaps the Talmud can help us here. In discussing the laws of metzi'ah, or finds, Talmudic law is that if one finds an object which has no distinguishing marks and is unclaimed, he may keep it. If he is a child, a katan or minor the metzi'ah belongs to his father or guardian. If he is a gadol, an adult, then it belongs to himself. And yet, the Talmud maintains lo katan katan mamash ve'lo gadol gadol mamash - whereas "child" and "adult" normally referred to chronology or physical development, i.e. before or after the age of 13, that does not hold true in this context. Katan or katanim with regard to finds is not a question of age but a question of independence. A minor or katan is one ha-somekh al shulchan aviv o shulchan shel acherim - who, literally, relies or leans on the table of his father or on the table of others. A gadol or adult is one who has his own table, who supports himself. I believe this is more than an economic definition in Jewish financial law. It is a lesson for all of life. To be gadol, great, means: to be yourself, to draw upon your own spiritual resources, to live true to your own destiny and character. A spiritual minor katan will beg for crumbs from the tables of others; one who has achieved gadlut will repair to his own table, no matter how sparse the food may be.

In Egypt, throughout their servitude, our ancestors were in the category of

those who "rely on the table of others." They had assimilated Egyptian life and values, Egyptian culture and religion. They had sunk to spiritual minority or Katnut, and this kind of katnut cannot be redeemed or healed by plagues or the splitting of seas or political independence. What was needed was nothing less than a miracle: The nes or gadol, the miracle of genuine greatness by an act which affirms the spiritual self, a rallying to unique Jewish destiny and image and character, a courageous cutting of the cultural umbilical cord which tied the Jewish victims to their Egyptian persecutors. This was achieved through shechitat elohem, through the slaughtering of the Egyptians gods and the rejection of the idolatry which until that time had been accepted by the Israelites as well. This was the miracle of Jewish greatness. No one else was hurt, and it was an act of spiritual independence.

This is a teaching which holds true universally. He who lives by leave of another, he who satisfies his cultural hunger by crumbs from strange tables, he who seeks esteem by alien standards - he is a katan. The abject conformist, the surville status-seeker, the eternal Mah Yafis'nik - these are ketanim in long trousers. Jews whose life long ambition it is to imitate non-Jews; Jewish movements and doctrines which pine for crumbs from the tables of secularism or unitarianism, from Deweyism or Marxism - and there are such movements here and overseas - are minors with big vocabularies. Those who are willing to settle for Jewish statehood, but are ready to abandon all attempts at the greater aspiration for Jewish selfhood - they suffer from stunted spiritual growth.

The first promise that God gave to the first Jew, Abraham, was: Ve'e'esekha le'goy gadol, "and I shall make thee into a great nation." God did not mean goy gadol insofar as numbers or power is concerned: we Jews have never had much of either. He meant a nation of genuine greatness. And that is why later when God tells him of the future bitter exile of his descendants in Egypt, he gives Abraham the greatest consolation: v'achrei khen yetz'u bi-rekhus gadol. This is usually translated, "and afterwards they will leave with great

wealth." I believe the real translation is: "and afterwards they will leave with a wealth of greatness." Great wealth is an ordinary ambition; a wealth of greatness is the extraordinary Jewish aspiration.

Our Haftorah for today concludes with a promise of the Almighty, hineh anokhi shole'ach la-khem et Eliyahu ha-navi lifnei bo yom ha-Shem ha-gadol ve'ha-nora," behold I shall send to you the prophet Elijah before the coming of the great and terrible day of the Lord." We have the choice: gadol or nora, great or terrible. We live in a word where decisions must be made. We live in a world where the figure of Elijah calls out to us as it did to the Jews gathered about him at Mt. Carmel, saying, "How long will you waiver?"

In our world there can be no waivering and no indecisiveness. It is either/or: either be Jewish and great, or cringe at the tables of others and nora, terrible. The world we live in will not permit leisurely smallness. Judaism cannot survive with pettiness of the spirit and the immaturity of Jewish mindlessness. If we return to Torah and tradition - we can ourselves forge the nes of gadol. If, heaven forbid, we do not - we must face and expect the terrible failure of katnut.

On Shabbat Ha-gadol we strive for the experience of yom ha-Shem ha-gadol, and by once again becoming a goy gadol, we will be able to bequeath to our children and children's children a rekhus gadol a heritage of authentic greatness.

Ve'heshiv lev avot al banim, ve'lev banim al avotam.

(based upon a theme suggested

by Rabbi J. M. Baumol)