

THE ABRAHAM WITHIN US

The Jewish tradition does not promise us that we or our children will survive as Jews. Unfortunately, we simply cannot have blind faith that Jewishness will remain with us forever. Indeed, in our millennial Jewish history, entire communities have disappeared -- beginning with the Ten Tribes, the majority of our people, in Biblical days, and on throughout the various countries of our dispersion. We have no guarantees that any specific family or community will remain Jewish forever.

Indeed, a measure of the losses we sustained, whether by decimation or assimilation, is a calculation by Prof. Salo Baron, which recently was brought to my attention, that had all Jewish communities of the past survived intact, there would today be a world Jewish population of some 200 million!

However, the Jewish tradition does bear us one promise: that Israel as a people will survive -- and not only survive but thrive and flourish and return to its ancient vocation as the am Hashem, the people of God. This is the inner meaning of the concepts of the Messiah and the eternity of Torah and the eternity of the people of Israel.

This means, on the one hand, that we cannot take the future of ourselves and our children for granted and blithely assume that our Jewishness will be effortlessly perpetuated. On the other hand, it tells us never to despair of the future of the

Jewish people and of Judaism itself. Thus, with effort and with a little bit *לעזר ליה"ו*, with some divine help and grace, we can achieve a successful integration of our lives and the lives of our families into the destiny of kelal Yisrael.

This concept of Jewish survival is implicit in our Sidra which tells us of the origins of our people in the person of Abraham. In the very first revelation, the Lord blesses Abraham and concludes with two words that are rather remarkable, *ואתה ארבה* "and be thou a blessing." The Talmud was intrigued by this expression, noticing that it does not say, "and be blessed," but: "and be thou a blessing." The Sages maintained that this meant that Abraham would himself be transformed into a blessing. They took the word berakhah or "blessing" in its formal, technical sense: the kind of blessing that one recites as part of his prayers. Thus, they said: *ואתה ארבה -- בק חותמין*, that when your descendants recite their most important prayer, the Amidah, the first blessing will be concluded with the words *ברוך אתה ה' מלך* *אברהם* "Blessed art thou, O Lord, the Shield of Abraham." Abraham has thus been transformed, verily, into a blessing itself.

What does this mean? What did the Rabbis really want to say? The great Hasidic teacher known as the *חידושי הרי"ם* explains: God promised Abraham that he would always remain in the hearts of his descendants, that some residue or core or vital spark of Abraham himself would always survive in his progeny to the

end of time, and that God Himself would guarantee that survival for He would be the Shield and protect this "Abraham within us," this (as it were) Abrahamitic gene which is passed on *דבר דבר*, from generation to generation. This is the meaning of, "Blessed art thou, O Lord, Shield of Abraham."

Now, there are many prerequisites for such survival, some more obvious and some less obvious. Thus, the triumph of the Abraham within us is enhanced when we live the Jewish way of mitzvot, when we are occupied in the study of Torah, when we engage in a life of good deeds towards our fellow men. If we are fortunate, we succeed in perpetuating this Abraham within us by such deliberate and conscious means of spiritual affirmation. If we are less fortunate, the Abrahamitic spark survives because of, and not despite, adversity and suffering and misfortune. For fundamentally, at bottom, the choice of remaining a Jew, a seed of Abraham, is an act of will, a sheer, irrational, zealous, even fanatic resolve to be and remain a Jew despite all and despite everything.

The Rishonim, the great medieval Jewish Sages, were of two minds as regards the relation of Israel's simple ethnic quality and its spiritual mission. Saadia Gaon believed that our very peoplehood is the consequence of our spiritual calling; were it not for the Torah, we would never have come into being as a separate nation. *אין אומה בלי תורה*, there is no Jewish people without the Torah. However, Rabbi Yehudah Halevi

formulated the issue differently. He believed that the special quality of Israel existed before the giving of Torah. The people of Abraham was a different, great people, and that is why we were given the Torah. In other words, his belief is not that we are Jews because of the Torah, but the Torah was given to us because we are Jews.

Far be it from me to try to resolve an issue disputed by two such giants. Nevertheless, it must be said that the experience of the twentieth century should incline us more to the point of view of Yehudah Halevi. The experience of the State of Israel and hundreds of thousands of individual Jews throughout the world shows us that even those who are not consciously committed to the Torah way nevertheless possess this unyielding resolve to remain Jews even if they do not quite know the meaning of Jewishness. We are Jews, and that is all there is to it. The will to survive as Jews is, for the collective, the equivalent of the instinct for survival for the individual: all normal people strive to survive, and those who don't are sick, and their suicidal tendencies are pathological. The Jew who does not wish to remain Jewish is a sick individual. And this will for survival is elemental, irreducible, and neither can nor need be explained by reference to any other idea or dimension.

We committed Jews must never underestimate this simple desire to continue the line of the Jewish people. What we do claim is that, with all respect to it, it is inadequate without its moral and spiritual dimensions. It is there, it exists, but it is not

satisfying; it is inadequate for people who possess a normal and natural search for meaning in life. And this wholeness of the Jewish people can be achieved only by wedding the instinct for ethnic survival with the great commitment to the Transcendent One Who revealed His world to us through the Torah and the Torah way of life.

But this essential will to continue the Abraham within us, the peoplehood of Israel, is a powerful and even blind one in its refusal to yield and vanish. It will defy oppression, all tyranny, and -- if we be permitted to say so -- it defies even God Himself!

Perhaps the most luminous case recorded in Jewish literature of the power and defiance of this resolve to survive is recorded in the famous Shevet Yehudah by Ibn Virgas, who tells of a number of Spanish exiles aboard a ship, when the plague broke out. The captain expelled the sick passengers on the nearest deserted island. Amongst them was a Jew, his wife, and his two children. When he awoke in the morning, the Jew noticed that his wife was dead and he fainted. When he was revived, he noticed that his two children too were dead. At which he turned his eyes to Heaven and cried out: "אֱלֹהֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל, Master of the world, You have done much to make me forsake my religion. But know faithfully, that in spite of all the powers of Heaven, I am a Jew and I shall remain a Jew, and neither what You have done, nor what You may yet do, will be of any avail in moving me from my resolve." With that, he went

in search of a place to live -- and remained a Jew!

Such is the nature of the Abraham within us. Even when the zera Avraham is abandoned, pursued by Heaven itself, the inner Abraham somehow triumphs, and with this stubborn and obstinate Jewish determination we justify that inner Abraham of which God is the Shield.

But there is really no need to go to the past, whether remote or close, in order to illustrate this point. We have remarkable examples of this Jewish determination in our very own days.

I refer to the experience of Soviet Jewry. Now, do not minimize this spark that has been called to life in our own days. Do not be impressed by the sophisticated cynics who consider the singing and dancing on Simchat Torah behind the Iron Curtain as an unimportant youthful exuberance which simply seeks an outlet. I am not speaking now of its possible influence on Soviet policy -- that is completely beside the point. I am speaking of a remarkable revival of the survival instinct of the Abraham within us.

The first reports of last month's holiday season behind the Iron Curtain are first now beginning to come to us from Western travellers. Because such reports have not been completely collated and have not yet been published, permit me to share them with you.

All of us know from reports in the press, that some 10,000 young people joined the Simchat T_orah celebrations around the Synagogue in Moscow. However, this has no particular, immediate

importance, because Russian authorities generally do not impede Jewish demonstrations in Moscow which they regard as a showcase because of the presence of numerous representatives of the foreign press.

More important is the repression that occurred in other major cities in Communist lands. In Vilna, for instance, the entire Simchat Torah service was condensed into fifteen minutes, and when the crowds of young people came they found the doors padlocked while they milled aimlessly about.

In Leningrad, Jews were warned in the Synagogue on Rosh Hashanah that young people should not gather round about on Simchat Torah. During the Sukkot holiday, a small and insignificant little Sukkah was torn down, lest it appear as a symbol that might inspire Russian Jewish youth. When Simchat Torah came, the police set up barricades. Nevertheless, thousands of young Jews appeared, many of them holding aloft placards protesting anti-Semitism and protesting the ban on emigration to Israel. There were clashes with the people, a number of young people were injured, and others were arrested. Some seasoned, experienced observers of the scene report that there was an incredible upsurge of Jewish self-assertion, Jewish identity, and Jewish pride, exceeding even that revealed in previous years.

In Baku, in one of the Asiatic republics of the Soviet Union on the Black Sea, no young Jews were permitted into the Syna-

gogue throughout the entire holiday season unless they could bring proof that they had finished their military service. On Yom Kippur, only one or two such young Jews qualified to come into the Synagogue. With them there was one young man from Brooklyn, a Day School graduate, and one young girl from England. It was depressing for them, because there were hardly any other young people at the service. But then they looked at the windows and they noticed that thousands of young Russian Jewish boys and girls were milling about the Synagogue, taking turns peeking in through the windows in order to join the service visually if not physically. When the service was over and they left, they were mobbed by the crowds who crushed about them trying to touch them in order to communicate their love and their solidarity with Jews in the Western world, and who cried out to them one word which somehow seemed to be the connecting link: " *ח'ען !* "

So, after two or three generations, after half a century of enforced assimilation, when it seemed that the Abraham within us had withered and died, it has suddenly come to life, revealing its remarkable tenacity, its formidable hold on the Jewish soul in some mysterious, marvelous fashion. Blessed art Thou, O Lord, the Shield of Abraham!

This, then, is the latest illustration of Jewish *התקן*, our incredible resolve to resist all tyranny and all corrosion and all coercion.

The recollection of this quality is of the utmost importance to us American Jews, not only because it encourages us about the fate of Russian Jewry, but also because it should inspire us as to the solution of our own problems. We in America are in trouble too, and our response must be a readiness to risk all for Jewish survival, for the Jewish way, for the totality of our Torah commitment. Our problem, even in the City of New York, is not really that of external anti-Semitism, and certainly not one of a hostile Government. Our problem rather is that of Jewishly ignorant masses, and that of a spineless and silly communal leadership that does not understand that without Jewish education we cannot possibly survive in a free society. Our problem is with our own weariness of spirit and flesh which makes us despair too quickly. Our problem is too our middle-class bias that we must politely accept what the Establishment decrees, our failure to recognize that in an age of militancy the "good guys" must be confident enough to use restrained militancy for the protection and advancement of ^{their} ~~the~~ own ideals and cherished values.

In the words of Isaiah in today's Haftorah (Is. 41:4),
וְיֵשׁוּעַ עַד כִּי יִבְרָא יְיָ, "who hath wrought and done this," who has insured this miraculous survival and this remarkable revival of the will-to-survive in the children of Abraham? -- הוּא אֱלֹהֵינוּ הוּא אֱלֹהֵינוּ He, God, that called the generations from the very beginning, and that 'ere our people began assured that we would thrive to the very end;

אלהים אני יהוה I the Lord Who was with the first generation, with Abraham -- and Who, although His existence and guidance be forgotten for one or two or ten or a hundred generations, אלהים אני יהוה, with the last generations I, God, shall be there, for the "Abraham within us" remains shielded by the S^Hield of Abraham.

Let us, in our own lives, remain always aware of this precious and sacred spark of Abraham within us, and then what was true of our first forefather will be true of us: אלהים אני יהוה, we ourselves shall be transformed into blessings.