

"ON INFLUENCING THE FUTURE"

It is an article of our faith that man has been endowed by his Creator with behirah hafshit, free will. He is permitted to make a free choice between right and wrong. In that sense, his future is open and undetermined. By opting for good or for evil, man can create his own destiny and fashion his own fate. "See, I have set before thee this day life and good, and death and evil, in that I command thee this day to love the Lord thy God, to walk in His ways... Therefore choose life, that thou mayest live, thou and thy seed" (Nitzavim, Deut. 30: 15-19).

And yet, for all that, the future is not altogether open and undetermined. The past does exert a powerful influence on the present, and through the present on the future. Heredity, for instance, plays a great role in the choices open to an individual. Some people are born stubborn, other more pliable; some lazy and some diligent; some rebellious and some obedient. Such ~~facts~~^{things} limit our choice, although they do not by any means cancel it out altogether.

There are some such limiting factors that are the result of an initially free determination by man. For instance, take environment. The kind of society in which we live, the kind of friends we have, often determines what kind of life we shall lead. But we are free to ~~choose~~^{ose} our society and to select our friends. Therefore, if we choose for ourselves a corrupt society and the wrong sort of friends, we are in essence making a choice which will determine a great part of our future. If we opt for the right kind of environment, then too we are creating our own future.

One of the most important factors in determining that future is -- what we think of that future itself, how we visualize it, what we expect of it. What we consider the future will often determine what it will turn out to be. Our estimate of the future is frequently, in itself, an influence on that future.

Do you recall Shakespeare's immortal play, "Macbeth?" We meet the young victorious general as he returns from putting down a rebellion against the King. The King is grateful to this young soldier who has displayed such ^{valorous} ~~great~~ loyalty. On the way back, in the famous scene on the heath, Macbeth meets the witches. We notice a malevolent change occurring in the character of Macbeth as he peeks into the future with the aid of witchcraft. This glimpse into the unknown, in which he is told that he will himself become King, redirects the development of his personality. We know that the witches' prophecies are, in essence, suggestions from Macbeth's own mind. We know that they are half-truths which he wants to believe, for secretly he covets the throne for himself. Thus, his is a self-created future; because he believes that he will become King, he ultimately does -- at the expense of his peace of mind, the purity of his character, and, ultimately, his very life. The faithful soldier has willed himself into the future of a perfidious rebel. What the poet is telling us is that man often becomes what he chooses to believe about himself.

"It hath been taught ^{us} ~~of~~ from the primal state

"That he which is was wished until he were."

Shakespeare is teaching us a universal ^a ~~principle~~ principle: that what we wish will come; that things happen often because we expect them to happen; that the vision of the future is at least as powerful as the facts of the past in shaping our own destinies.

This is true of men and it is true of societies. Inspect their dreams and you will discover their future. A brutal ideology, which tolerates inhumanity and accepts the lawlessness of the jungle, whether it be Nazism or Facism or a primitive evolutionism, will breed that very kind of society. A man who considers himself only a complicated machine, without real meaning or purpose in life, will become just that: a cipher, a statistic, a helpless plastic lump of humanity that is molded by external forces and without an inner will; an ineffective man or woman who cannot control his own destiny -- in short, a nobody.

But if the dreams are of the reverse kind, if the expectation of the future and the estimate of his self is that of one who considers himself a living, loving, feeling, thinking, free being, one created in the tzellem Elokim, and therefore utterly unique -- such a person will become just that: a purposeful, thoughtful, free, unique, and distinct individual in his own rights.

These last days of Passover we read the shirah, the Song of Triumph at the shores of the Red Sea. Immediately before the beginning of the song, we read the immortal words va-yaaminu ba-Shem u-ve'Mosheh avdo, the Children of Israel believed in the Lord and in His servant Moses. Somehow, it seems, the Torah was trying to tell us that a relationship exists between the belief and the triumph. Indeed, our Sages taught: lo nig'alu Yisrael mi-Mitzrayim ela bi'sekhar emunah, Israel was redeemed from Egypt for the faith they had.

Do the Rabbis mean to teach us that there was a simple trade, a kind of barter as a form of reward-and-punishment? -- that the immediate wages of faith or emunah are redemption or ge'ulah?

I believe not. Our Sages were not speaking of faith in its purely theological context, such as faith in the existence or unity of God. I believe that what they meant is that the faith in the redemption itself brought on the redemption! The confidence that Israel had in the future determined that future. The ge'ulah came about as the result of Israel's emunah in its own ge'ulah.

In a similiar vein, the rabbis promised that ein ha-galuyot miskansim ela bi'sekhar emunah, the in-gathering of the exiles in the days before Messiah will come about in return for the faith of Israel. Think back to the years before 1948, when our contemporary kibbutz galuyot or in-gathering of the exiles began. At that time it took a tremendous amount of courage to believe that it was possible for the straggling remnants of European Jewry to form an independent state and return to Zion. Those who entertained such visions were accused of dreaming pipe-dreams and flirting with dangerous hallucinations.

Yet those who maintained a dogged faith in this vision lived to see it. Our very faith was itself instrumental in achieving it. Indeed, the future tends to conform to your opinion of it.

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People sometimes wonder: why is it that, by and large, our people are rahamanim, compassionate and merciful, with liberal tendencies, and generally in favor of human rights for all. Even when you meet a segregationist Jew, you usually find that he is more moderate and humane than others, disposed towards decent treatment to the very people he may oppose. What accounts for this? In all probability it is: our vision of the future! Read today's Haftorah -- Isaiah's picture of the Messiah and his period -- and you will see how our vision of the future has indelibly impressed itself upon our present and directed us to a certain kind of character. Not for us the dreams of drunken power, lording it over others who remain permanently inferior and subordinate. Instead, we dream of a Messiah who will judge the poor in justice, of a world of universal peace in which natural enemies will live together, the lamb with the wolf, the kid with the leopard. Our dream is one of universal knowledge -- "for the world will be filled with the knowledge of the Lord even as the waters cover the sea." For a people, even as for an individual, "he which is was wished until he were!"

What kind of future do we ^American Orthodox Jews dream of for ourselves and our children in this country? I would define it as follows: on the one hand, we want to have a community of Jews who will be loyal to Judaism and to the Jewish tradition; dedicated to the people of Israel and to the State of Israel; who will produce individual talmidei hakhamim, and a generation which will be a dor deiah, knowledgeable and versed in Torah. And on the other hand, we want them to be creative members of American society; fully cultured and conversant with all aspects of Western civilization; leaders in their professions and careers, assuming the leadership of the Jewish community and the

and the community at large. But above all, we want to be able to merge both worlds, to combine both disciplines, to synthesize both traditions.

Do you recognize that dream, one which we hope will in and of itself guide us towards that kind of future? If we had to describe that dream in two words, they would be "Yeshiva University!" Yeshiva, with its intensive schools of Jewish learning and education, and its excellent secular department, where subjects ranging from medicine and science through the liberal arts are taught from the high school to the post-graduate and post-doctoral level, supplies the generation of the future with the materials and the stuff by which our dreams can be transformed into reality.

Yeshiva University is not only an institution. It is a faith, a vision, a dream, a destiny. Do not underestimate it. I have seen Jews on three continents inspired to new heights when they hear the details about this most significant of all Jewish institutions of modern times. Yeshiva University is that definition of ourselves that tells us what we can become.

But we must beware of merely wishing ourselves into a ^ebitter future. We must be careful lest we resort merely to an infantile kind of wish-fulfillment. What I propose is not a childish conception whereby if you want a thing strongly enough, the very wish will bring it about; but rather that kind of faith and optimism that elicits from us work, dedication, and endless effort and endeavor.

It is in that sense that The Jewish Center repeats and reaffirms this year its honored tradition of devoting the last day of Passover to an appeal for Yeshiva University. With your invaluable assistance, this vision can become a reality.

I beg you to remember that the Rabbis promised the ge'ulah, the ultimate redemption, as sekhav emunah. That last phrase should not be understood as "the reward for faith," but in a different sense altogether. For the words sekhav means not only reward, something given in return, but also: compensation,

payment, a kind of deposit. The redemption came about not as a reward for faith, but as a result of sekhar emunah -- the effort, the work, the payment that was offered ^{because} ~~as a result~~ of emunah, the faith in the vision. It is not enough to have emunah; one must also add his sekhar. If we are willing to give, to pledge, to pay, as an expression of our faith, ^ethan indeed we will be privileged to experience the ge'ulah, the kind of redemption which will restore us not only to our national home, but to our national destiny -- the return of the People of Israel to the Land of Israel according to the Torah of Israel. For this is indeed the final redemption itself, the ge'ulah shelemah.