

"THE ELECTION OF ABRAHAM"

The chosenness or election of Israel at Mt. Sinai had its antecedent in the choosing or election of the patriarch Abraham, about which we read in this week's and next week's Sidra. It is an event about which we speak every day, in our morning prayers, when we recite the passage from the ninth chapter of the Book of Nehemiah, atta hu ha-Shem ha-Elokim asher baharta be'Avram, "You are the Lord God Who chose Abram," etc.

What was the purpose of this election of Abraham?

It could not be just to teach the idea of one God, because even according to the Bible Abraham was not the first human being to be aware of monotheism. The Lord discoursed with Adam, He revered Himself to Noah, He was known by Seth, and even Malkizedek knew a concept of God not radically different from that of Abraham. Today, we know that even certain Egyptians, such as Ikhnaton, already entertained notions not too far from Jewish monotheism.

What then was Abraham's contribution, for which he was elected or chosen? It is, I submit, the idea that the worship of one God includes and implies a moral and ethical life as a part of that worship, and not separate from it. Thus we shall read, in next week's portion, that God says, "I have known him (which means, according to our commentators: I have chosen Abraham) in order that he shall command his children and his household after him that they

shall observe the derekh ha-Shem, the way of the Lord, laasot tzedakah u-mishpat, to do justice and righteousness." That derekh ha-Shem, which was the essence of Abraham's teaching to posterity, was not primarily cultic or ritual, but rather the moral conception of life that grows out of a relationship with one God.

Exactly what does this derekh ha-Shem consist of so that it is the purpose and aim of election?

The term implies, as we have mentioned, a moral outlook on life. Maimonides teaches us this in the beginning of his great halakhic code. But in their conceptions of the foundations of the structure of this moral life, the great Jewish sages of the Middle Ages differed.

Maimonides himself taught that this derekh ha-Shem consists of moderation of character. Every human characteristic can be divided into two extremes and a mean. The normal human tendency is to incline to either one of the extremes; the divine teaching, the derekh ha-Shem, is to choose the middle path. Thus, for instance, take the matter of how a man handles his money. There are two extremes: the spendthrift and the miser. Both of these are to be shunned. The follower of the "Way of the Lord" is the one who neither squanders nor hoards but spends his money intelligently, and for noble purposes. Or, as another example, a man may be inclined to bravado in the risks that he takes, or he

may be a complete coward; the man who follows the derekh ha-Shem is courageous intelligently and purposefully. The essence of the moral life, the foundation of the derekh ha-Shem, is to be found in the principle of moderation, the middle path.

Less well-known than this theory of Maimonides is that of Saadia Gaon (at the end of his "Emunot ve'Deot"). Saadia (who inclines more towards Plato, whereas Maimonides leans more to Aristotle) does not disagree with the ethical philosophy of Maimonides, but he gives us a different emphasis. Saadia stresses the total personality rather than individual characteristics; he is interested not so much in a well-moderated character, as in a well-rounded personality. Saadia holds that all talents of the human being must be utilized and together expressed in a harmonious and balanced way for divine purposes. Thus, intellect, the power urge, the erotic dimension of personality, the desire for leisure, love, the seeking of pleasure -- all of these must be blended together, each in moderation (like Maimonides), but together must present a comprehensive picture. (Saadia holds that because only God is one, man is a plurality, he is composed of many powers and aspects; but because God is one, man too must unify all his powers, must integrate his entire character, in accordance with the will of God.) The right way, for the Gaon, is more than moderation, but many-sidedness. Man must be well-

rounded, never one-sided. There is, thus, no conflict between Maimonides and Saadia, but a different insight.

Permit me to recommend one further step in developing the theme of Saadia Gaon.

Man, as Saadia teaches, possesses many powers; but man is more than just a collection of diverse talents and propensities. These aspects of his personality and character are frequently in conflict with each other. We are shot through with ambiguities and contradictions and inconsistencies. And, therefore, to follow the derekh ha-Shem means to utilize all these qualities, even the contradictory ones, for the purpose of achieving tzedakah u-mishpat, righteousness and justice. Man must put all sides of his personality, even those which logically are mutually exclusive, at the service of the divine goals of the moral life.

The best example for this is Abraham himself, who lived and taught the derekh ha-Shem. When we consider Abraham we find far more than a simple, pious, decent individual. We discover a rich, multi-faceted personality.

Look at how contradictory and different are the inclinations and instincts of Father Abraham. We read this week of Abraham as a military man; he hears that his nephew Lot has been captured, and he forthwith organizes an army, does battle with the four victorious kings, and returns triumphant. Yet the same military chieftain is overwhelmingly a man of peace. When his own

employees quarrel with those of Lot, he approaches his nephew and says, "Let there be no conflict between us," and offers Lot first choice of the pasture land.

Abraham is a rich man, who apparently finds nothing wrong with wealth. "And Abraham was very heavy in cattle and in silver and in gold." Yet this same man of great wealth can show an amazing contempt for money. When the king of Sodom offers him all the booty as a result of his military triumph, Abraham turns it down: "I will take neither thread nor shoelace, and do not say 'I have made Abraham rich.'"

The patriarch is a man of extremely profound faith. Time and again we read of Abraham's flawless belief in God. Yet the Jewish tradition ascribes to him philosophical insights; he was a rationalist who arrived at the idea of God, in his earliest youth, by means of a proof much later to be termed "teleological."

This is a man of utter integrity and honesty, yet he does not hesitate to use deception in order to save himself when his wife Sarah is threatened with being kidnaped into the local king's harem.

He dislikes sinners, and will have no truck with them; we shall read later of how he refused to choose a wife for his son Isaac from amongst the Canaanite women. Yet, as much as he has contempt for the Canaanite pagans, he offers his historic prayer for the worst of them -- Sodom and Gemorah.

His domestic relations show him to be many-sided indeed. He will not hesitate to offer a harsh reprimand to his wife when he thinks she deserves it; when she denies that she laughed at the message of her forthcoming child-bearing, he sharply tells her, "No! you did so laugh!" And yet, the same firm husband, when he feels that a vital interest of his wife's heart is at stake, graciously yields and defers to her: "Do unto her what is good in thine eyes."

Even more startling is a contradictory quality of Abraham's relations with his children. He can show remarkable tenderness, especially for the child of his concubine Hagar. He prays for Ishmael, takes up the cudgels on his behalf, refuses to neglect him. He is soft and sentimental about his children. And this same sweet father does not hesitate to employ the quality of harshness, even heartlessness to the point of callousness, when he is called upon to rise to the greatest trial of his life, the akedah, the sacrifice of Isaac.

So that Abraham has the kind of character in which every trait is used, even deception and hardness. He likes money and has contempt for it, he is faithful and rational, he is harsh and gentle, he is fatherly and motherly. This is more than moderation, according to the teachings of Maimonides, and even more than simple well-roundedness which Saadia demands. Rather, we have here a dialectic, an equilibrium of characteristics, a dynamic interplay



of the forces of personality. Such a personality is never rigid, nor is he infinitely plastic; rather, he is always intelligently flexible. Abraham is the archetype of the personality which refuses to neglect any facet of the richness of human life. This is important not only because self-realization is good for oneself. The modern flirtation with the idea of "self-fulfillment" is frequently nothing more than a pandering to one's desire for all experiences; it is merely a form of narcissism, an extravagant egotism. For Abraham, however, this marshalling of all the forces of his life, even the mutually contradictory ones, means that he makes every aspect of his personality available to God, that he focuses all his power towards a higher goal, that all his existence is informed with a sense of transcendent purpose. Abraham used all his God-given potentialities in order to advance his God-given purpose and his vision, namely, derekh ha-Shem laasot tzedakah u-mishpat.

This idea was enunciated centuries later by King Solomon in his Koheleth. The wise king understood that man is ambiguous and ambivalent; and he taught that all these characteristics, though they be mutually incompatible, must be called upon at different times to play their role in man's life. Some of the contradictory themes Solomon proposes are: a time to plant, and a time to uproot; a time to kill and a time to cure; a time to break and a time to build; a time to embrace and a time to keep far away

from embracing; a time to love and a time to hate; a time for war and a time for peace. Koheleth, I submit, had in mind this extension of Saadia's ethical theory.

This country, the United States, can never permit itself the luxury of one-sidedness. A great nation can never be totally dove or totally hawk; it must use all its potentialities and all its talents. Until now -- maybe too long, maybe not, that is not the subject of our sermon -- we have showed our abilities at "a time for war." Now, with the latest news, thank Heaven!, we have arrived at "a time for peace." We all pray, together with our fellow-Americans, that we shall now have the opportunity to demonstrate our abilities in this far nobler area of peaceful living with all our fellow men.

The same principle applies to the State of Israel. It is true that we are all anxious for peace. We all hope that the Israeli government will leave no stone unturned in its search for the path of peace and the road to international serenity in the Middle East. But we should not be over-anxious in this regard. We must not allow the United Nations, with its double standard, the State Department with its perennial ambivalence, and the New York Times editorial writer, with his Olympian stance, to push us into making inordinate demands on Israel's magnanimity. Israel must remain flexible, able to use all its talents, both for war and for



peace. At the shores of the East River, it must demonstrate its genius for peace; at the bridges over the Nile River, it must continue to reveal its talents for retaliation. In New York, at the U. N., it must show that this is a "time for peace;" and in the Middle East, if there is going to be continued Arab aggression, we must demonstrate that we are not afraid of "a time for war."

The same principle of many-sidedness, including contradictions, holds true for family and social relationships, especially those between parents and children. It means we must never be rigid. It means that parents may be single-minded, but they must never develop a fixation on only one method of dealing with their family. It means that we must make use of the full range and spectrum of human experiences and talents. The same Abraham who was characterized, above all else, by the trait of hesed, or love, was able to repress all his natural instincts of paternal love, to become hard and firm and tough as flint, and offer up his son on the akedah.

It sometimes becomes my unhappy duty to counsel parents whose hearts are broken because their children have decided to marry out of the faith, and the prospective partner remains non-Jewish -- and thus their bitter fate is to become grandparents of non-Jewish children. Once upon a time, Jewish parents -- though their family serenity and happiness and love were second to none, superior to the standards that prevail today -- knew exactly how

to react: there was immediate rejection, a cutting off of a child who had decided to poison the well from which he had drunk. Today, many Jewish parents think that such an attitude is benighted. They are more enlightened -- they are great believers in "love" and therefore decide ultimately to accept such children. Do we, then, believe that those parents who rejected their children who married out of the faith were really hard and callous people? Yes and no -- "yes" in that the potential for hardness, though rarely exercised, was here called in to service; "no," because on the whole they were people of extraordinary family love and gentleness. For Jewish parents to cut off a child forever meant to break their own hearts, to rip it into shreds, to destroy a part of their lives, never to cease mourning for a beloved child who had, to their everlasting shame and disgrace, turned against their family and their faith, their God of their people. Such parents brought an akedah -- no less heart-rending than that of Abraham offering up Isaac. But when it was necessary, they were ready. Many of today's parents, contrariwise, think that they are showing love, when they are really only showing weakness. And what a mistake they make! By failing to exercise that other, less attractive, hard side of their personality, they contribute to the destruction of an entire people. They show their children that, no matter how much they object vocally and resist emotionally, ultimately their unhappiness with intermarriage

is only a front, it is a facade that can be cracked if children are determined enough. And children who detect this attitude are -- completely right. As a result, Jewish parents who fail to exercise the harsh side of their personalities in such instances, merely plant a seed in the hearts and minds of others of their children, and in the children of others. In this manner is the fabric of an entire people slowly eaten away and destroyed. Of course it is a terrible sacrifice to give up a child -- but without such sacrifices, our people would long ago have ceased to exist. "There is a time to embrace, and a time to keep far away from embracing."

It is interesting that the daily mention of the election of Abraham, to which we referred at the outset, was first recited at an unusually historic occasion. Atta hu ha-Shem ha-Elokim asher beharta be'Avram, "Thou art the Lord God Who chose Abram," was first declaimed at a special assembly in ancient Palestine. It came at a time when Ezra and Nehemiah had returned from Babylon to build up the Jewish community of the Holy Land. When they came there they found a disastrous state of affairs: a Jewish community that was demoralized, that had abandoned the major tenets of the faith, and, worst of all, that had inter-married. Many, many of the Jewish men had taken to themselves non-Jewish wives. The decision of Ezra and Nehemiah was cold, hard, difficult, demanding -- but it saved the Jewish people: they insisted that all Jews who

had married non-Jews break up their families forthwith. It was bitter medicine. There was resistance. But the medicine was accepted, and, difficult though it was, it proved the only cure possible. And so, the Israelites who had wrenched out part of their hearts, who broke up their families, laden down with guilt feelings of all kinds, most of them justified, gathered together in Jerusalem at this assembly, girded in sack cloth with dirt and earth poured over their heads as a sign of mourning and grief. And there they turned their eyes heavenward and proclaimed: atta hu ha-Shem, You are "the Lord" -- the One Who exercises His middat ha-rahamin, His attribute of mercy; and You are ha-Elokim -- "God," the One Who exercises His middat ha-din, His attribute of justice and harshness; and it was You asher baharta be'Avram, Who chose Abram, and taught Abraham himself how to exercise both of these contradictory qualities, how to be a soft and loving and gracious father -- almost to the point of being a mother! -- and yet one who was able to be much harsher than any father should ever be expected to act: to bring his son on the akedah. Now that we are called upon to make our sacrifices and evoke our hardness of heart -- we are ready, painful though it is.

We must pray that never, never shall we be brought into a situation where such harsh decisions are demanded of us. But we must always remain ready to offer every aspect of our characters

at the service of the great purpose that unites us as Jews.

Abraham became the elect of God only after he placed in nomination at the service of the Lord all of his talents, his whole life, every potentiality and propensity he possessed.

It is fitting that we, the descendants of this elected patriarch, resolve to continue his tradition of derekh ha-Shem laasot tzedakah u-mishpat, and so inaugurate a newer and fuller, a happier and more meaningful life, for ourselves, all of Israel and all the world.