

"FROM TOLERANCE TO SENSITIVITY"

A fascinating dialogue takes place between the mighty king of Egypt and the leader of the band of Hebrew slaves, as it is recorded in this morning's Sidra. Moses says to Pharoah, "Thus saith the Lord, let my people go and they will serve Me." Pharoah retorts with a compromise: You may perform your service to your God, but do it here, within the borders of Egypt, without leaving the country. Moses refuses to accept this response. "It is not proper to do that," he says, "for we wish to sacrifice the abomination of Egypt to the Lord our God" -- our religious festival calls for the sacrifice of animals, which animals are considered deities by the Egyptians, a fact which we consider abominable. "Lo, shall we sacrifice the abomination of the Egyptians before their very eyes, ye'lo yiskelunu, and they will not stone us?"

On this answer of Moses -- which, on the surface, seems reasonable enough -- the late Rabbi Yaakov Mosheh Charlop, the greatest disciple of the late Rav Kook, of blessed memory, offers a comment which reveals new insights not only in this passage but in Judaism as a whole. Moses, says Rabbi Charlop, was speaking to an absolute monarch, a sovereign with unlimited powers over his subjects. If this Pharoah assures Moses of his permission to perform the sacrificial service in Egypt, why should Moses be afraid

of a few Egyptians who would feel scandalized by the slaughter of animals? Certainly it is within the power of Pharoah to offer protection to the Hebrews, to call out a riot squad or encircle them with a protective cordon of troops against the wrath of the Egyptians. How, then, could Moses answer Pharoah as he did, and why did Pharoah accept this response?

In his answer, Rabbi Charlop points to the Aramaic translation of the Torah by Onkelos, who renders the words, ve'lo yiskelunu, not as "and they will not stone us?," but as: ha-lo yemrun le'mirgemana, "Will they not wish to stone us?" What Onkelos here implied is that Moses was not at all afraid of physical violence by the outraged Egyptians. He knew full well that if he had Pharoah's blessing, no Egyptian could hurt him or his people. What Moses was troubled by was the very act of so arousing the Egyptians, of so offending their most delicate religious sensitivities, that they would want to stone the Hebrews! Moses' concern was not military or political, it was ethical and moral: even if I consider the religion of the Egyptians as barbaric and cruel, an abomination, yet I do not want to indulge my own highest religious feelings if in so doing I will insult them and hurt them and offend their sensitivities. Even the greatest mitzvah ought not be performed at the expense of others and at the cost of irritating their most cherished feelings.

Actually, this sublime ethical gesture is but the expression of the Biblical commandment that Moses would later make

at Sinai, "Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thy self," which, according to the formulation of Hillel, meant that one ought not to do to his neighbor what he would not wish done to himself.

This matter of respect for the feelings of others is not necessarily universally practiced in the world in which we live today. This past week, for instance, it took a court order of the Oregon Supreme Court to remove a 51-foot neon cross from public property in the state of Oregon. The student group that erected this Christian symbol betrayed insensitivity to the feelings of those who do not share their faith and do not belong to their communion.

Conversely, recent weeks saw a splendid example of sensitivity for others when the Royal House of Sweden and the Academy that awards the Nobel prize -- the "Sages of Stockholm," as Agnon referred to them -- went out of their way to accommodate Mr. Agnon in his observance of Shabbat and Kashrut.

Sometimes we come across a painful paradox: Christians show understanding and sympathy, but Jews -- descendants of that same Moses who showed an appreciation of the feelings even of abominable Egyptians -- do not. This past week a leading defense agency, the Anti-Defamation League of Queens, ran its annual fund raising event -- but offered a non-kosher dinner! Surely they do not reject observing Jews; they merely relegate them into a ghettoized corner where they can nibble at their special, quaint,

kosher plates. At the same time, the Catholic Diocese of Brooklyn, which sponsors the Catholic-Jewish Relations Committee (jointly with A.D.L.!) ran a strictly kosher banquet. So awkward did the situation become, that a Rabbi in Queens -- non-Orthodox one -- had to publicly threaten to solicit help from the Catholic Church against the A.D.L. in ensuring kashruth at Jewish public functions!

Yet, to be honest, despite occasional lapses, the democratic world in which we live does normally show tolerance for non-conforming opinion. Hence, this biblical insight into consideration for others, noble and beautiful as it is, is not really a great novelty or unusual contribution to pluralistic, easy going, live-and-let-live America. Secularist society practices tolerance; what then does the Torah have to offer?

We can best appreciate the contribution of the Torah when we realize that it is all too easy to be tolerant when you have no firm opinions of your own. If one has no clear convictions, then he corroborates the observation of W. Somerset Maugham who said that tolerance is frequently another name for indifference. All too often, the easy-going way is simply a disguise for a lack of passion and the absence of commitment.

What the Torah wanted to teach us is not to take the easy road to tolerance. If you have no convictions of your own, it is simple enough to accommodate people of different ideas. The Torah,

however, implanted within us very powerful ideals -- and yet demanded of us to be considerate for those who do not share them. Thus, today's Sidra will read the words of the Almighty announcing the forthcoming redemption: ve'hotzeti etkhem mi-tahat sivlot mitzrayim, "and I shall take you out from under the burdens of Egypt." The great Hassidic teacher, the author of "Sefat Emet", commented on the word sivlot, which we have translated as "burden." It is a noun which comes from the word li'sbol, which means to suffer, to bear -- and also to tolerate. In other words, God was here not promising only a redemption from hard work, but something far more subtle: I shall redeem you from that lowly state whereby you feel you can tolerate evil, from being satisfied with what is spiritually cheap and vulgar, from your willingness to bear the burden of brutality, from your readiness to coexist with abomination in silence. In other words, the redemption was also a spiritual one -- Jews would receive new and powerful commitment, great ideals which would make them reject most emphatically anything that is beneath such sublime goals.

It is only when people have such firm convictions that their tolerance of opposition becomes truly significant. To believe that my commitments are true -- and, hence, to exclude other commitments as untrue -- and yet to respect the delicate sensitivities of those who are in the opposition, that is to achieve ethical greatness. The Jew, therefore, was taught by his Torah



to walk on a tight rope: to despise a creed if it should be despicable, but not to despise those who believe it; to reject an opinion but not those who opine; to practice tolerance for people and their right to their own views, even if I consider those views intolerable.

Of course, there are limits to tolerance in any society. Unless civilization is to be reduced to complete anarchy, there must be certain boundaries beyond which we do not go. No society can long exist if it is going to suffer with impunity the murderer and the rapist, the dope-pusher and the smut peddler. In a religious society, certain kinds of conscientious idol worship and blasphemy are treated in the same manner. But between the two extremes of total anarchy and totalitarianism, Judaism bids us act in a manner so moral that it has no peer among people with profound convictions. What a far cry from the malicious teachings of Toynbee who points to Judaism and the Bible as a source of modern intolerance!

Respect and tolerance are part of the culture of our country. But its roots and predecessors are biblical. Yet, there is a difference. For the secularist, there is tolerance -- a practical, utilitarian way of letting society function while different groups go their own way. It is socially difficult, but personally easy enough. For a committed Jew, who has very clear opinions and commitments of his own, the task is much more difficult

to attain; that is why committed people frequently fail in learning the lesson of tolerance. To accomplish it requires a high and lofty spiritual-ethical personality. Yet, when he achieves it he has moved beyond tolerance; he has achieved sensitivity. His consideration for his fellow man is not the easy and practical tolerance of a secularist, who does not necessarily have any religious convictions of his own, but the profound respect that only a man of one commitment can have for people of other commitments. To achieve such sensitivity is a spiritual triumph of the first magnitude. It may have its political and social consequences, but its origin is in Torah and in our great heritage.

The Torah, therefore, as we read it in today's Sidra, urges us to aspire to the most magnificent goals known to man. When pondering such teachings, we may rightly declare, in the words we recite every morning, ashrenu, "happy are we: how goodly is our lot, how pleasant our destiny, how beautiful our heritage!"