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TALE OF A KVITTEL • "UP AND OVER"

TOWARD A THEOLOGY OF SOCIAL SERVICE

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"Up and Over"

*Lessons from the World Conference**

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IN TERMS of goals it had set for itself, the recent World Conference of Orthodox Ashkenazi and Sephardi Synagogues was undoubtedly a success. It was the first opportunity of our times for Orthodox Jewish leadership of countries throughout the world to meet with each other, take measure of each other, counsel with each other, share problems and solutions, and encourage one another. In this respect, the Conference achieved its goals eminently well.

What emerged from these deliberations were two centers of concern, which we might designate by two Hebrew words which have one common origin: *aliyah* (עלייה) and *hithaluth* (התעלות) both of which come from the Hebrew root, *aloh*, which means: to go up. By this we mean, that the dual concerns of the Conference were Aliyah, the problem of literally emig-

rating to Israel from all over the world, and Hithaluth, the act of self-improvement, self-transcendence, self-elevation in Jewish commitment and in loyalty to Torah.

IT IS interesting that both these concepts, of Aliyah and Hithaluth, are discovered by one commentator, Abarbanel, in one word of the Biblical narrative about Israel in the infancy of its history. When the Pharaohs of Egypt became anxious about the growth of the Jewish community and its prosperity, they decided to scheme against the Israelites for fear that they were growing too strong, and because of the suspicion that in case of war they would join the enemy and *v'alah min ha-aretz*, which literally means: "And he will go up from the land." Normally, this is taken to mean that the Pharaohs feared that in case of crisis the Jews would leave Egypt and go on Aliyah to the Land of Israel, much in the same way that the Com-

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munist commissars of Soviet Russia are today worried that if they will open the doors and allow the Iron Curtain to part, that most of the Jewish community of Russia might emigrate to the State of Israel. Abarbanel, while agreeing with this interpretation, adds one other insight. He maintains that the phrase can also be interpreted as "they will rise beyond the rest of the land." He interprets the word *min* not as derivative, "from," but comparative, "than." The concern of the Pharaohs was not only that the Jews would perform Aliyah and go up from the land of Egypt, but that they would experience *hithaluth* and that they would rise in their stature and in their quality *beyond* the rest of the population, they would become greater *than* the rest of the Egyptian population.

What bothered the Pharaohs, bothered us: the twin problems of Aliyah and Hithaluth. At the risk of sounding frivolous, we might say that our attention was directed to the questions of Jews going "over" to Israel, and of growing "up" in the quality of their commitment—"up and over" being the antidote to "down and out."

The foremost impression that one takes away from even a brief tour of the State of Israel, provided that one has paid attention not only to seeing places but also to meeting people, is the seriousness with which Israelis take the entire question of Aliyah. There is little doubt in my mind that we have paid far too little attention to it, assuming unconsciously that when the Israelis speak of Aliyah they are engaged in a kind of ritualistic war dance in which they do not really mean for us to take them with any earnestness. But that is clearly not the case. The

Israelis desperately need us; and we need them even more.

Only 17% of world Jewry now lives in the State of Israel; yet it is there, to use the current colloquialism, "where the action is." Chief Rabbi Unterman was quite right when he told the Conference that whereas the *rov minyan* of world Jewry is in America, the *rov binyan* is in Israel; that is, that while the majority quantitatively resides in the United States, the qualitatively weightiest group, which will decide the destiny of our people, is the Jewish community of the State of Israel. Jewish history will be written, and is being written, primarily there, not here. And no one should be so self-effacing and modest as to confine himself forever to the margins and periphery of the arena where history is being forged and molded.

I have no solution to offer on the Aliyah question; our best minds have not yet devised a proper answer to the question. I know that if the tables were reversed, and we would be in Israel and demand of the people now in Israel to come on Aliyah, they would have the same hesitation and reluctance that we experience because of practical matters. But that does not and should not allow us to escape confronting the problem squarely and acknowledging that we must give great weight to the challenge, especially as orthodox Jews. We dare not cut down our ideology to conform to the limitations of current circumstances. We dare not develop a theory of Jewish life which will do away with Aliyah in order to satisfy practical considerations—for then we will have abandoned Orthodoxy. Great deeds are demanded of us, deep thinking is the challenge of the hour. We must no longer treat Aliyah as a pipedream or

as a piece of perfunctory Israeli propaganda not deserving of our serious attention. It may be true that it is unlikely that the generation now ensconced in the business and professional life of this country will perform this mitzvah; but this does not excuse us from so raising the next generation that it will be possible for them to perform Aliyah without the difficulties that face us.

FROM the first problem, that of Aliyah, we proceed to the second center of concern, Hithaluth. The most dramatic case of Hithaluth, or Jewish improvement, I find in Israel itself.

I confess: there was a time when I all but despaired of the secular majority in the State of Israel. Religion had been so subject to the extreme politicization that is endemic to the country; antireligiousness was rampant to such an extent; the belligerence against Torah was so doctrinaire; the machinery of Israel's religious establishment was so antiquated—that there was little reason at all for optimism or encouragement. I saw the major, if not the exclusive hope for a Jewish renaissance in the United States.

I have now revised my opinion. I know that all is not well. Those in Israel who are spiritually insensitive will probably remain obtuse and coarse. The religious establishment is, unfortunately, still largely ineffective in reaching out to the great majority of the alienated Jews of Israel. But I detect a new spirit since last June, a sense of apocalyptic fulfillment, a feeling of the imminence of Messianic days, an awareness that we have passed a threshold in Jewish history, that we

have crossed a watershed in the story of our people.

Great opportunities are ripening for a mature and enthusiastic approach—by an orthodox Jewry which does not want to segregate itself but wants to live in this world—to the heretofore alienated Israelis.

Permit me to share with you an experience which, in a manner of speaking, was even more moving than that fabulous Friday night Kabbalath Shabbath at the Western Wall.

Quite by accident, we took advantage of the opportunity to pay a visit to a kibbutz, which is one of the northernmost outposts of the State of Israel, on the Lebanese and not far from the Syrian border. The terrain is mountainous and rough, and the members of this agricultural commune must work hard and long hours in order to prosper. Our conversations for these several hours were held with a few people, especially one who was "the old man" of the kibbutz, who had celebrated his 40th birthday only two days earlier. All members of this settlement, which was founded only eighteen years ago by young men and women in their late teens and early twenties, were the children of anti-religious socialist idealists of the Kibbutz movement. But in this particular kibbutz, the children had moved beyond the sterile positions of their parents.

For instance, this kibbutz is non-kosher; but they use only kosher meat. Only recently they had introduced a kind of Kabbalath Shabbath service, which included the recitation of *va-yechulu* and the communal reading of the Sidrah of the week. At this time we tried to persuade them to include the Kiddush as well; I believe they will accept this recommen-

dation. The members of the kibbutz encourage only religious ceremonies for their weddings. Their thirteen-year old boys are now taken, as a matter of course, to nearby Safed for their Bar Mitzvah, and they have developed the charming custom of informing each child on his Bar Mitzvah day of his whole family history, as far back as it can be traced into the glories of the Jewish past.

Perhaps most interesting, though tragic to relate, is the following illustration of the difference between the two generations: several months ago one of their members had been killed by accident by a guard who mistook him for a Syrian infiltrator. He was the first person to be buried on their cemetery. The father of the slain kibbutznik, himself a member of an older, well established, thoroughly anti-religious kibbutz, refused on principle to recite the Kaddish at his son's funeral. However, his younger son, who was likewise a member of the younger kibbutz, as well as his friends, did recite the Kaddish!

THE finest indication of the truly religious mood of this young generation is the attitude they evinced in the conversations. A question they persistently directed at us was, "How is it that we were privileged to achieve such a victory?" That question deserves to be studied well. Usually, when Jews turn to a rabbi with a question of this sort, it is just the reverse: "Rabbi, why did G-d punish me so much?" But these young and brave men and women put the question the other way around: "Rabbi, why was G-d so good to us?" This is clearly indicative of a profoundly religious stirring that deserves our utmost attention. There is a gracious

humility and spiritual sensitivity under the tough Sabra exterior.

There was, however, one jarring note during this visit that bothered me especially much because of its symbolic significance. It is, I believe, instructive and worthy of pondering. Two of the kibbutzniks produced for us a Mezuzah each, birthday gifts from their wives. They were anxious to affix them properly, with the appropriate blessings, for they would be the first to be seen there. Both of us—the Israeli rabbi who accompanied us, and I—were delighted by the opportunity, and I had the sense of participating in a historic act. My Israeli colleague had the presence of mind to examine the Mezuzah scrolls within the metal tubes before proceeding. They were, alas, completely *pasul*, invalid; they did not even bear the proper Biblical passage, the Shema!

It is a frightening symbolic portent of what may come to pass if we are not sufficiently alert and active. The new thirst for Judaism may be slaked by impure waters. There is no guarantee that a genuine quest for G-d and Torah and tradition will be satisfied by authentic Judaism. The generation that may shortly be returning to Judaism is long on integrity and short on knowledge. Unless we and our colleagues in Israel are there to fill the spiritual void with the Torah tradition, others may rush in from all over the Diaspora to fill it with the truncated and distorted versions of Judaism that have plagued us in America. If we do not provide a kosher scroll for the Israeli who seeks a Mezuzah, someone will surely provide him with one that is *pasul*—and much less expensive, taxing, and inconvenient. Whether we are presently geared to reach out to such individuals, to en-

gage them in meaningful dialogues, to convince them of the integrity of the religious tradition we represent—that I do not know. I do know that it will be futile to use force or legislation or pressure to prevent our competitors from making their sales-pitch. We shall have to make a convincing case of our own—although I wonder which groups within the religious community in Israel are both willing and able to execute this task and do it well.

So there is an incipient Hithaluth in Israel, and it is obvious in this small portion of the population, those who live on the kibbutzim, who are the most sensitive idealists and the pace-setters for the rest of Israel. And despite the dangers, this is a wonderful and encouraging development for which we ought to be grateful.

DOES this mean that we should give up on the Golah? No. I disagree with those Israelis who have despaired of the future of Judaism in the Diaspora. I do not believe that love for Israel and the encouragement of Aliyah to Israel should be dependent upon a negative view of Jewish life in the Diaspora. On the contrary, only if there is true Hithaluth amongst Jews in the Diaspora, can we ever expect a substantial Aliyah of these Jews to Israel. If our contacts with the Israelis at the World Conference showed *their* Hithaluth, the very fact of the World Conference was an indication of *our* Hithaluth. Organized Orthodoxy in the United States has come of age, in that it has finally seen fit to meet with orthodox Jews of similar disposition throughout the world, despite all the opposition which was quite inane and at times ugly. We broadened our horizons. We

learned to appreciate the different circumstances in different Jewish communities. The element of Hithaluth was evident to anyone who saw the impression that was made upon the large and influential French delegation, or upon the courage that was given, for instance, to that lonely young Rabbi of the dwindling Jewish community of Athens.

There is a great need for further such contacts and more such meetings, without fear and always with dedication. Without ever neglecting our local needs, we must strengthen our bonds with the Jews all over the world, and they are the bonds of Torah. But especially important is the continuing interplay and interaction between American and Israeli orthodox Jews. Together we must strive for spiritual Hithaluth and for actual Aliyah.

IN the interesting debate between G-d and Moses, when Moses is reluctant to accept his prophetic mission, G-d tells Moses that his brother Aaron is coming towards him. "And he will see you and he will be happy in his heart." Aaron will experience inner joy upon meeting his beloved brother Moses. Yet the Rabbis found an oblique source for criticism of Aaron in this verse. They say, if only Aaron had known that the Torah would record for all posterity his emotional reaction upon meeting Moses, then he would not have been satisfied with experiencing joy in his heart, but he would have greeted Moses with a whole band of drums and fifes.

We live in a time of *ha-kathuv machtivo*, of Biblical proportions and Scriptural dimensions. The challenge to us is historic and will be recorded for all times. Good will and fine intentions about Israel and Judaism are

simply inadequate. To be "happy in the heart" simply will not do.

There are times when history turns a telescope upon a particular period. At such times, our actions, our movements, our achievements, are meaningful only in the perspective of the great flux of world events which have their origin in the dim past and their climax in the remote future; but our actions by themselves, in a small segment of time, are fairly inconsequential and meaningless.

But there are times when history turns not a telescope but a microscope upon a particular epoch. At such times, every action, every gesture, every deed, almost every word, assumes gigantic proportions. In a period of this kind, whatever we do is invested with enormous significance by itself for all of history.

Today is a period of history's micro-

scope. *Ha-kathuv machtivo*—it is almost a period of Biblical magnificence, when all that we say and do and achieve is of the greatest significance, when our failures are catastrophic and our successes are enduringly illustrious.

ONE can hardly blame us, in this first year of *Yisrael Ha-shelemah*, the "Whole Israel" of historic dimensions, for experiencing great joy in our hearts. But this joy must not remain in our hearts. It must rise up out of the heart, and pull us up with it. It must *rise* to the occasion.

We must take counsel on how our community can achieve "up and over," how we can literally rise to Israel in Aliyah, and at the same time rise to a life of Torah and Mitzvoth and Jewish spirituality in ever increasing Hithaluth.

