

"BITTER-SWEET"

The maror that we eat at the Seder is more than just a vegetable recalling the hard times inflicted upon our remote ancestors in ancient Egypt. It is the very symbol of human anguish through all the ages, and what we do with it is an expression of the Jewish philosophy of suffering as it issues out of the historical experience of the Jewish people.

Consider how astounding is our attitude towards this piece of food and how it speaks volumes to us. We do not weep when we eat it. We take this maror, this morsel of misery, and we recite a berakhah (blessing) over it, as if to say, "Thank you God for the miserable memory!" We then take this bitter herb and dip ^{it} into the haroset, the sweet paste of wine and nuts and fruit. Life, we say in effect, is neither all bitter nor all sweet. With rare exceptions, it is bitter-sweet, and we ought not to bemoan our fate but to bless God for it. Ever since Adam and Eve ate of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, our Kabbalists taught us, this good and evil are comingled, and life offers us neither pure, unadulterated goodness nor pure, unredeemable wickedness. The pessimist deplores the bitter and the bad that corrupts the sweet and the good. The optimist is delighted that the sharp edge of bitterness is softened with sweetness, that there is some good everywhere.

That is why when the Jew, the eternal optimist, dips his

maror into the haroset, he makes a berakhah, a blessing. That is why when we celebrate the zeman herutenu, the time of our liberation, the Jew at this time inclines while he eats. He plays the role of a nobleman even while the Gentile majority persecutes and oppresses and embitters him. Let others laugh at the comic Jew who tells himself he is a mellekh while he is being tormented. We know it is true. Life is bitter, but we have dipped it into the sweetness of haroset.

Hence, as we come to Pesach this year and every year, we relearn our lesson. Many of us enter the holiday burdened with a secret sigh, with the heart heavy, the mind distracted, and the soul sorely troubled. Yet, as Jews, we shall look for the sweet, we shall perform the tibbul maror be'haroset and experience by sheer will the simhat yom tov, the happiness of the holiday.

But the message of maror is more than just the awareness of the bitter-sweet taste of life, more than just the idea that every black cloud has a silver lining. What maror means to tell us is that misery is not meaningless, that pain is not pointless punishment, that human anguish has larger dimensions, that the bitter leads to the sweet. In fact, without the foretaste of maror, haroset loses its value. There can be no sweet without bitter, no light without darkness before it, no joy without prior sadness. There can be no wealth without poverty, no faith without doubt, no freedom without slavery, no redemption without exile.

The author of the Hagadah reminds us va-eten l'esav et har se'ir la-reshet oto, ve'Yaakov u-vanav yardu mitzrayim, God gave to Esau the Mount of Seir to inherit, but Jacob and his sons went down to Egypt. Why is this particular bit of historical information important to us? It tells us that Esau had no experience in exile, and so he later had no right to Canaan, the Holy Land. But Jacob and his children suffered the yoke of Egypt and so they were rewarded with redemption. Their very exile entitled them to the greatest joy known to any nation in history.

R. Samson Raphael Hirsch saw this idea in a powerful, subtle, and sophisticated interpretation of the famous cry of King David in the Psalms: Eli, Eli, lamah azavtani. We usually translate that, "My God, my God, why hast Thou forsaken me." But, asks R. Hirsch, should not so pious and saintly a Jew as King David accept his lot with love and resignation even to the point of keeping his silence if God forsakes him? He answers that King David was not asking "why hast Thou forsaken me," because then the Hebrew would be madua; the word lamah means not just why, but wherefore. Lamah, for what reason, for what purpose, "wherefore hast Thou forsaken me?" I do not question Your deeds insofar as Your justice is concerned, but what do You want me to do with all of this agony? Suffering must have meaning. My question is therefore: Eli, Eli, my God, my God -- what meaning and purpose does this particular anguish have for me? What am I expected to accomplish with it?

Hasidim tell a charming story. In the very first generation of the movement, there was a great saint known as Der Shpoler Zeide, the Shpoler Grandfather. It happened that at the Seder table, on the first night of Passover, he called upon his youngster to recite the Order of the Service, the kaddesh u-rehatz. In those days -- and even in our days I remember it from my elementary Yeshivah days -- the youngster would not just recite the list of ten items, but explain each one in Yiddish. He would say: kaddesh, "az der tate kumt aheim fun shul, macht er kiddush balt, kdei die kinder zolen nisht shlafen un zei zolen fregin mah nishtanah." Kaddesh means that when father comes home from the synagogue on Passover eve, he must make the kiddush quickly so that the children not fall asleep and that they be able to ask the mah nishtanah. Now, when the Shpoler Zeide invited his son to recite this formula, he did not say the entire thing. Instead, he merely said: "kaddesh, when the father comes home from the synagogue let him make the kiddush immediately." He did not recite the rest, and the father was upset that his son had not been taught the entire explanation of kaddesh.

The next day, at the dinner table, after the morning services of the first day of Pesach, the teacher of the child was present, and said that he did not think that the rest of the recitation was important. At this, the Shpoler Zeide rebuked him and said: You have no idea of the great meaning in this simple little

Yiddish explanation! What does it mean? It refers not only to the father of the house, it refers to the Father in Heaven. When God, our Father in Heaven, leaves the synagogue on Passover eve and He sees His Jews so overcome with fervor and piety, he performs the kiddush -- not the recitation of the kiddush, but kiddushin, marriage. He remarries, rebetrothes the people of Israel. He recites once again the vow of His love for us: v'eraстикh li be'tzeddek u-ve'mishpat be'hessed u-verahamim. And why does He do that? Here the metaphor switches, and Israel is no longer the bride but the child, the yelled shaashu'im, the delightful child of the Almighty Father. God turns to us "so that the children not fall asleep" in their exile (ani yeshenah -- be'galut), so that we do not become moribund and comatose and fall into an everlasting sleep. God seeks us out lest we become "vanishing Jews," lest we disappear in the course of persecution and our own forgetfulness. God wants us, His children, to rise up and to say to Him, mah nishtanah ha'lailah ha-zeh mi-kol ha-lelot, why is this night so different from other nights? Why is this exile so much colder and blacker and longer and more heart-rending and more agonizing than any other exile ever was before? Mah nishtanah ha'lailah ha-zeh does not mean merely, "why is it different," but "wherefore is this night so different, what purpose is served by the exile that is so long and dark, the night that is so endless, the blackness that is so bitter and so frightening?" "Kdei die kinder zolen fregen mah nishtanah" -- God wants us not to question Him, but to inquire after

the purpose of our suffering so that we might use it creatively and nobly.

What a heroic attitude! When we ask the mah nishtanah in this manner, therefore, we are not like the defiant survivor of a storm shaking his fist angrily but vainly at the howling rains, but we are like one who, having survived the winds, abandons the dramatics of raging self-pity and sets about quietly but resolutely rebuilding his home, making it stronger than ever, and learning to appreciate what gifts God has given him. When we do that we temper the bitter with the sweet, the maror with the haroset, and we can survive to enjoy again the bliss of God's goodness. Then we can ultimately learn even to make a berakhah over maror.

Indeed, the beauty of the Seder lies not only in its teaching of the bitter-sweet quality of life and the meaningfulness of suffering, but the further fact that evil itself is a source from which the good can be fashioned! Out of the very fibre of anguish we can weave the fabric of joy. It is interesting that the korbon pesah, the sacrificial Passover lamb, had to be a seh, a lamb -- which very animal was the idol of the ancient Egyptians. Would it not have been more appropriate had we been commanded to offer up a goat or a deer for the paschal lamb? Similarly, matzah must be made from the same hameshet minim, the same five species that when fermented become hametz. But why take the chance of having hametz contaminate our matzah? Why not make matzah out of potatoes or

eggs?

The answer is, we learn that from the avodah zarah itself we are going to fashion the Korbon la-shem. From the very substance that can become hametz, we are going to make matzah; the very stuff of evil will become the means to achieve the good and the holy.

The great Baal Shem Tov put it this way: Ha-ra merkavah le'tov, evil is a chariot which will carry us to the good. Out of evil itself we shall fashion the good life.

Does this not happen often? A man loses a loved one -- a spouse, a child, or a parent -- and he perpetuates the memory of his loved one by building living monuments of education or healing or Torah. From the evil has come the good.

A child is sick, and as a result his parents draw closer to each other and to him than ever before. From the bitterness comes the sweet.

A family loses its fortune and they suddenly must learn, and do learn, to subsist on inner resources of maturity and wisdom that they never knew they possessed. From the hametz comes the matzah.

The only daughter of a cruel, tyrannical Communist dictator who had tried to silence the very mention of God across the length and breadth of the entire globe, suddenly decides that she prefers freedom and self-expression, and turns to God whose Name was not permitted to be spoken in her father's house or her father's land.

It is the ultimate irony of history's inexorable revenge: out of the avodah zarah of Communist Russia, the Pharoah of modern times, there comes forth renewed faith, the korbon pesah of the contemporary age.

Let us therefore learn that life is bitter-sweet, that it is worth making a blessing over it in gratitude for the sweet, that maror itself has meaning and purpose, and that that creative and noble end can be fashioned out of the very stuff of suffering. Such is our destiny in this world. It is a lot that b'nai horin, free men, must accept heroically.

Let me conclude with the unfinished tale of the Shpoler Zeide. After the Rebbe expounded this interpretation of kaddesh and mah nishtanah, all who heard him -- and the Rabbi himself -- began to weep disconsolately. The floodgates had opened to the dam of Jewish woe and travail, and the pent-up anguish of years gushed forth. But then the Rabbi held up his hand and bade his family and friends cease their weeping. "It is true," he said, "that the night is cold, long, and dark, and we do not know why or for what reason or purpose. But when children are frightened by the dark, they sing and they dance to drive the darkness away." And so the Zeide and his Hassidim locked hands, and they sang and they danced and they drove the darkness away.

A people that dips maror into haroset and makes a berakhah over it, is never defeated by fate or by foe. A folk that can find the mellow in a morsel of misery, can drive away the darkness with

its own light, the outer sorrow with the inner joy.

May God grant that we learn for ourselves this bitter-sweet lesson, rising me'avdut le'herut, mi-yagon le'simchah, me'avdut le'herut, mi-yagon le'simchah, me'afelah l'ore gadol, u-mishiabud li'ge'ulah -- from slavery to freedom, from woe to joy, from darkness to light, from exile to redemption.

Ve'nomar lefanav shirah hadashah, let us sing before Him a new song, halleluyah.