

"A JEWISH DILEMMA"
Doing Business with the Russians

I devote my comments this morning to a sensitive moral dilemma that is faced by a number of American Jews. Although most of us are not directly affected, the ethical dimensions of the problem are such that they should interest every Jew, and the social and political aspects may well have consequences for the entire community.

Earlier this week, The New York Times reported that trading with the U.S.S.R. had become an emotional and divisive concern of American Jewish businessmen now that the Soviet government has placed its notorious emigration tax on Jews who wish to emigrate to Israel. The dilemma consists, simply, of the requirements of business on the one hand, against the need to protest this brutal modern form of slavery on the other.

Now, I have an opinion on this problem. I am against dealing with the Russians under these circumstances. I will explain my point of view, argue it, and hopefully I may even convince some of my listeners of its merits. But I wish to say at the outset, that I can understand and sympathize respectfully, even if I cannot agree, with those who experience dilemma and anguish but nonetheless decide to go ahead and do business with the Russians anyway. In addition to any other arguments they may have, they feel that if they do not trade with the Russians, others will anyway. That is not a moral argument, but it has the virtue of integrity. At least it is not hypocritical.

But I have no sympathy, no understanding, no respect -- only derision and contempt -- for those American Jews who imagine themselves fashionably liberal when all they are doing is reviving the vestigial leftism that used to be a dogma in American Jewry. I refer to those people quoted in the Times article who said that whereas they are ready to do business with the Russians under any circumstances, they make clear distinctions between trading with the U.S.S.R. and doing business with the rightist racist regimes such as Greece, South Africa, or Rhodesia. They clearly see the evil in encouraging rightist regimes who oppress blacks or liberals, but they feel no compunction about negotiating commercial deals with the Russians who discriminate against Jews. The same holds true for that inane statement, also quoted in the same article, by an American Jewish businessman who said that he would do business with the Russians, but nevertheless will not allow lettuce to appear on his table, as a sign of protest against the exploitation of Mexican American laborers in the country's Southwest. Now, I

am not commenting on the morality of doing business with the rightist regimes, or with the question of lettuce. But to make such invidious distinctions is shameful, blind, and a particularly disgraceful example of Jewish self-hatred. So I wish to make it clear that I do not speak about such people, for there is nothing to speak about with such anti-Jewish Jews. My remarks are intended, rather, for those who are genuinely perplexed by the moral dilemma with which they are confronted.

The arguments for trading with the Russians are primarily three. First, there is the conviction that such trade will help relax the tensions between East and West, and thus bring peace closer. Second, there is the commonsensical attitude that you cannot do business only with those whose policies you approve of in all areas. Business is essentially a neutral enterprise, and if you begin to check on the moral credentials of your customers or suppliers, if you "examine their "tzitzit," you eventually find the circle of your business contacts shrinking until you can do business with no one but yourself. Third, profit is the heart of the business enterprise, and should be sought without recourse to any other facts.

I agree that there is a measure of justice and truth in these arguments. But I do not accept them under the present circumstances.

It is true that trade is a way of relaxing tensions and leading to international peace. However, I have never believed in peace at all costs. In the face of moral outrage, we are called upon to resist, not to submit; to show indignation and not relaxation. The name "Chamberlain" will always be a reminder that there are times when tension is morally preferable to appeasement. We dare not do anything which will encourage this slave trade. We dare not give dollars to international rouges. We dare not lose this opportunity to save or at least help Soviet Jewry.

Second, I accept that one cannot confine his trading only with those with whom he agrees. But surely there are limits to this doctrine. Would a legitimate businessman want it said that he does business with the Mafia? Would a self-respecting black man casually and callously do business with the Ku Klux Klan? Would a Jew trade with the Nazis? Would an Israeli feel comfortable dealing with El Fatah? One must be able to intuit the limits with a healthy moral sense. I would not, personally, have objected to Jews doing business with the Russians before this tax was levied, no matter how anti-Jewish or anti-Israel the Russians were. But we have now reached a new plateau of anti-Jewish and anti-human activity by the Russians. We have, I submit, crossed

the threshold beyond which trading with the Russians is an act of complicity in their crime.

Third, I well understand the need of the businessman to seek new markets for his products. But a moral man must consider this legitimate interest of profit against factors which may outweigh the profit motive, against moral and religious demands which may prove more compelling.

Let us see what our Torah and tradition have to teach us with regard to our dilemma.

In our Sidra, we read of a war between four kings against five kings. The latter, which included the kings of Sodom and Amora, lost the war, and these two kings and their armies were bogged down in a swamp. Included with them was Lot, the nephew of Abraham and an inhabitant of Sodom. When Abraham, who was a powerful chieftain, heard of the predicament of his nephew, he rallied his allies and went to war to save his nephew. He soundly defeated the previously victorious four kings, and liberated those who heretofore were the losers. Whereupon the king of Sodom approached Abraham and said to him:

וְהַמֶּלֶךְ הַשְּׂדֹמִי אָמַר אֶל אַבְרָהָם, "give me the persons, and you take the goods." He wanted his people returned to him, and was willing to relinquish all his booty and property to Abraham, in recognition of the fact that without Abraham he would have been totally defeated. Here Abraham turns to the king of Sodom and says, in immortal words:

הִנְנִי מֵרִישׁ הָעֵלֶם וְעַד הָאֲחֵרִים לֹא אֶקַּח מֵעֵלֶם וְעַד אֲחֵרִים, וְאַתָּה תִּקַּח אֶת הָעֵלֶם וְאֶת הָאֲחֵרִים. הִנְנִי מֵרִישׁ הָעֵלֶם וְעַד הָאֲחֵרִים לֹא אֶקַּח מֵעֵלֶם וְעַד אֲחֵרִים, וְאַתָּה תִּקַּח אֶת הָעֵלֶם וְאֶת הָאֲחֵרִים.

Abraham raises his hand in oath and says, "I have lifted my hand to the Lord, the highest God, Creator of heaven and earth, that I will take nothing of yours, from a thread to a shoelace, and you shall not say: I have made Abraham rich."

How interesting: Abraham will have no traffic with the king of Sodom, he will not trade with him at all. Yet, in the very next verses, we read of Abraham turning to God and, instead of submitting to Him, he begins to -- haggle with the Almighty! God promises him prosperity, and Abraham retorts: וְהָיָה כִּי אֶתְּנֶה אֶת אֶתְנִי וְאֶתְנִי לְךָ, what can you give me that really counts? God promises Abraham wealth, and Abraham comes back at Him: וְהָיָה כִּי אֶתְּנֶה אֶת אֶתְנִי וְאֶתְנִי לְךָ, but I want children too. God promises Abraham the Land of Israel, and Abraham, like a shrewd and competent businessman, demands guarantees: וְהָיָה כִּי אֶתְּנֶה אֶת אֶתְנִי וְאֶתְנִי לְךָ, how do I know that I will indeed inherit it? A righteous man will do no business

with Sodom. He will negotiate and drive a hard bargain with God, but no traffic with a cruel slave trader. Bartering and huckstering with God are legitimate; but no deals with this ^{לען}, with this cruel man who heads this evil people of Sodom.

Moreover, and more to the point, is the interpretation of Netziv (in his commentary "הנחמה" to the above verse). Why, asks Netziv, did Abraham refuse the ^{לען} or goods of the king of Sodom? After all, we read later of how he freely accepted gifts from the Egyptians and Pharaoh, and then from Abimelech. Also, exactly what is meant by "^{לען}" which we translated, "the persons?"

Netziv points to a Midrash which applies to Abraham a verse from the Prophet Isaiah. Isaiah refers to the righteous man as ^{וְיָרֵם כַּיָּדָיו וְיִסְרֹף}: he shakes his hands, refusing to hold the bribe. The Midrash tells us that when Abraham raised his hand and said ^{וְיָרַם אֲבִרָהָם}, I lift my hand in oath, he in effect was refusing to accept graft from the king of Sodom!

What this means, Netziv tells us, is that when Abraham won the war, he freed all -- kings and subjects, soldiers and slaves. Upon being emancipated, the slaves of the King of Sodom refused to return to their former master for they knew from their bitter experience how cruel a slave-holder he was. They therefore asked Abraham to keep them free. But the King of Sodom wanted his slaves. And so he turned to Abraham and said:

^{תן לי את אנשי} -- give me my persons, i.e., my slaves, I want them back; and, as a reward to you, I am willing to give you the goods. In other words, the King of Sodom was offering Abraham a bribe to be allowed to keep his slaves, but Abraham refused: no slavery and no business! No ransom and no profit! A Jew cannot be bought.

This is what Abraham would say today, and this is what the descendants of Abraham must answer now. Until this exorbitant ransom was demanded by the Russians, the injustices against the Jews did not cross the threshold of moral outrage. It was still possible to do business with them. Now we are in a qualitatively different situation. Now to trade ^{לען}, to buy the goods of Russia or sell them what we have, will result in muting the criticism of American Jewish leadership, especially businessmen, against the contemporary Sodomite king who wants our ^{לען}, our souls, our people, as his slaves. But an American-type attitude must be: no deals! We will not be a partner to such a scandal against our own brethren. When Russia keeps its Jews and offers to trade with American Jewish businessmen, it is

If we put profit first, gentiles throughout the world and especially in the United States will say, with a large measure of justice, that Jews are ready to pressure the President and Congress to forego American interests in order to get the Soviets to relent on their Jewish policy, but Jews themselves will do nothing if it hurts their pockets. What a *חלול השם !*

But if we are strong and courageous and of tough moral fiber, our response will be a true *קדושת השם*, a sanctification of God's Name.

The descendants of Abraham can do no less, at this juncture of history, than be *עם שומרי אברהם* by telling the Russians: *וזהו אלהינו אברהם*. You cannot bribe us into silence. Our wealth will come from other, cleaner sources. We are the children of Abraham.

Neither our brethren nor our consciences are for sale.