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"PAST, PRESENT, AND FUTURE --
A JUBILEE PERSPECTIVE"

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by

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I did not
include these
here. They were
never followed

A jubilee anniversary for an institution no less than for an individual is an occasion for brooding reflection. It is a time for both retrospective and prospective assessment, for pulling out of the hurly-burly of daily events and viewing one's life from a wider perspective than is usually given to us.

I shall therefore take this opportunity of the fiftieth birthday of the RCA to reflect on our current situation according to the paradigm of the three tenses -- Past, Present, and Future. I intend to speak not about the R.C.A in these three time segments, but rather to analyze how we have gone about handling these tenses themselves.

Let us begin with our host culture -- the U.S.A. In its politics, its technology, and especially its psychology, America is a Future-oriented culture. Hence, its emphasis on youth -- even in a period when its population is aging and should be more concerned with geriatrics than pediatrics. Its greatest strength is: the Present. The mightiest (and most benevolent) power in the world, it is thoroughly immersed in the here-and-now. It is pragmatic, empirical, and business-like.

However, its great weakness is -- the Past. Because of its relatively brief history -- a mere 210 years -- America's valuation of its past as a factor in the Present, its historical consciousness, is remarkably tenuous and deficient. In a sense, it is still a pioneer country eager to throw off the shackles of the Old World and build a new one. Consider this: What for an ordinary American child is early history -- the 1770's -- is for a Jewish school-child late Jewish history, the period of the Acharonim!

The most poignant and painful illustration of this characteristic American insensitivity to history is the incredible brouhaha of the Reagan administration -- not of one man, an honorable and decent President, but a whole team of so-called experts -- because they did not appreciate events of only 40 years ago, events of the most recent past. The President wanted to forget the Past (hence his initial refusal to visit Dachau), help Kohl in the Present, and fortify the reconciliation between America and West Germany in the Future. But the Past has returned to stake its claim with a vengeance. Bitburg will long remain in American history -- if Americans in the future ever learn to consult history! -- as a testament to the indigenous failure of American culture to appreciate, confront, and consult the Past.

Let us now turn to the Jewish community and see how we fare in relation to the various tenses.

It is my sad contention that, no matter how they relate to Past and Present, the non-Orthodox groups have failed miserably in their vision of and hence responsibility towards the Future.

Nowhere is this more apparent than in the area of yichus. From the inception of Jewish history, when Abraham pleaded for and then was promised posterity; through Ezra, who undertook the painful task of breaking up families to ensure the Jewishness of Jews for all time to come; through the codification of all the halakhot dealing with marriage and divorce and yibbum and chalitzah -- our concerns were centered on securing the Future. Jewish parents sacrificed every

comfort and convenience to give their children a Jewish education - because of the Future. They became private investigators of geneology -- to make sure their children married spouses who would ensure them a Jewish Future. Poskim decided halakhic questions as they came to them with reverence and meticulousness but with relative dispatch; but when it came to problems which impinged on the Future, questions of mamzerut and Jewish identity -- they "sat shivah nekiim" and consulted and worried the question to death.

And it is precisely here, in this extremely vital dimension of Judaism and Jewish folk psychology, that Reform declared its bankruptcy. Reform produced great historians. It exercised vast influence over much of the Present through its organizational ability, its grasp of political trends, its involvement with the currents of the times. But it was blind to the consequences of its actions. It had no vision of the Jewish Future and the havoc it was creating for it. It abandoned gittin -- and gave no thought as to how the Jewish people would remain united if their descendants would be illegitimate and asurim la-vo be'kahal. It effectively cast away the requirements of gerut -- and made every descendant of its Temple members suspect for marriage with traditional Jews. Its refusal to discipline those of its members who officiate at intermarriages with unconverted Gentiles clearly spells out its indifference to the future unity of Klal Yisrael -- and yet it has the temerity to demand Orthodox acquiescence to its acts as an expression of "Jewish unity."

The most recent shock to the Future of our people is Reform's decision to recognize patrilineal descent as a valid form of Jewishness. And I note with deep regret and alarm the recommendation

of the head of the Conservative movement that its official bodies "study" the patrilineal issue for the Conservative movement as well. Such "studies" have a way of emerging with anti-halakhic results and accelerating the eventual merger of Conservatism and Reform. (The decision to ordain women rabbis too began as a "study.") No digression from halakhic norms undertaken by Conservatism in the past can equal in destructive force the decision -- even the "study" -- to "kasher" patrilineal descent as a valid way of becoming Jewish. Should that nightmare come to pass, the next step is inevitable: the discarding of hilkhot gittin as well, first by chipping away at them and then by outright abolition.

The effect of the "Who is a Jew" stance by the dissident groups -- and the patrilineal issue is just one aspect of it -- on the Future can best be assessed by viewing the natural development of such a step in the Past. I refer to the attitude of the Tannaim to Christianity. As long as Christians were Jews who went astray after one they regarded as the Messiah, but otherwise kept their yichus inviolable, they were regarded as minnim -- heretics, apostates, but still Jews. It was when the Jerusalem Church lost power and the Gentile Church gained ascendancy, when Christianity decided to abandon the halakhic standards for determining Jewish status and declared that effectively one could join the religion by self-declaration, that they were regarded by the Tannaim as a separate religion.

A competent young scholar, a professor at N.Y.U., has recently studied the issue and come to the following conclusion:

In retrospect, the halakhot we have studied were what maintained the identity of the Jewish people. Had the rabbis relaxed these standards, accepting either the semi-proselytes or the earliest Gentile Christians into the Jewish people, Christians would quickly have become the majority within the expanded community of "Israel." Judaism as we know it would have ceased to exist even before reaching its codification in the Mishnah and the other great compilations of the Tannaitic tradition. Christianity would have been the sole heir to the traditions of Biblical antiquity, and observance of the commandments of the Torah would have disappeared within just a few centuries. In short, it was the Halakhah and its definition of Jewish identity which saved the Jewish people and its heritage from extinction as a result of the newly emerging Christian ideology.

The ultimate parting of the ways for Judaism and Christianity took place when the adherence to Christianity no longer conformed to the halakhic definitions of a Jew. As these Gentile Christians, never converted to Judaism, through the legal requirements we have discussed, became the dominant stream in the Christian communities which the rabbis confronted, even in Palestine, the rabbis ceased to regard the Christians as a group of Jews with heretical views and Christianity as a Jewish sect. Rather, the rabbis began to regard the Christians as members of a separate community, and their teachings a perversion of the Biblical tradition... -- (Lawrence H. Schiffman, Who Was a Jew? [Ktav: 1985])

Those in the other groups possessed of Jewish integrity and of responsibility to Jewish destiny must rise above personal and institutional and denominational animus and recognize the perils implicit in this newest and most ominous "innovation." We Orthodox have not always conducted our polemics with mutual respect, the finest manners, or adequate sympathy. But these ought not prejudice them against co-responsibility for the common Future of all the House of Israel. Ki yishalkha binkha machar -- for some day their children will surely ask them: Why did you ignore our machar, why did you not take into account our Tomorrow, our Future? That is a terrible question -- if one doesn't have an adequate answer.

How have we Orthodox Jews managed in our approach to the three tenses? I cannot fault our appreciation of the Past, especially the remote Past. The consciousness of an authentic ben Torah, a genuine shomer mitzvot, is suffused with the celebration of history. We are, at least consciously, responsible towards the Jewish Future. My worry is that we may injure that Future because of our imperfect grasp of the Present.

There are times that I am amazed at how we manage to live in the Past, committed to the Future, and remain blithely unaware -- deliberately unaware -- of the Present. For example: We -- not all of us, of course, but a sufficient number to warrant honest self-criticism -- act as if the Holocaust and the State of Israel can have no impact upon our religious consciousness and practice, or even be recognized as facts of life at all. We are, it sometimes seems, antagonistic to the Present. A couple of weeks ago, on Yom Hashoah, the commemoration of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising was changed from its previous venue to Felt Forum, a neutral area, to allow the participation of Orthodox Jews who felt uncomfortable in a Reform Temple. A kol korei had been distributed, signed by three venerable Gedolei Yisrael, urging Orthodox Jews to participate. Indeed, more observant Jews attended than ever before -- although not in the numbers that they should have. However, an anonymous group distributed a circular forbidding participation because among other reasons, it took place during Nisan, when hesped is asur and tachanun not recited! Rumors, I am told, circulated throughout Boro Park and elsewhere, that the signatories to the original kol korei changed

their minds. Now, I know we are dealing here with a splinter, fringe group that has no innate importance. But I believe that the state of mind that informs them is all too prevalent amongst too many of our camp. My complaint is not only that it is halakhically inaccurate: In Eretz Israel, a long time ago, there were three official fast days in Nisan -- on the first of Nissan or Rosh Chodesh, for the death of Nadav and Avihu; on the 6th for the death of Miriam and the disappearance of the be'er: and on the 18th for the death of Joshua (see Mordechai Margoliot, Hilkhos Eretz Yisreal min ha-Genizah, Jerusalem: 1973, p. 141). Much more important, it shows an imperviousness to current events, as if they have no right to be considered as part of the sacred continuum of Jewish life and history. A third of our people was destroyed, and we can't commemorate it because no tachanun is said on Nisan! And, of course, no provision is made to mark the event -- despite the most recent half-hearted efforts -- at any other time or in any other way. The Present is effectively erased from the purview of our spiritual concerns and no one takes halakhic notice of it. Yom Hashoah and Yom Haatzma'ut can't be looked up in the Mishneh Berurah; hence, they don't exist -- indeed, have no right to exist.

Similar arguments are presented, in mirror-image, against the celebration of Yom Ha-Atzma'ut during Sephirah. This proposition is seriously advanced by those who have no compunctions about the joyous celebration of Lag ba-Omer -- even though we are not quite sure of what reason there is for any celebration at all. Indeed, the Chatam Sofer (Y.D., No. 233) is unhappy about simchah on this day and, while reluctant to order it abolished because it is so wide-spread, himself

scrupulously avoided joining in any celebration. (See too R. Aryeh Balchover, Teshuvot Shem Aryeh, 14, who argues that the death of R. Shimon bar Yochai on Lag ba-Omer argues for fasting, not feasting, on that day.) Of course, it is argued that, as is maintained by Tur and Shulchan Arukh (O.Ch. 493), the students of R. Akiva stopped dying on that day. I am not quite sure what that means (did they all die during the seven weeks of one year? -- over many years?), but I am aghast at the disproportion implicit in the whole stance. Twelve or twenty four thousand disciples stopped perishing, so we are permitted to celebrate even if we thereby break the Sephirah regulations -- but the advent of the State of Israel, which heralded the end of the greatest blood bath in Jewish history for the 12,000,000 Jews who survived the murder of the 6,000,000, is not sufficiently important to offer thanks to the Almighty because He happened to arrange for it to come out during Sephirah? This has nothing to do with Zionist vs. anti-Zionist polemics, nothing to do with politics. It has very much to do with a frighteningly erroneous attitude towards the Present. We are so frozen in the Past, so oriented to a distant, eschatological Future, that we ascribe no significance to the Present. Does the divine Hashgachah have no power in the Present? We are suffering from a deep temporal malaise, a pathology of time. We have pulled in so hermetically, segregated ourselves so effectively from the new and the unprecedented and the Present and the contemporary, that I fear for our Future.

U-fasah-ha-nega. The infection spreads to our own, so-called Centrist Orthodox group as well. In our satisfaction at achieving greater numbers of shomrei Shabbat in our congregations, higher

standards for our synagogues, and more and better limmud ha-Torah in our yeshivot, we have begun to ignore the numerically larger body of Jews, good Jews, who identify with Orthodoxy but are less intensely involved. They -- the group which we of R.C.A. and Yeshiva University and the Orthodox Union worked on so hard and so successfully 20 and 30 and 40 years ago, whose children are the very ones whose observance and Torah Study we are so proud of today --- are now being relegated to the penumbra of Torah life, even to the realm of non-existence. We are beginning to read out of our camp not only unaffiliated Jews; not only Jews who belong to Conservative congregations often for want of an Orthodox synagogue nearby or simply out of ignorance, but also anyone, even if identified as Orthodox, whose culture and manners and lifestyle are not exactly identical with those of the Yeshiva World: Those who struggle with intellectual problems, who wrestle with profound moral questions which somehow never impinge on our own consciousness, whose social milieu exposes them to tensions of all kinds we simply refuse to consider -- and who nevertheless are and always want to remain Orthodox Jews, within the ambit of Torah and observant of Halakhah. They have become contaminated with the Present - and so must be dismissed!

How else explain the phenomenon of teshuvot to certain contemporary halakhic questions, addressed specifically to this kind of Orthodox constituency, which are not formulated as calm and considered replies -- divrei chakhamim be'nachat nishma'im -- but slam the door in people's faces with derision and invective, and follow them with oral comments which betray a total lack of sympathy, respect, and fraternity. Sometimes, style is more important than

substance. People who live in and appreciate the Present do not react with such gracelessness.

Some of our Orthodox rabbis (perhaps more so is this true of the newer musmakhim) argue, in all sincerity, that they acknowledge that something must be done to keep those "others" within the fold -- but they do not have the time for them. If a choice must be made between catering to those who are totally "frum" and wholly within our camp, and attending to their own religious growth and "lomdus," on one side, and bothering with the problem-ridden, more modernist, less "yeshvish," and more secularly involved Orthodox Jews on the other, then they must choose the first of these alternatives on the grounds that this takes precedence. I have, in conversation with such of our younger colleagues, heard some enunciate the argument that osek be'mitzvah patur min ha-mitzvah: They are preoccupied with thier own learning, with giving more "solid" sheurim, with tending to the halakhic needs of the totally committed group, and they therefore are exempt from troubling themselves with all those "others."

I respectfully and vigorously disagree. I can accept no such excuses. Permit me to explain with a few brief divrei Torah.

אמנם הגמרא טוכה דף כ"ה פוטק שעוטק במצוה פטור מן המצוה, נגד
כמה ונאית, והגמרא שם ובטוטה דף מ"ד לומד כלל זה ממוז שכתוב
לגבי פסח שני (במזכר ט': ו-ז): "ויהי אנשיט אשר היו טמאים לנפש
אדם ולא יכלו לעטות הפסח ביום ההוא. ויאמרו האנשים ההמה אליו
אנחנו טמאים לנפש אדם, למה נגוע לכלתי הקריב את קרבן ה' במועזו
בחור בני ישראל". ומכאן לומד הגמ' שכיון שהיו עטוקין במצות
טומאה למתים היו פטורין מק"פ. והגמרא ממשיכה: "אוותם אנשים מי היו?
נוסאי אורנו של יוסף, ויברי ויוה"ג. ר"ע אומר, מיטאל ואלצפן היו,
שהיו עוסקין בנזיב ואביהו". ור' יצחק אינו נוקב אותם בשם, אלא אומר
טתם טמאי מתים היו.

ולכאורה קשה להובין, מה נ"ט מי היו, הלא טו"ס היו טמאי מת לקיים
מצוה ולפיכך פטורים מק"פ, ומכאן ראייה טעבטמה"מ, ולסט מה שואלת
הגמרא "אוותם האנשים מי היו"?

אלא שחכמינו באו ללמדנו לקח טוב במוסר הוויים. הלא מצד הדין
היו פטורים מק"פ מטעם עבטמה"מ, ואין למישהו חרעומת עליהם.
ובכל זאת, לא היו מרוצים מזה שהם פטורים, ודוקא הוואמצו בכל כחם
לקיים גם מצוה ק"ע "בחור בני ישראל" ולא להיות מובדלים מאחיהם
אפילו אם ען הדין אין טענה עליהם. ולכן חשוב לדעת "אותם האנשים
מי היו", כלומר, אזיבוו וצדקו וחסידות שכזו ראוי' להוודע ברבים,
כדאי לפרסט אנשים כאלה שלא הטחפקו בכלל של עבטמה"מ ודוקא השתדלו
לקיים שניהם, אנשים אשר בזכותם ניתנה מצות פטח שני. ועל זה
השיב הגמ' - או נוסאי אורנו של יוסף, ויברי שהועטק בו משה בשעתו
היצ"מ, או מיטאל ואלצפן הלויים. רק אנשים כאלה, שמוכנים לטמא
את עצמם לשט שמים ולשם אחיהם לקיים להם הטטחה עתיקה או להציל
גופותיהם מבזיון; אנשיט כאלו שאינם בושים להגיד קבל עט ועדה
"אנחנו טמאים לנפש אדם", לשט נפשו של יהודי כדאי לקבל טופאה;
אנשים שכאלה שאינט מסתפקים באמתלאות ולו יהיו צודקות, ומ"מ
עושים כל מאמץ להשאר עם אחיהם גם במצוה אחרת בחור בני ישראל
-- אנשים כאלה כדאי לכולנו למשך כל הדורות לדעת מי היו ולעשות
נמעשיהם.

Rabbis with such an attitude will not avail themselves of the excuse that they are preoccupied with their own learning and with the fully "frum." Without neglecting them, or their own growth, they will make the time to deal with all Jews. They will confront the here-and-now of Jewish life with a lamah nigara attitude that is generous, non-arrogant, and suffused with love and understanding. They will not preen themselves with the self-serving conceit that they give only sheurim and not derashot which serve to bring their audiences into the orbit of Torah by reaching out to them where they are. Neither will they derogate the art of communication, learning that "Yinglish" is not necessarily the language of true piety and certainly not the lingua franca of the most bright, alert, concerned, and committed American Orthodox Jews.

When the four lepers, as we read in the Haftorah of last Shabbat, came across the abandoned military camp of the Syrians who had been threatening the Israelites during a great famine, they satisfied their own hunger and then realized that they were neglecting the needs of Klal Yisrael. In a moment of heroic reflection, they said: Lo khein anachnu osim -- we are not doing what is right. Ha-yom ha-zeh yom besorah hu, va-anachnu mehashim -- today is a day of great good news; how can we remain silent? And so they alerted their fellow Jews and ensured a victory for their people.

We can do no less. Those who live only in the Past and the Future, lo khein anachnu osim, are not doing what is right and proper. The Present too has its claims. Ha-yom ha-zeh, this day, the Present, the Today, can be equally glorious to the Past and the Future if we

will it so. The Present can be redeemed from its profaneness. The
Today, ha-yom ha-zeh, can well become a yom besorah, a day of good
tidings, of good news and great opportunities.

Now --today --is not a time for silence.