

"ABI GEZUNT"

Our Sidra opens this morning with the revelation of God to Abraham. We are not told what it was that God told the patriarch, but the Rabbis inform us that the Lord, as it were, was performing the commandment of Bikkur cholim, visiting the sick. Abraham was an old man, he had just been circumcised, and he was indisposed. It was at this time of his recuperation that God paid him the visit.

Reading of this account affords us the opportunity to speak about the Jewish view of sickness and health, and especially one of the most significant and cherished precepts in the Torah, that of Bikkur cholim, visiting the sick.

First, it is unquestionable that health is an important value. Judaism raises shemirat ha-guf, care for the body, to the level of a mitzvah or precept. Maimonides had taught, long before Benjamin Franklin, that a sound mind depends upon a sound body. To deny that health is a great value is to fly in the face of the facts of Jewish teaching. Every four weeks we offer a special prayer at the advent of the new month in which we ask for chilutz atzamot, health, and three times every day we turn to God and pray, refaenu, "Heal us, O Lord." Those who suffer from illness, either themselves or in their families, can surely appreciate the great blessing that good health is.

And yet, I question the implicit prejudice of many uninformed and semi-informed people that health is Judaism's chief value. Thus, for instance, they interpret the laws of Kasrut and Mikvah as primarily hygienic regulations, when in fact they are not such.

Furthermore, we are all acquainted with the Yiddishism, "Abi Gezunt" -- as long as you are well. You've lost a fortune? -- "Abi Gezunt." You failed a crucial test? -- "Abi Gezunt." You are getting a divorce and breaking up your home? -- "Abi Gezunt." Your children are marrying out of the faith? -- "Abi Gezunt."

"Abi Gezunt" is based upon a philosophical assumption which I deny, namely, that health is the highest value. Perhaps this overemphasis on health derives from the tradition of the sickly child who grew up undernourished in a sunless and cold ghetto, nurturing a secret envy of the strong, healthy, brutish peasants who tormented him.

The fact is that the danger to health or even life suspends most prohibitions, but not all of them. The three major sins -- idolatry, homicide, and unchastity -- are not annulled because of reasons of health or life itself. Thus, "Therapeutic adultery" is considered an abomination by the Torah. Immoral expression for the sake of enhancing physical or mental health is clearly forbidden by the Halakha. Holiness is more important than health. Kiddush Hashem, "the sanctification of God's Name" (or martyrdom) too takes precedence over health. The soldiers who crossed the Suez into the Israeli bridgehead would have been much healthier in Tel-Aviv. Yet not only their generals, but their Rabbis too, sent them into battle!

"Abi Gezunt" is not true to our tradition. It is a Yidishism which is not consonant with Judaism. It is a distortion of Jewish values because it is a half-truth, a misplaced emphasis. Holiness is important, but it is not the most important value. John F. Kennedy, whose tenth Yahrzeit is being observed this month, was not really "Gezunt." He was in pain most of his life. Would one call that a wasted life?

I have known people who have no sight, but do have extraordinary insight. And I know people with 20/20 vision who are blind to the beauty, the marvel, the sanctity of life. Who leads a more productive life? "Abi Gezunt?"

I know people who are bent over by cardiac disease, yet their hearts are young and vigorous and warm and full of compassion and love. I know others whose hearts never skip a beat, who are strong as can be -- but they are callous, empty, cold. "Abi Gezunt?"

I know a person who has long been afflicted with cancer, but whose spirit is indomitable, whose heart is overflowing with courage and heroism, whose disposition is sweet and gentle. I know others who are healthy as oxen, but they are embittered, apprehensive, weak-willed. Is "Abi Gezunt" enough?

But I have a second objection to "Abi Gezunt" from an entirely different perspective. Permit me to begin with a few comments on the commandment of Bikkur Cholim.

According to the Halakhah, a basic part of the observance of this commandment to visit the sick is: prayer. One must, preferably in the presence of the patient, offer up the following prayer:

יְיָ אֱלֹהֵינוּ הוֹשִׁיעֵנוּ מִכָּל חָלָא וְכָל מַחֲמָה  
וְכָל מַחֲמָה וְכָל מַחֲמָה וְכָל מַחֲמָה  
אֲנִי וְכָל יִשְׂרָאֵל וְכָל יִשְׂרָאֵל

"May it be by Thy will that You quickly send a speedy recovery from Heaven, health of soul and health of body, to so-and-so amongst all the other sick of Israel."

Why "amongst the other sick?" Because this prayer is an attempt to overcome the patient's loneliness, his solitude, by joining him to the community of the sick, the she'ar Cholei Yisrael, the other sick of Israel. The patient suddenly feels that he is out of things, the flux of life is bypassing him, the world has forgotten him. His family and business and friends seem to be getting along without him. He is shocked by his discovery; I am not indispensable, I may even be expendable! He is overwhelmed by his own marginality and insecurity, by the fragility of his life. He is so alone! So we remind him that he is not alone, for he is included be'tokh she'ar cholei Yisrael. You are not the only one who is sick. You are, along with other patients, part of a world-wide community of the bed-ridden.

Perhaps we ought to go further and modify and broaden this interpretation of that prayer. Perhaps she'ar cholei Yisrael does not mean that this patient is part of a well-defined community of specific people who happen to be sick. Rather, we are all of us cholei Yisrael! All people are sick! All humans are patients. All men and women are blind in some way, deaf and dumb and lame and maimed and feverish and unbalanced. Maimonides, that great physician, spoke of the defects of character in terms of Choli and refuah, health and illness. Who, by <sup>this</sup> definition, is in full and robust health?

What I am saying is that the definition of well or ill must not be confined to individual organs or only to the physical self. Rather, it is a question of wholeness of body and mind and emotion and will and soul and spirit. The Hebrew expression refuah shelemah, complete recovery or health, comprehends both refuat ha-guf (the health of the body) and refuat ha-nefesh (the health of the soul).

The sick man is thus told: The whole human condition is sick. You are only one case where the symptoms more obviously show that something is out of kilter. But you are not alone. We are all fragmented and atomized. We all lack wholeness and wholeness. Some need refuat ha-guf, physical health; almost all of us require refuat ha-nefesh, spiritual healing.

There is no such thing as "Abi Gezunt." There are no truly "Gezunt" people; and if there are, they are mighty few!

That is what she'ar Cholei Yisrael means. Proof of this is the similar formula that is recited when consoling the mourners.

When we leave, we say to them: "May the Lord console you be'tokh she'ar avelei Tzion vi' yerushalayim, amongst all other mourners of Zion and Jerusalem." Who are these "mourners of Zion and Jerusalem?" They are -- all of us! All Jews! We are all mourners of Zion and Jerusalem. For the last 1904 years we are in mourning, even as today we are in special mourning for the flower of Israel's youth destroyed and maimed so callously and unnecessarily. So the mourner is not alone. And in the same way, the ill person is not alone. He is part of the human community of the sick. Our body politic is moribund. Ethically we are at a dangerously low ebb. Morally, society is drowning in its own filth. We are sick and absurd and unhealthy in every conceivable way -- some more, some less, but all ill. It is part of our inescapable, finitude, our unavoidable existential fate. metaphysical

Diogenes was looking for an honest man. He would have had even greater difficulty had he been looking for a healthy man. Because, truly, all the world's a hospital.

Am I exaggerating when I suggest such a dour diagnosis of our human condition? I think not. With all the crime and lying in high places, we know that there is blight and moral cancer in world leadership, from Washington to Moscow to the UN. All the world's a hospital.

When there is no echo, no response to Israel's anguished cry, when it discovers the bodies of Israeli soldiers bound hand and foot on the Syrian front -- according to one report I read, bound by the straps of their own Tefillin! -- and tortured to death and mutilated, then it is not only the Arabs who are demented savages, but the world which will not issue an outcry of protest that is mad, dangerously insane, mortally sick, morally leprous!

The world religious leaders? Official Christian leadership has been as silent during the Yom Kippur War as it was right before the Six-Day War. This is "Gezunt?"

Ah, but surely the intellectuals are healthy? Consider this: a few days after the outbreak of this war, the Israeli Writers Association sent letters to hundreds of writers and poets throughout the world asking for their support for Israel in this hour of its travail. Until the middle of this week, not a single word has been heard, not a single reply given, not a single letter received. There was, perhaps, one notable exception: the renowned Soviet physicist Sakharov, who talked up on behalf of Israel even without being asked. But he will probably, because of this, wind up in a Russian insane asylum! "Abi Gezunt?"



Lest we feel swelled up with ethnic pride or jingosim, and maintain that at least we American Jews have proved healthy, let us think about our own condition. We are healthy? Maybe, and maybe not. It is true that the outpouring of help and sympathy and assistance by American Jews to Israel was most commendable, even historic. And yet, despite everything, those who are active on behalf of Israel will tell you that the total number of people who gave anything to U.J.A. or bought any Bonds, does not exceed 20 to 25 percent! Hence, the great majority of American Jews did -- nothing! So we are not all "Gezunt!" American Jews know that their fate depends on Israel, and yet they were passive and indolent. Sick indeed! Compare that to the young soldier in an Israeli hospital who was visited by my sister this past week. With his right hand he was tapping on the bed to the tunes of Shlomo Carlebach who went from ward to ward, bringing joy and dispelling the gloom. Then a nurse came to attend him and pulled back his sheet. When she shed a tear upon noticing that he had no limbs left except for that right arm, he consoled her saying: Zeh shaveh li'medinat Yisrael, "It is worth it for Israel." That boy is far healthier than many of us because he has found meaning in his life, he has sacrificed for something he believes in, he has lifted himself to a higher dimension; far healthier indeed than the American Jew who did not lift a finger to help because he was so involved in his own self-indulgence.

When we pray for health, we do not plead only for a small segment of the population. We pray for all of us, for all of mankind. We are all unhealthy. We all need healing, cure, recuperation.

Those who are bed-ridden, those of feverish brow and missing limbs, are only the obviously ill. Pity even more those who suffer from Choli ha-nefesh (spiritual sickness) than those who suffer from Choli ha-guf (physical illness), those who are sick and do not know it; those whose fatal wounds do not show and do not register on the thermometer -- and therefore go on untreated. I have far more pity for the man who lacks sensitivity than for the one who is missing a kidney; for the pathetic person who has lost meaning in life than for the accident victim who lost a limb.

Pity the vain man who cannot bear not to be the center of attraction; his egocentricity is pathological.

Pity the man who cannot let go; he is ethically diseased.

Pity the woman who cannot grow old gracefully; she is emotionally debilitated.

Pity the person who is obsessed with money and power and status; he is morally delirious in his hectic and frantic and pointless activities.

Pity the schemer and con<sup>n</sup>iver and conspirator who has taken a healthy mind and twisted it into something sick.

Oh, how we need health! Oh how ridiculous to say of such people, just because they are not under a doctor's care, "Abi Gezunt!"

For indeed, the spiritually-morally sick are far different from and far worse than the merely physically ill. For of the physically sick the Sages taught that: Shekhinah le'merashotav shel ha-choleh, the Presence of the Lord rests above the head of the patient. But just the reverse is true of the morally sick. Rabbi Hayyim of Volozhin maintains that the term Chilul Hashem, the desecration of the Lord's name, comes from the word Chalal, a void, an empty space, signifying the absence of God. Where God is not, there you have desecration. Long before him, Ibn Ezra made a similar etymological observation. The term chalilah (far be it, or: profane -- as in today's Sidra) is related to chalil, the flute, which is empty within.

I suggest that the same is true of the similar word choleh, the sick person. Ultimately, the etiology of our existential sickness, our pathological human condition, is our distance from God. That is what religion is all about.

Our disease is self-imposed. By turning from God, we turn against ourselves. By abandoning Torah, the source of our existence as Jews, we become dangerously anemic.

So I conclude on a rather optimistic note. The fact that all men are in some way sick does not excuse us individually, but should relieve the burden of those of us who are painfully aware of our personal shortcomings. And more important, because we know the cause of our spiritual malaise, we know how to correct it. It is - the return to God, the rapprochement with Torah, the rediscovery of the spirit. The prescription is an ancient one, but it is still valid and always will be. This is the source of my optimism. And the prognosis -- that depends on us.

Abraham, our first father, ignored his pain and discomfort and rose to greet the angels of the Lord. And we, his children, must return to the same God. This is our way to health.

But there is a difference. When Abraham was sick, God sent an angel to heal him, while He personally, as it were, performed the act of Bikkur Cholim, visiting the sick. We prefer the reverse. We will gratefully accept visits by an angel. But we need personal attention from the Divine Physician Himself: Refa'enu Hashem ve'nerafe; --"Heal us, O Lord, and we will be healed." Only if God heals, if God comes, if we go to Him, then Ve'nerafei, shall we be healed.

When that happy day comes, we shall all be blessed with refuah shelamah, which includes both health of body and health of soul.

Then, and only then, will we be entitled to say "Abi Gezunt."