

THE BREAD OF FAITH

The Zohar has two terms for Matzah. One of them is "חמץ אבות" (ḥametz avot) "the bread of the fathers," a term in all likelihood borrowed from the opening paragraph of the Haggadah, the "חמץ מצרים" (ḥametz mitsrim) which refers to the Matzah as the bread which our ancestors ate in Egypt. The second term is "חמץ אמונה" (ḥametz emunah) "the food of faith." The two together symbolize two major approaches of a Jew: that of tradition and that of faith.

Both of these are implied in the verse of the song that Moses and Israel sang at the shores of the Red Sea: "זה יי אלהי וזה יי אבותי" (זה יי אלהי וזה יי אבותי) "This is my God and I will glorify him" -- the approach of personal faith; "זה יי אבותי וזה יי אבותי" (זה יי אבותי וזה יי אבותי) "the God of my fathers and I will exalt Him" -- the approach of tradition and history.

With the Emancipation in the eighteenth and especially nineteenth centuries, many many Jews sustained a massive loss of faith. Their own personal religious commitment was crushed. But nonetheless, most of those who had lost faith retained a powerful link to tradition and historical continuity. They kept up a strong national and ethnic and linguistic consciousness. The languages of the Jews, the fellowship of Jews, the cultural patterns of Jews, were accepted naturally by them. They no longer knew the food of faith, but they still ate the bread of their fathers. (Israel Zangwill once said that when a Jew eats matzah, he eats history "...).

What of today, however? Which Matzah will be ours: The "חמץ אבות" (ḥametz avot) or the "חמץ אמונה" (ḥametz emunah), the bread symbolizing the tradition of the fathers -- the nationhood of our people and its ethnic cohesiveness -- or that of faith, of personal commitment?

I am pessimistic as to whether an appeal to tradition and peoplehood is really viable in any meaningful way to large numbers of Jews. Except for the minority, like those of us who are present here this morning, who are sensitive to ancestors and history and continuity, most Jews lack a sense of tradition, they lack an awareness of fathers. What fathers? Their own fathers are probably as assimilated as they are! Even the grandparents of most of them had already departed from the wellsprings of our tradition.

I am therefore sympathetic with, but weary of, all those seminars on "Jewish identity." Ethnicity alone, like tradition for tradition's sake, simply will not do. Yes, it is a good thing; no, it is not the best possible solution. Yes, we can and ought to use it and exploit it; but no, it will not endure in and of itself. Rallying around the State of Israel, or Soviet Jewry, or the Jewish poor in New York, is not the substance of permanent identification as a Jew in conditions both happy and adverse.

What then? Can it be the way of faith, the "חמץ אמונה" (ḥametz emunah), the bread of faith? In this age of cynicism and materialism and hedonism?

Yes, the way of faith!

I make here a naive, but deeply held declaration of faith in faith

and in its hidden powers of regeneration. There are whole ages when dimensions of the human personality go into eclipse, only to reappear at a later time. I believe with all my heart that faith is one of them. After long decline it will reemerge with a strength and clarity heretofore unsuspected.

How will that be? My confidence is that it will come after great disappointments with our various ersatz faiths. The Rabbis put it this way:

"He who denies the idols, it is as if he observed the entire Torah."
 "As if" -- and also prior to. The denial of idolatry leads to the affirmation of God.

Faith is achieved in one of two ways. Either one is born into it, or one understands it in a sudden flash of intellectual insight, or one is blessed with a revelation from Heaven. This was the way of Moses. The other way is that of torturous climbing, of searching (with all its bitter disappointments and setbacks), of worshipping every idol until one learns how false they are, and then, on the ashes of one's frustrations, one discovers the secret of faith. This is the way of Abraham the Jew, and Jethro the non-Jew. They worshipped all the idols, till they denied them all, and found faith in the One God.

When the people of Israel will return to its sacred sources, it will be the way of Abraham and Jethro. Most of us will come to God only when our idols will lie shattered, the shards of their clay feet puncturing our illusions and goading us to look up, beyond the confines of our own creations, past the dazzling display of our arrogant inventions, to the brooding Presence which summons us and awaits us so patiently.

For indeed, our idols have already, or are in the process of, falling and failing.

What, after all, are the major idols of our time? The most significant of them may be said to be the following: Science; power, especially political power; money; the self, especially as formulated by pop-psychology; and pleasure and the philosophy of hedonism. Each, or all of them together, if used in a limited way, can certainly be valid from a spiritual point of view. But the problem is that we have turned to them as ends rather than as means, and we have put in one or all of them our ultimate trust and our absolute faith. And they are failing, and failing fast.

Take the idols we mentioned. It is a truism that science produces good results and bad results. It heals us and makes life more comfortable, and it destroys our environment and puts dangerous bombs in our hands. There is nothing unusual about that piece of information. It is only that when we begin to apotheosize science that we put ourselves at the mercy of our runaway technology. And then it threatens to destroy us. Idols devour their worshippers.

Money and the material are certainly the objects of faith. In the Communist world, dialectical materialism reigns supreme. In the non-Communist world, especially America, we have all along unconsciously elevated free enterprise, the capitalist system, Wall Street, the "good things" of life, to religious values. But who today

would venture such a reckless religion? Who today is not afraid of the very systems we have so idolized?

Ego can become an idol, "Self-expression" and "self-realization" can be very important psychological tools. Certainly we must seek to enhance the self and not crush it. By all means, self-expression is important and it must teach us not to impose unthinking discipline upon young minds and simply throw in data and information into passive brains. But we have gone to the other extreme. We have begun to worship the self, and therefore we have learnt how to destroy it. We have made a bitter discovery: what self? -- a self without values, meaning, worth, transcendence? Psychology, when transformed from a way of understanding and healing, which mark it as a genuinely significant tool for man's happiness, to a religion and the focus of absoluteness, makes it idolatrous and it disappoints its worshippers.

Pleasure is in the same category. Our permissiveness was supposed to give us a sense of primitive joy, and instead it has left us with a residue of profound, elemental sadness. Instead of a life without hangups, we have a life full of a variety of hangovers. With every inhibition we have destroyed, whether for psychological or philosophical reasons, we have increased our sense of impotence and apathy.

Political power used to be something we trusted in. No more! Today, the most industrial of nations stands with begging bowl at the feet of oil - sheiks who have benefitted from the accidents of geology and geography. Who can rely on power? The Kurds relied on Iran! The South Vietnamese and Cambodians relied upon the United States! And when I see those pictures of masses of refugees, whether Kurds or Cambodians, holding the mangled bodies of their children, I remember that only 30 years ago those same pictures were identified as European Jews!

Shall Israel today trust in the United States for arms and the Iranians for oil?

Defense Minister Shimon Peres, ^{who was the "strong man" in} the cabinet in the recent negotiations, ~~who was the "strong man" in~~ in an interview in Maariv just this past week, denied that the American abandonment of Viet Nam and Cambodia played a major role in his thinking -- But he did admit that the pictures to which I referred would not leave his mind throughout all this period. He also mentioned that he was aware fully throughout these protracted discussions that Jewish history has proved that power is not the ultimate answer. And so when the American Secretary of State turned to the Israelis and said, "trust me," that even if the Egyptians offer nothing they will really behave themselves, the Israelis refused to put such trust even in the benevolent intentions of the most powerful man of the most powerful country in the world.

Peres mentioned something which is worth recalling for us, who are so worried and apprehensive at this time. He said that when he studied in graduate school in America, a professor at Harvard told him at the end of the semester, "Peres, I don't know if you learned anything during this semester. But I hope you will at least have remembered one thing from all I have taught you: When you have disappointments that are at hand, and bad news that is inevitable,

swallow it at once, take your lumps immediately, and so you will leave the future open for new hope, for new options and alternatives."

That was the policy that was followed. I feel all ought to approve of it. What Peres and Rabin and the Cabinet were saying was what King David told us a long time ago: אֲנִי יְהוָה וְלֹא אֵל אֲחֵרִים, אֲנִי יְהוָה אֶחָד

Do not trust in princes or power, in mere man who is essentially powerless. אֲנִי יְהוָה, אֲנִי יְהוָה; Israel, trust in the Lord!

When the Israelites crossed the Red Sea we are told

וַיַּרְא יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶת-מִצְרָיִם הַמָּוֶת, עַל-שְׂפָרְיָם

"And Israel saw Egypt dead on the shores of the sea, and they believed in the Lord and in His servant Moses." It does not say that they saw "the Egyptians" or "the people of Egypt" dead at the shores of the sea. They saw "Egypt" dead at the sea. How does one see a whole nation dead? What the Torah means is that the Israelites saw not only masses of individual Egyptians who were destroyed, but they saw Egypt itself, all that it symbolized -- the naked worship of brute power, tyranny riding high -- that was dead at the shores of the sea. And when such an idol is smashed, only then does one come to an act of high faith in the Lord and in His servants!

I find this presumption of iconoclasm, this necessary failure of idolatry prior to the attainment of faith, hinted at by various aspects of the Matzah itself, what the Zohar calls the מַצָּה הַזֶּה the food or bread of faith.

Consider this: The Matzah is called לֶחֶם עָנִי, "the poor man's bread" -- a denial of the ability of money or material influence to save us. It is a refutation of the omnipotence of science and technology, by the very fact that Matzah must be made from the simplest of substance, flour and water alone, in the most primitive of ways. The Matzah is a bread which does not rise, it does not puff itself up in boastfulness, and is thus a symbol of humility, a denial of the value of the ego in and of itself. Pleasure too is counted out: by custom we do not salt the Matzah which we eat at the Seder, as we do with the bread that we eat all year long. And even power is denied, symbolized by the fact that the Matzah we eat at the Seder, in fulfillment of the special commandment, must be מַצָּה שֶׁנִּשְׁבְּרָה, a broken Matzah, a symbol of powerlessness. So the Matzah itself is a symbol of iconoclasm or the breaking of the idols of our times, and thus becomes a most appropriate "food of faith."

Once upon a time, we might have hoped that from loyalty to מִלְכּוּת, to tradition or history or nation or ethnic origin, our people would move on to מִשְׁפָּחָה, to religious faith. I do not believe any longer that that is the way it will happen. Today, tomorrow, the day after tomorrow, the process will be: first, disappointment with our myriads of idols; then, religious faith; and from there to a discovery of our fathers, our tradition, our people, our fellow Jews.

For the majority of our people it will not be a journey from tradition or nationalism to faith, but from faith to tradition or nationalism.

Then we will have both, and we will be able to say at a Seder table in the not too distant future: This is my father's bread and

my food of faith. And Judaism will then become highly attractive, so that ^{כִּי יִבְרַח יְיָ וְיִכְלֹךְ} ^{בְּ}, all who are in need of some linkage to Almighty G d will come and join us; ^{כִּי יִבְרַח יְיָ וְיִכְלֹךְ} ^{בְּ} all who feel a thirst for their people and their brethren will join us.

I should like to make it clear that by faith I do not mean some kind of **atavistic**, primitive, simple-minded faith, but a sophisticated, intellectual, and alert faith.

Remember that Matzah can be made only from the ^{חֲמֵשׁ הַמִּינִים} from the five varieties of grain -- the very substances which alone, if leavened, can yield ^{חֵמֶץ}! It is the same substance which can be either ^{חֵמֶץ} or ^{מַצָּה}. The very same items which lead to idolatry must be used in creating the "bread of faith." Faith, the ^{מַצָּה} ^{חֵמֶץ}, will make use of the elements of science and power and money and ego and pleasure -- all the goods and wisdom of this world. But they will be our servants, not our masters.

For we will have, always, only One Master: ^{יְיָ אֱלֹהֵינוּ} ... ^{יְיָ אֱלֹהֵינוּ}, "Who knows one?...One is our God in heaven and in earth."

And even if we affirm our complete faith in our One God, He will say of us, as the shepherds sang of the beloved in the Song of Songs (6:9) - ^{אֵלֶּיךָ הָיָה יְיָ אֱלֹהֵינוּ וְיִכְלֹךְ} ^{אֵלֶּיךָ הָיָה יְיָ אֱלֹהֵינוּ וְיִכְלֹךְ} "My dove, my undefiled (people of Israel) is but one...The daughters (i.e., other nations) saw her and called her happy. Yea, the queens and concubines (i.e., the great powers) too, and they praised her."