

"LET MAN BEGIN"

The leitmotif of the entire High Holiday season, and especially this Shabbat Shuvah, was expressed by the prophet Malachi:

שׁוּבוּ אֵלַי וְאֶנִּי שׁוּבוּ אֵלֵיכֶם, "Return to Me, and I will return to you." The prophet Zechariah said the very same thing in almost identical words. Indeed, the Rabbis taught that all prophets ultimately prophesied about נִשְׁתַּחֲוֶה (repentance), and all of them present us with modifications of the same theme. They seem to teach that נִשְׁתַּחֲוֶה is not a one-way street, that there is a mutuality or a reciprocity of repentance. They imply that man returns to God and God returns to man.

How did they envision the mechanics of this divine-human process? What did they mean by these words?

Permit me to explain by referring, first, to the concluding verse of the special psalm that is recited during this season. David says: חַזַק יְהוָה וְהוּא יַעֲזֶרְךָ "Be strong and He will make you strong." Is this not redundant?

What David is saying is that first you, man, must be חַזַק, strong; only afterwards יְהוָה יַעֲזֶרְךָ, will God make you strong.

This is based upon a great Jewish idea concerning the relationship between man and God. God was never conceived as a cosmic genie locked up in an infinitely large bottle, and whose powers can be evoked by magical incantations. Man's religious acts are not theurgical gestures, by which he can manipulate a naive Deity. What Judaism taught, essentially, is that God acts not so much on behalf of man, as through man.

"God help^s those who help themselves" is a good Jewish principle. The Rabbis put it this way: אִם יִשְׁתַּחֲוֶה אִישׁ לַיהוָה, if one wants to be pure, and does something about it, then he will be helped from Heaven. Man must begin with חַזַק, then יְהוָה יַעֲזֶרְךָ, God will give him strength. First man must find his own sources of power and consolation and comfort, and then the Lord will build upon it.

This teaching has a certain contemporary relevance because of the well-publicized so-called "Humanist Manifesto II," a newly revised document signed by a number of distinguished liberals, including several Jews, one of them a person who considers himself an "atheistic rabbi." One of the most amazing things in this manifesto is a statement by the Humanists that they have courageously decided to abandon the theistic notion that there is a God, because religious folk leave all their problems to be solved by God, whereas Humanists are brave and independent and have decided to solve their own problems. Since the challenges that face us in the world today are too many to shove off on to some non-existent Deity, therefore the Humanists want everyone to understand that it is we who have to solve our own problems.

Bravo! But these noble sounding sentiments are absolutely trivial. I can not believe that people of such scholarship as those who signed this document do not know more about the nature of religion. I cannot help but assume that there is here a deliberate misinterpretation of the religious message, and perhaps an unintentional blindness to the magnificence of religious teaching. Do these people really believe that the Western religions taught man to leave everything to God? Did ~~it~~ not Islam use the sword, and not leave to Allah the conversion of mankind to the religion of Muhammad? Were Christians really so passive as to leave the conversion of the Western world to the mysterious workings of the God of love, or did they actively proselytize? Did not the rise of capitalism and industrial revolution have something to do with Christian religion? And in so far as Judaism is concerned, I believe I have known a number of pious Jews in my lifetime, yet all of them worked for a living, took out insurance policies, and despite unbounded faith in God never failed to secure their lives and the lives of their families in the best way they could. It is true that there is a quietistic note in the symphony of Judaism, and it is an important one. But never did it achieve great prominence in practical life, except for a brief time in certain political conceptions amongst a small group of Jews. So, I do not know if the signers of this manifesto are primarily malicious or naive, but one thing I know: they are wrong.

The Jewish conception that man must initiate action in the world can be seen in a number of areas. For instance, the most significant miracle reported in the Bible is the splitting of the Red Sea. Yet the sea did not split until -- as the Rabbis taught -- one man, *אֶלְיָשִׁיב בֶּן אֶלְיָשִׁיב*, the prince of Judah, went into the water until it reached his nostrils, ready to give his life. Only then did God help and perform the miracle.

The beautiful miracle of Hanukkah, in which the little bit of oil burned not for one day but for eight days, proves the same thing. There could never have been a miracle if some anonymous High Priest did not have the foresight and perspicuity to put away a cruse of sealed pure oil. Only because there was something to begin with, for at least one day, could God have executed the miracle of extending it to eight days. This, indeed, is what the Zohar taught -- and one would expect that the Kabbalah or mysticism would be the last place to look for an affirmation of activism, -- that *אין כח באלוהים אלא בזה העולם*, that no miracle can be effected except on a natural base, when man has begun.

So let man begin, then God will do His work.

The same holds true in the biblical and rabbinic view of medicine. We know that there are a number of fundamentalist sects which do not approve of the use of medicine and surgery. Often we laugh at them, but if we are fair we will recognize that there is in them a logical consistency with the religious premise. Perhaps that is what is wrong with them -- that they are too consistent! If we believe that God is a Master of the world, then indeed how dare we change His decree or rule, and if He decreed that one be sick, by what right do we interfere in the process and heal him? The Rabbis recognize the apparent justice of this argument and therefore pointed to two Biblical words which are the warrant for our right to interfere: *והוא ירפא*, that man shall heal. The Rabbis added: *הרופא כעובד כבוד*, from this we know that the physician has the right to exercise the healing arts. So the physician may interfere in the natural design. But Nahmanides deduces from this that once we have established that it is permissible to interfere, it automatically and immediately becomes obligatory to do so! The principle of *לפניו*, the commandment to preserve and enhance life, makes it not only *רשות* but *חובה*, not only permission but obligation to heal and cure. God is the ultimate Healer, but man must always take his ^step first. We must initiate the concern and activity for health and only then can God help.

Perhaps this is what Daniel meant when he said, in a quaint verse, *לחכמים תתן חכמה*, "He gives wisdom to the wise." Wisdom is a divine gift, and far too precious to waste on fools! Only if man exerts himself and exercises his own intellectual potential, will God grant him wisdom and understanding. *אין חכמה אלא ללמד*, "You grant to man knowledge." God gives knowledge only if you are an *אדם*, a mentsch, a real, authentic human being. Fools are not deserving of wisdom. That is why they are fools.

Thus we may understand the nature of שבת, יום ראשון, יום ראשון, what the prophets tried to teach us about the mechanics of repentance. The penitent acts not only out of contrition and disgust with his former behaviour. Even a secularist, if he is moral and ethical, can experience this '13, and אדם וחוה. A secularist as well as a religionist can feel repelled by his own past, that he has soiled his personality, that he has failed miserably, and that he now wants to change the direction and course of his life. What distinguishes the religious man in this act of penitence is his hope that once he emerges from the quandry of sin that he will be reconciled with God, that there will be a reciprocal turn of God to him, that somehow his faith will be vindicated, that he will feel some responsive motion from above, that his search and his yearning and his nostalgia will be answered and not rejected. He thirsts for some experience, some response, some awareness that God is listening.

Thus the prophets tell us that only if you first return to Him, will He return to you; only if first man performs '1, אדם, can he expect that God will perform אדם, אדם.

In this conception, אדם thus becomes a minuet of moral rehabilitation; man takes the first step to his God, then God takes a short step to man. Next, man takes another step to God, and God approaches man ever more closely, until they can hope that eventually there will come true communion in the act of great spiritual reconciliation.

This, then, is the choreography of repentance, of reconciliation, and of moral renaissance. אדם, אדם, אדם, let man begin.