

THE PIT REVISITED

Following the marvelous story of fraternal strife and family reunion -- a story of singular dramatic impact which addresses itself to each of us -- our Sidra this morning relates something that almost becomes an anti-climax. After Jacob's death and his interment in Canaan, when the funeral procession has returned to Egypt from the Holy Land, we read that *וַיָּבֹאוּ בְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶל יוֹסֵף בְּעֵינָיו* Joseph's brothers saw that their father had died, and they said, who knows but that now Joseph will hate us and avenge himself upon us for all the evil that we have caused him. The peace and harmony of the House of Israel was threatened all over again.

Now, this is a disturbing report. Of lesser people, we expect that brothers live in an armed truce while their father is alive; but when he is dead, they resume their hostilities. We expect of an Esau that he should refrain from murdering his brother Jacob only as long as their father Isaac lived, but that once he is gone Esau should plan to destroy his antagonist brother. But of people of higher moral caliber, of *אֲנָשִׁים*, we expect a continuation of fraternal and brotherly feeling. For as long as a cherished and revered Father is spiritually alive for his children, his very memory serves to keep them together in peace and friendship. It is only when the spiritual presence of Father has died for some or all of them, that fraternal strife breaks out unrestrained. But ought we expect this of the sons of Jacob, founders of the House of Israel?

The Rabbis of the Midrash (*מדרש רב*) reveal a superb psychological insight not only into Joseph and his brothers, but into the universal dimensions of human relations. They tell us that on the way back from the burial of Jacob in Egypt, they passed the very pit into which the brothers had cast Joseph and from whence began

Joseph's long adventure. When they passed that pit, he *וירא ויבכה ויפול על פניו*,
went over to it, and stared and gazed into it.

The pit revisited! I can imagine what the brothers thought as their faces reddened with shame and chagrin. No doubt that Joseph's long look at the pit where they had cast him made the brothers believe that surely this will recall for him the terror they had brought upon him, and that he will not take the revenge which he had waited for all along. It was this incident of the pit revisited that aroused dread and struck paralyzing fear in the hearts of the brothers.

But with the gift of hindsight, we know otherwise. We can reconstruct the thoughts that raced through Joseph's mind as he peered into the snake-infested, scorpion-populated pit where he was once cast and left to die. A *ק'צו ב'ל* is not moved to revenge by such experiences. On the contrary, he was impressed by the contrast between his condition now and his condition then. He thought: now I wear the purple robes of royalty; then -- my *כחול וצבעוני*, coat of many colors, was ripped off me, soaked in blood, and presented to my grieving father. Now I wear on my head the crown of Egypt; then I was sold as a slave, as a piece of human merchandise. Now I have majesty; then misery. Now honor; then horror. Now I sit in splendor; then I stood amidst serpents. Now I am rich; then wretched. I have come a long way in the world! I must remember my origins. I must never submit to delusions of grandeur. I must never let my good fortune go to my head. Remembering my miserable and impoverished beginning, I shall retain my humor and humility, my sense of proportion and perspective. It is this kind of thinking which later informed the Torah's command to all Israel, that when they are well established and independent in their own land that *אזכרת כי עבד היית בארץ מצרים*, Israel must always remember that it was a slave-nation in Egypt, and therefore must now treat with exemplary sympathy the outcast and the alien, the friendless and the forlorn.

This, then, is what the pit revisited did for Joseph: It kept him human, restrained his ego, controlled his self-importance. The pit reinforced his sympathy for the poor and the wretched, the anguished and the humiliated everywhere. That long, lingering look into the dark pit from which he began his tortuous climb up the ladder of success kept him from getting a dizzy head now that he stood at the very

Is not this something that all of us can benefit from? Is it not of importance for every man or woman who has achieved something of significance, who has attained a measure of fame or power or wealth, to revisit his own dark pit, his early period of privation and want?

I once visited, in another city, the home of a very wealthy industrialist. It was a house which was lavishly appointed. On the walls of his parlor there hung famous paintings, original masterpieces. Amongst them I noticed something quite unusual: surrounded by a very expensive frame was what looked like a discolored, frayed piece of cloth. At first I hesitated to inquire about it, fearing that I would thereby display my ignorance of avant-garde art. But after a while, I asked what this was. He said: It is nothing but an ordinary rag. I had it framed so that I might look at it and remember that no matter how much I have now, I must always keep in mind that I began as a poor, hungry, barefoot lad whose few pennies were earned by being a menial rag-picker! It helps me keep my sense of balance and proportion. It is a reminder that I don't own the world. It does not let me forget what it is like to be hungry.

Pity our affluent society. I sometimes am sorry for our children who have no pit to return to, as did Joseph. How shall they ever learn to attain a true perspective on life? In the deeper sense, the children of our society of plenty are underprivileged, spiritually deprived. They have never known hunger or fear or poverty in the past, a lack of toys or gadgets in the present, or the inability to expect an abundance of cars and cruises and trips before they are ready for it in the near future. Most parents, at least, remember their own humble beginnings. Some were refugees, and know what it is like to leave everything you have and go into flight for your life. But how can our

children know how bitter the cup of life can be, how uncertain life is, and therefore to appreciate what they have and to use their affluence properly, without sacrificing character in the process?

American Jews are today assimilating at an unprecedented rate. I believe that one of the reasons is their false sense of security, for they know of the dreadful experiences of our people in Europe only in an abstract and theoretical sense. That is why I would urge parents and schools to teach our children, when they are ready for it, the complete story of the great holocaust of our people during World War II. The visit this past week of a German court to Auschwitz is deeply symbolic. Modern Jews too must make pilgrimages to the *ו/ו/ד* of horror which contain six million corpses of our people. I can understand the reluctance of parents who lived through this period who do not want to rearouse the ghastliness of their experiences. But American-born Jewish children and parents need this experience. That is why I believe that any trip to Israel should have as its first and foremost feature a visit to the *מקום* *ב* in Jerusalem, the museum which contains the record of the destruction of one-third of our people. If we deny this pit revisited to ourselves and our children, we keep away not only the Jewish past, but the present and a guarantee of the future as well.

Such thoughts, then, occurred to Joseph as he contemplated his lowly origin, his form of the Rabbis' injunction: *וידעו מן מקומם*, know from whence you came. Yet, the brothers were terrorized. They were struck by fear. Why did they not ascribe such noble thoughts to Joseph as have been mentioned? Why did they not attribute to him these meditations, and why did they panic instead?

Perhaps because they too had an insight into human nature. They knew full well that reliving early misery, taking a long look at the pit of poverty, can have a humanizing effect. But they also appreciated that sometimes it is counteractive, it has the reverse consequences. For some people *וידעו מן מקומם* results in a fanatic desire to cover up humble origins, to make up for lost time and benefits ignored and pleasures

not enjoyed. Thus it sometimes happens that a man who was once hungry now overeats. A woman once poor, now overdresses and becomes overacquisitive. A person once humiliated, now becomes arrogant and oppressive. An individual once ignored, now becomes insatiably publicity-hungry. Who knows, the brothers thought, but that Joseph staring into that black pit of despair may not now destroy us who subjected him to this anguish and terror?

Indeed it was a very real possibility, and the brothers cannot be blamed for considering that eventuality.

But while they saw all that was to be seen, they did not hear all that was to be heard.

For the Rabbis (אנשי תלמודא) tell us that something else occurred at that time: *פליק יוסף
אברק את איתו פהור שפליכל אחיו בתוס' אברק עלי' בלו שחיה אדם אברק על מקום שיש
על ים אברק פלמקום שיש על בלמקום פלמ'.*

When Joseph looked into the pit he also silently recited a blessing, which the Halakhah prescribes for any person who was miraculously delivered from danger upon revisiting the scene of his deliverance: Blessed is the Lord who performs for me a miracle in this place.

That is what they missed -- the whisper of a blessing! The pit revisited can be equally divine or demonic; humanizing or dehumanizing. But if that visitation is accompanied by a *ברכה*, then it invariably helps man restore his sense of balance and harmony. For by *ברכה* we mean: the acknowledgement that it is not by my own ability and skill that I rose to the top, but the will of God, *שם על ים בלמקום פלמ'.* It is not my wisdom but God's will, not my greatness but God's goodness, that have sustained me through my adventures.

The Jew at the Seder table eats *זכר לעבדות*, a token of his ancient servitude; but -- he recites a *ברכה* over it, and this blessing is what teaches him the path of righteousness rather than revenge. We recite the *עקידת יצחק* but we conclude with the blessing of *על אלא ישרא'ל* -- and so it leads us on to the way of

honor and humility, not of oppression and retaliation towards our former taskmasters.

This is what Joseph did: he blessed God when revisiting the pit. Therefore, when the brothers became apprehensive, he said to them:

אני הנהאני כעמית אלוקים אני

which usually is translated, do not fear for am I in place of God? -- or, preferably, as Onkelos translates it, "For behold, I am under God!" And one who is "under God" neither despairs when he lies forsaken in the pit, nor turns pompous when he sits in splendor on the throne of Egypt.

The problem which confronted Joseph is one which none of us, in our society, can escape: how to attain affluence without forfeiting faith; honors without losing honor; prosperity without abdicating perspective.

Like Joseph, we must each revisit the נח, the symbol of our initial failures and lowliness. And like Joseph, we must each thank God and acknowledge Him as the One responsible for our triumphs.

The Jewish response to God's blessing is -- to bless God.

The Jewish way is to recognize that our successes impose moral obligations upon us.

In the words of Joseph, אני הנהאני כעמית אלוקים אני: God sent me before you to be a source of life and livelihood. Our function, then, must become: to enhance life, to restore peace, to advance the cause of God in the world.