

"CAN GOOD COME FROM AFFLUENCE?"

The question in this title sounds strange indeed. It might be more appropriate coming from the context of Christianity, which is frank in its prejudice against the affluent, holding that the chances are indeed poor for a rich man to enter the "kingdom of heaven." Judaism, however, has never entertained such economic discrimination. It believes in ^{לִפְנֵי} to the poor, but it does not deny ^{לִפְנֵי} (lending money) to the rich too. It holds to the ideal of absolute justice, and this may not be weighed in favor of the rich or even the poor -- ^{וְלֹא יִפְתָּוּ לְרֵיחַ}, you may not discriminate in favor of the poor and thus cause a miscarriage of justice.

Why, then, bother to ask the question?

My explanation is that the question is based on the practicalities of sociology, not the abstractions of theology. Of course we do not discriminate against the rich -- the Talmud even tells us that ^{רַבִּי יוֹחָנָן}, Rabbi Judah respected rich people. But the hard fact of life is that success often leads to failure, that material plenty is frequently the prelude to spiritual poverty. Moses already complained ^{וַיִּשְׁמַע יְהוָה וַיִּשְׁמַע}, that when Israel grows fat it begins to rebel against God. Maimonides plaintively noted that in his generation when a man became wealthy or achieved social or political prominence, he began to leave his Judaism, and that the degree of his defection was in clear proportion to the degree of his rise on the social ladder. In the United States, as a general rule (but with significant exceptions), the spectrum of Orthodox-Conservative-Reform follows an ascending economic pattern. So, unfortunately, economic opportunity and social mobility, which are the pride of the United States, present a formidable challenge to Jewish tradition and continuity.

The question, then, does make sense: can good come from affluence?

In attempting to answer the question, let us look at our Sidra and especially at the ^{וְהָיָה כִּי יָבֹאוּ אֵלֶיךָ}, the portion which speaks of repentance -- both the challenge to repent and the promise that our people some day will repent collectively. This portion appears immediately after the description of the ^{וְהָיָה כִּי יָבֹאוּ אֵלֶיךָ} (covenant) which Israel entered. The repentance portion begins ^{וְהָיָה כִּי יָבֹאוּ אֵלֶיךָ} "and it shall be that when all these things have come upon you, the blessing and the curse," that you will return to God.

Now, one can understand that **אספ--** curse -- can lead to repentance. Man sees failure and frustration all around him; he experiences the transience of life, the ephemeral quality of his achievements, the impermanence of his conquests; he sees all his triumphs reduced to ashes and life turning sour in his mouth; and he realizes that all his social and economic accomplishments are empty and vain. In disillusionment with the material world and its chimerical nature, he turns to God, recognizing that only in Torah and in the life of the spirit can man attain immortality. But how does man come to **אמר** through **אמר** ? Indeed, does blessing and affluence ever inspire a man to spiritual eminence?

The answer is: yes! Blessing too can lead to turning to God, but it requires moral excellence and spiritual heroism. A Hasidic teacher once said: how hard it is for a rich man to believe in God! He comes to his lavish home or to his big business, and all his possessions cry out to him, "believe in us!" And so he believes in them -- and not in God...

Yet, this is the way that a true religious spirit manifests itself. A man who has come to God and to Torah because of the experience of אִסָּר (curse), is never quite sure of why he turned toward his Creator. But if he becomes affluent, if fortune smiles upon him and his conditions improve, and nevertheless he remains a good Jew and a loyal and observant son of his people, this reveals that his original religious inclinations were genuine, that his spirituality was authentic, that his Judaism was not social but real. He had come to Torah and to God not only through אִסָּר but through אִסָּר as well; not through failure but through success; not through adversity but through affluence.

A great Hasidic scholar the author of " נפש חיה ," makes the following incisive comment on the verse we recite at the end of השמונה עשרה (Grace):

the end of (Grace):
יִרְאוּ אֵלָה ה' קְדוֹתָיו כִּי אֵין אֲחֵרִים לְיִרְאָתוֹ
 "Fear the Lord, O His holy ones, for those who fear Him shall have no want." Now, that is a patently strange remark. Surely there are many pious people who are in want and in need. Indeed, were statistics available, we might discover that it is the pious who suffer more want than the impious, the observant who are more needy than the unobservant, the religious who are more stricken than the non-observant. What then do these words mean? The author of " אֵלֶּיךָ יְיָ " answers: the meaning is this -- the holy ones of the Lord should fear Him because they love Him, because they feel a yearning for Him, and not because of אֲחֵרִים, any need or physical want that they experience in their lives!

American Jewry, for all its problems and concerns and its

newly discovered poor, is still a quite affluent community. And hence the challenge to us is: ^{אברהם} through ^{אברהם} and not through ^{אברהם}, to do the good out of affluence and not out of adversity. It is not easy. It is not easy at all, especially with regard to children. The affluence of parents apparently makes living easier for children -- but life more difficult to fulfill. Yet, ^{אברהם} that comes through ^{אברהם} is infinitely superior to ^{אברהם} that comes through ^{אברהם}.

What is the source for attaining good through affluence? We can become more authentically Jewish by being more truly Jewish. By that I mean, a true Jew is one who lives up to his name, and the name "Jew" is derived, via the word "Judaeen," from the name Judah or Yehudah, the son of Jacob and Leah. He was called by this name, the Bible tells us, when Leah proclaimed at his birth *ה' נא יודה לי*, "this time I will thank the Lord." In other words, the word Jew means -- "thank God." The principle of gratitude is enshrined in the very name of the Jew. And when a man feels grateful for his blessings, he turns to God.

This is the best way in which to enter the ḥanukkah season and the new year. Gratitude must remain the greatest spur to repentance.

May the Almighty grant us a year in which affluence and ^{שפע} of all kinds will surround us, and through them may we achieve ^{השגה} and return to Him. May it be a year of life, plenty, of happiness, of spiritual eminence --

לברכה אהא עקלה.