

"AFTERWARDS"  
Straightening Out Jumbled Priorities

I

In the whole sordid story of the selling of Joseph, it is the oldest brother, Reuben, who comes out better than all the others. "And Reuben heard, and delivered him out of their hand, and said, 'let us not take his life.' And Reuben said unto them, 'shed not blood; cast him into this pit that is in this wilderness, but lay not hands upon him' -- that he might deliver him out of their hand, to restore him to his father" (Gen. 37:21, 22).

Yet, Reuben's plan comes to naught. At the crucial moment, Reuben fails. When he is most needed, he is not there. For by the time he has returned to the pit in order to release Joseph, the brothers had already sold him into slavery. "And Reuben returned unto the pit, and behold, Joseph was not in the pit; and he rent his clothes, and he returned to his bretheren, and said, 'the child is not there; and as for me, whther shall I go?'" (Gen. 37:29, 30).

Where was Reuben? Why wasn't he there in time avoid the tragedy? The Rabbis give a number of answers, one of them somewhat surprising: עסוק היה בשקו ותעניתו על שבעל יוצי' אביו Reuben was preoccupied with doing penance because of his previous sin of "changing the bed of his father" -- in taking up the cudgels for his mother Leah, he offended his father Jacob by removing Jacob's bed from Bilhah's tent, into Leah's tent. He meant to establish his mother's primacy as chief wife over her co-wives. But in so doing, he deeply hurt Jacob. Reuben was seized by remorse and contrition. He was so engrossed in his own spiritual rehabilitation -- that he missed the opportunity to save Joseph.

Reuben meant well, but it came out all wrong. His priorities were jumbled. He failed to appreciate that life and survival come first, and only then can one attend to his own spiritual growth and religious development. Pikuah nefesh (saving a life) precedes teshuvah (repentance).

II

At the recent National Convention of the UOJCA, which was attended by myself and a number of leading members of The Jewish Center, the focus of debate was the problem whether or not the

UOJCA should secede from the Synagogue Council of America, in which are represented both the rabbinic and lay organizations of Orthodox, Conservative, and Reform groups. The point of view that I advocated was that we should stay in. But the secessionists too had a point, and they pressed their argument vigorously. Fortunately, the Convention decided that now is not the time for divisiveness and factionalism. In order to avoid an open battle, it was decided to postpone the issue for three months. But the sentiment of the majority was clear. It was for staying in, not pulling out.

When all the House of Israel is threatened, you do not go off in a corner yourself. When everyone else seems to be against you, you do not divide yourself against yourself. When Jews are in danger of being sold out; when supposed friends and allies and brothers stand by impassively; when

חיה רעה אכלתהו, "an evil beast has eaten him" -- when the P.L.O. is acknowledged as a legitimate group in international forums -- this is not a time to go away and brood over the spiritual problems על יבולבל יצוץ אבין, worrying lest innocent Jews will confuse Conservative and Reform for Orthodox and vice versa.

In Israel too the same principle of priorities must hold. Now is not the time for political bickering and interparty sniping. Now is not the time to insist upon the purity of the principles of each individual group. Now is the time for all factions to work together, and to postpone individual self-assertion and ideological pursuits. Would that the government be broadened to include all groups in a nation coalition!

### III

The same message is subtly woven into the very structure of our Hanukkah prayer, the על הניסים. We say that in the days of Mattathias, when the evil Greek-Syrian government oppressed Israel להשכיחם תורתך ולהעבירם על חוקי רצונך, to cause them to forget the Torah and to violate the commandments, the Lord miraculously saved us. We would expect that our song of praise would indicate immediately that the Lord came to our rescue by allowing us to study the Torah and observe the mitzvot. The rational assumption is -- an immediate resumption of spiritual and religious activity. Instead, we read a rather long passage,

ואתה ברחמין הרבים צמדת להם בעת צרתם, רבת את ריבם, דנת את דינם, נקמת את נקמתם, מסרת גיבורים ביד חלשים, ורבים ביד מעטים... ולעמן ישראל עשית תשועה גדולה ופרקן כהיום הזה.

"And You, in Your great compassion, stood by them in the time of their woe, You fought their battles and championed them in judgment and avenged them. You delivered the strong into the hands of the weak, the many into the hands of the few... And for Your people Israel did you perform a great salvation and redemption on this day."

And only then do we read,

ואחר כך באו בניך לדבר ביתך, ופינו את היכלך וטהרו  
את מקדשך, והדליקו נרות בחצרות קדשך, וקבעו שמונת  
ימי חנוכה אלו.

"And afterwards Your children came into Your holy house, and cleaned Your sanctuary, and purified Your Temple, and kindled lights in your sacred court, and established these eight days of Hanukhah..."

What this prayer is telling us by its very construction is that before all else, the very first item on the national agenda is survival against the common foe. The Greeks must be repulsed, their armies scattered, and military triumph assured. Only then, ואחר כך, afterwards -- will they attend to the fulfillment of their ideological commitments, to "cleaning house" internally.

#### IV

If this is true of principles, especially of religious principles, how much more so is it true of purely personal concerns, of luxuries and convenience and comforts! All these must take a back seat to our central and foremost concern: the survival of the people of Israel, which in our days is to such a great extent contingent upon the survival of the State of Israel. We therefore expect that all members of The Jewish Center, without any single exception, will subordinate their personal needs and considerations to support Israel בעת צרותם, in their time of woe, in greater measure than ever before.

#### V

Yet, this principle of ואחר כך, "afterwards" -- that first must come the fact of survival and only then can we attend to the quality of that survival and the purity of Jewish existence -- holds true only where indulgence in one's own ideals may jeopardize kelal Yisrael, the totality of Israel.

It is an institutional, not a personal priority. The priority of the question of life-and-death is valid only in the area of organizational activity, in the arena of practical undertakings.

Each man for himself must realize at the very outset that without emunah (faith), without the Holy One, all is lost. Fundamentally, our struggle for survival itself begins with and is contingent upon an act of will and faith. The taking up of arms -- זנת את יבם, זנת את דינם, נקמה את נקמתם must be undergirded by a pervasive awareness that the battle is רשעים ביד צדיקים וצדיים ביד עוסקי תורה the evil in the hands of the righteous, the wicked in the hands of students of Torah. It is not only a military battle of unequal odds, גבורים ביד חלשים ורבים ביד מעטים -- but also one of moral confrontation.

The State of Israel -- its founding and survival these past 26 years -- as well as the persistence of Jews for over 2,000 years in enduring the exile, all this is irrational and improbable and unpredictable without the spiritual-historic dimension. There is more than a grain of truth in that famous anecdote about a rabbi who turned to his people during the War of Independence in 1948, after noticing the poverty of Israel's arms and the multitude of its enemies, and called out,

אידן, פארלאזט זיך נישט אויף ניסים, זאגט תהילים!

"Jews! Do not rely upon miracles! Recite Psalms!"

To rely on the U.N. or the United States or even one's own armed forces is to rely naively on miracles. To rely on God, to act with hope and confidence and אמונה and בטחון, is the only sane and rational course. With all prior attention to the exigencies of economics and arms and politics, underneath all and before all else, the issue of success and failure ה'ו, will hang on faith -- faith in God, faith in Israel, faith in the justice of our case, faith in ourselves, faith in our future.

A recent issue of the Israeli newspaper Maariv, relates that there was an old Hasid of the Brazlaver group in Jerusalem. He came to Israel, then Palestine, at the end of the 1920's, when Russia forbade emigration and the English let no one in to the Holy Land. The late Rabbi Elimelech Bar Shaul ש"י tells, that he once asked this old Jew how he managed to cross the international borders at such a difficult time in order to get into Palestine. The Hasid answered, "What kind of question is that? I knew that a Jew must come to the Holy Land, and so I wanted to come, and so I came."

"How about the certificates?"

"Bah, that's nothing. I knew that if I wanted to come, that if I believed that I must come to Eretz Israel, then I will with the help of God reach it. Indeed, I once stole across the border in Syria, but the Englishmen caught me and sent me back."

"And after that you did get a certificate?"

"No, not at all. I knew that something must be wrong with my faith, that I did not believe with my whole heart, and that is why I did not succeed in stealing across the border. So I sat in the Bet Hamidrash and I worked on my faith. Again, I tried, and again I was caught. So again I returned to the Bet Hamidrash, to strengthen my faith and my trust. I thought that if I believed with my whole heart and whole might, that I desired with every bone in my body to reach Eretz Israel, that the Holy One will help me. So I tried a third time, and then I believed as one must believe, and that is why I am here."

As we enter Hanukhah, we reaffirm our priorities: first, we must strengthen our own emunah, our own faith and hope. Second, we must dedicate all our efforts to save kelal Yisrael and the State of Israel. Afterwards, לְכָל יִשְׂרָאֵל, we must make sure to rid ourselves of the desecration of contemporary Hellenism, of the flippancy to Torah and Halakhah, of the insinuation of assimilation and quasi-assimilation into our religious life. Then must we clean the sanctuaries of Judaism, purify its temples, kindle lamps in its court-yards and, with the light of God and Torah, illuminate the life of all Jews, and through them become אֵין לְכָל יִשְׂרָאֵל, a light to all the nations.