

THE JEWISH NOTION OF PARADISE

1. This morning we are going to discuss the Jewish Notion of Paradise. But when we say "Paradise", we do not mean refer to the Paradise after death, to what is technically known as OLAM HA'BA, or the world-to-come. We speak, rather, of the GAN EDEN HA'TACHTON, the earthly Paradise. For Paradise is here, on earth, even as the Bible this morning goes out of its way to indicate that Eden is a very real place, filled with delights of all kinds. GAN EDEN, as we use it this morning, and as Jewish thinking understands it, is, in essence, a way of life, a real utopia, Paradise is even more than a spot on the globe. It can be the globe itself. We speak of the Paradise which Life is, or can be.
- \* 2. Well, what is Paradise? Conceptions of it differ ~~as we~~ differ one from the other even as men's minds and hearts and personalities differ one from the other. What is Paradise to one person is Hell to another. What is Gehennom to me may be Gan Eden to another. Yet there are certain distinct notions as to what G.E. - which in Bible indicates the this-worldly paradise - consists of.
  - a) the Moslem Paradise. A cosmic harem with an infinite supply of wine, women and song. Physical pleasures and material plentitude, sensuous delights and bodily gratification - this is Paradise for the Moslem.
  - b) the American Indian Paradise. The brave charging down an infinite hunting ground, mounted upon a swift white steed, with an inexhaustible supply prize beasts to hunt.
  - c) The modern man's paradise. Builds on above, and includes: sit on soft couch, feet on desk, snip off plum with right hand, apple with left, big long straw to sip all kinds liquid without having to get off seat, TV set one corner, convertible Caddillac for fast drive Riviera, triple-split level ranch-home, and end to income tax.
- \* 3. No one can deny that all these things are pleasurable, and, when pursued with moderation, are acceptable from Jewish point-of-view. Talmud (Brachot 57): SHLOSHAH MARCHIVIN DAATO SHEL ADAM, 3 things give a person peace of mind and wholesome delight, DIRAH NA'EH, ISHAH NA'AH, VE'KEILIM NA'IM, a beautiful home, a pleasant wife, and handsome clothing, or other items of comfort and luxury.
- \* Yet this certainly - most certainly - is not the entirety of our concept of a Paradise. This certainly is not the goal for which a Jew must strive. This is not the final Jewish good and end-all.

If it were, then Adam would have stormed the gates of Eden, tried with all his might to get in. Instead, our Rabbis tell us (Midrash ha'nebelam, eichah 91): BA'MEH LAKCHO, BI'DVARIM, G-d had to persuade Adam to come into Eden. Certainly, if Eden were a composite of those worldly pleasures we enumerated - and nothing more - then no human being would have to be "coaxed" or "persuaded" to enter its luxurious portals. There is something else involved in this Paradise, something which gives it its special Jewish flavor, quality.
4. What is this special element? Why did Adam have to be coaxed into Paradise? What makes a Jewish G.E. out of an earthly Paradise? Bible this morning answers it in 2 words: LE'AVDAH U'LE'SHAMRAH. To work it and to watch it. That is the fundamental difference between our and other's conceptions of Paradise, of the good and best and finest life.
5. LE'AVDAH. To work it. Work, labor, according to the Biblical conception, can be more than sweet or dignified. It can be the major essence of an earthly Paradise.

There was once a time in America - in the days of our parents or even in the memories of some of us - when the work day was so long and bitter and hard that it became a first rate Mitzvah to fight for a shorter work day. Jews were prominent together with other Americans in gaining the shorter work day. It was most necessary.

But today, now that we have the shortest work day in history, and less than any other people, we find that there is also a danger in the lack of work. It is something that has caused the downfall of more than one home. I refer, of course, to the leisure hours given to modern man by scientific research, industrial progress and social legislation. He has so much leisure and he knows not what to do with it. He is bored to death. And that product of leisure, boredom, is one of the most dangerous plagues in this country. Boredom causes:

- a) infidelity. The husband with too much time on his hands, speeds his feet to the wrong places. The wife whose home is run by mechanical gadgets is bored by her long hours of boredom, and the results can break the home and drag it down.
- b) gambling. Perhaps it is part of the social scheme of the modern age. But even when limited, in moderation. But boredom has made it more than a social custom. It has made it a scourge. Typical Jewish resort hotel - gambling is an all day affair. Excuse: "have nothing else to do".

No, when there is too little work, there is too much boredom - & results catastrophic. Paradise, without work & with boredom - can become something much worse.

6. Hope the pulpit will be forgiven if, in the interests of illustration of a weighty point, we become somewhat frivolous. Story old ast Side peddler, worked very hard all life, never made a decent living. Dies, taken to beautiful castle, rolling hills, golf course, most luxurious room, push-button service, just ring bell and well-groomed butler gets you anything heart desires. Takes it all in for number of weeks, life of supreme luxury. Finally, rings for servant, "Yes?" "Look, I'm getting bored. There's a limit to doing nothing. Immediately, now, without delay, I want you to get me something to do. I want some work." "Sorry, it's only thing you can't get here" "Why, if that's the case, I'd rather be in the other place, in GEHINNOM". "But, sir, where did you think you are?" Boredom, lack constructive work, makes a Hell out of a Paradise.
7. Granted, then, that boredom is an unsubtle, direct and terrible danger. But does LE'AVDAH, to work, and LE'SHAMRAH, to watch, mean that the Jewish notion of Paradise is built on labor alone? Does it mean that happiness can be achieved only by drudgery? Certainly not! When a man works seven days a week, and has no time for himself or his wife or his family, when he drives himself as one would a team of oxen, when he knows no rest, no respite for social contact, and especially no respite from his work for creative thinking, for religious introspection, for spiritual devotion and for his synagogue and people, then neither Judaism nor any sane person regards that man as being in Paradise. Quite the contrary. Rabbis (Midrash Rabba, Breshit, 16) explained these two words as follows: LE'AVDAH - from SHEISHESH YAMIM TA'AVOD, 6 days of constructive labor, then LE'SHAMRAH - from SHAMOR ESS YOM HA'SHABOS LE'KADSHO, the 7th day a day of rest for sanctification, made holy by observance of Shabbos. The Jewish Paradise results from intelligent work-distribution, from observing a Sabbath so that on Sabbath can appreciate the dignity and nobility of my work on 6 days, and during week anticipate and appreciate the dignity with which Sabbath invests whole week, the spirituality and elevation of all of life. Then man can look forward to a worldly Paradise.
8. And not only "work" as we usually use the word is the constituent of Paradise. The Talmud adds a more novel interpretation: (Sifri, Ekev, 41): LE'AVDAH...ZEH TALMUD, LE'SHAMRAH ... ELU HA'MITZVOS. To work means to study, to watch means to observe the Torah. There is no more productive and enjoyable labor in the world than study. It is the true Paradise. Perhaps because we have forgotten this fact that Jews feel such an emptiness in their lives. Einstein: Jews don't feel respect to their learning. 1/3/11.

No one in this synagogue this morning who cannot spare  $\frac{1}{2}$  hour a day for serious reading, thinking, study. Torah not given only to scholars, Rabbis. What a Paradise it would be if we would be a bit more serious, elevated, study - and if it would result in just a bit more Torah-type living, LE'SHAMRAH! That kind of working and that kind of observing can do more than eliminate boredom - it can make a Heaven of a Hell, a Paradise of an otherwise prosaic and dull existence.

9. And what happened when Adam was rejected from this Eden? What happened when he failed to achieve the LE'AVDAH ULESHAMRAH in the way G-d had demanded? G-d chased him and his wife out of Paradise. And our Sages (Tanhuma Yashan, Breshit, 25) explain SHE'BI'SHVILO CHARAV BEIS HA'MIKDASH, because of Adam the Temple, many centuries later, was destroyed, and therefore G-d was incensed at Adam and expelled him. Most certainly, the vulgarity and baseness born and bred on the soft and rotting couch of boredom can destroy a Temple; it has and does eat its way into the very life of our most sacred institutions.

- a) It is no secret that try as we will, the "content" or "program" of so many worthy organizations is centered about "entertainment". And what kind of entertainment? Usually, the cheapest and vulgarest kind. "That's what the people want" we are told. "The people" evidently, have no conception of what Paradise really is. They think, like our peddler, that they are in it when they are really in a very different place. SHE'BI'SHVILO CHAREV BEIS HAMIKDASH. More than one sacred institution has gone to destruction because of this lack of LEAVSAH....
- b) And how about the synagogue itself? How do modern statisticians, or - let us be frank - most ordinary Jews judge the success or significance of a synagogue? By number of people at service? By quality of their devotion and piety? By service to humanity? No. The criterion for the MIKDASH is the number of people who listen to the imported vaudevillians, the quality of the playlets and the dances run, and the attendance at the card-parties. CHURBAN BEIS HAMIKDASH!

10. In essence, then, the Jewish goal, the J Paradise, is, like most conceptions, a place of happiness etc. But, we are always aware of the danger of idleness, and so we add the element of WORK. But work does not mean drudgery. It requires the sanctification of Shabbos. And work also means active intellectual creativity. It means study and it means the observance of Mitzvos.

11. Perhaps all we have said can be summarized in the words of the sage, Rav Acha (Midrash Rabba, Koheleth): the distance between Gan Eden and Gehennom, between Paradise and Hell, is very narrow. The distance is one TEFACH, the size of a fist. If man is willing to clench his fist and work hard, achieve LE'AVDAH; if he is willing to open it and extend his help to others and thus observe LE'SHAMRAH; then he can make of Gehinnom a Gan Eden, and of all earth a Paradise.

Only then can Adam truly become a man; and man - human,