

ON BEING RESPONSIBLE

Responsibility is the hallmark of the civilized and mature human being. One of the two things that filled the great philosopher Immanuel Kant with awe was the sense of moral responsibility in man. In an ultimate sense, to be responsible means to be religious, for an irresponsible person believes that, except for the police, there is no one to whom he has to answer for his conduct. Whereas, the responsible person acknowledges the existence of a higher power beyond himself to whom he must answer or respond for his life and his actions. Therefore, if one accepts that there is a God Who asks and challenges and makes demands upon us, and he feels he ought to respond to Him, then he is responsible.

There is yet another way to which responsibility is related to faith. Not, this time, faith in God but faith in man. The Talmud tells us hen shelkha tzeddek ve'lav shelkha tzeddek (B.M. 49b) -- make your "yes" firm and your "no" firm. Let people know exactly what you mean. In other words, a man must be responsible for what he says. For if he is not, the Talmud continues, then he is counted among the mehusarei amanah, those who lack faith, those who are faithless. Rabbi Simchah Zissel, the great light and leader of the Mussar movement, asked: what is the relationship between responsibility and faith? He answered: by mehusarei amanah the Talmud means that the man who has no responsibility does not deserve anyone else's faith in him. He is not trustworthy. He is not/faithful. Therefore, for the same reason, the dayan mun'eh, the righteous judge, is called in the Humash by the name Elohim -- not only because he, like God, is a source of authority, but also because, like God, he is deserving of faith by others. For such people responsibility never becomes, as the American humorist Ambrose Beir<sup>cl</sup> defined it ("The Devil's Dictionary"),

"a detachable burden, easily shifted onto the shoulders of God, Faith, Fortune, Luck, or one's neighbor." A man who is not counted amongst the mebusarei amanah keeps the responsibility on his own shoulders. There is a famous Talmudic proverb that lefi gamla shihna -- according to the strength of the camel is the load placed upon him. The bigger the man, the more responsible is he and the more deserving of our emunah or our faith in him. If, therefore, in an ultimate spiritual sense, responsibility is a religious faith in God, then in a more immediate social sense, responsibility means reliability, dependability, winning the faith of others.

But there is yet another aspect to responsibility which also reflects an element of faith, and that is -- faith in the future, faith in the durability of human ideals, faith that the good and the noble and the right are not a fleeting, chimerical, imaginary phenomenon, but that they will endure long after cruelty, dishonesty, and meanness will have been spent and will perish.

The great teacher, of Geonic times, Rabbi Nathan of Rome, ~~the renowned~~ talmudic sage, and lexicographer, in his renowned halakhic dictionary, the Arukh, analyzes the theme of responsibility or aharayut. He points out that Talmudic law regards real estate but not chattel as an adequate surety in any transaction. Only karka, land, can be used for a mortgage, can be regarded as nekhasim she'yesh la-hem aharayut or "responsible property" -- meaning that if one offers karka (land) as property from which a debt can be collected, we accept it. What is the relationship between karka (land) and aharayut, (responsibility)? Rabbi Nathan explains ~~by~~ the relationship by the fact that karka has aharit, it has a future, it lasts, it continues onward. Metaltelin (chattel or moveables) can be destroyed. Land cannot. Therefore, says the author of the Arukh, the idea of aharayut is tied in with aharit. Responsibility is based upon the idea of the future.

Is this not a profound psychological and spiritual as well as legal and economic truth? Statesmen who think the world has no future, that its aharit

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be buried under a fine radioactive ash, abandon all aharayut for civilized international conduct. A man who feels his job has a future will execute it responsibly; otherwise, if he believes it has no aharit, he will feel no aharayut towards it. Look at the tremendous sense of responsibility that our Prophets felt for our people, especially for the conduct of Israel. Because they saw ahead that this people will endure into the limitless future, they felt obligated to lead it right. No wonder the Talmud tells us that kol ha-neviim kulan lo nitnab'u ela li'yemot ha-mashiah -- all the prophets, in all their addresses, intended primarily the days of the coming of the Messiah! All their words were directed to Israel's and the world's great future. All prophecy, with its demands and its reprimands, its courage and its encouragement, its avowals and its arousals, its incessant reminders to Israel, of the Covenant and the sacred terms of it, all this sublime sense of responsibility comes only because the Prophets knew that this people, to use the phrase of C.P. Snow, "has the future in its bones." If it has an aharit, then we have an aharayut.

This theme is of perennial significance. The Jew who believes in the future of his synagogue will feel a sense of responsibility for it. He who knows that Torah has an aharit will not rest, but his aharayut-- or ~~the~~ responsibility-- awareness will move him to support Yeshivot and all other Torah institutions. The parent who really has faith that Judaism has a future will not forfeit his responsibility in bringing up his children Jewishly. It is only the mehusarei amanah, those who lack faith in the aharit, who abandon aharayut.

It is appropriate this day to remember the greatest, most singular expression, in all of history, of a sense of responsibility based upon faith in the future. This week Jews throughout the world celebrate the 20th Anniversary of the Uprising of the Warsaw Ghetto. This was an uprising which, despite the impossible odds against the heroes, was born, not of despair, but of hope, of not/an attitude that "we have nothing to lose," but that "we have everything

to gain." That is why the most recurrent phrase on the lips of all the martyrs of European Jewry was ani maamin be'emunah shelemah be'viyat ha-mashiah -- I believe with perfect faith in the coming of the Messiah.

We believe that Kenesset Yisrael has an aharit. These gallant Jews and Jewess took responsibility for the redemption of the honor of all Israel on their bowed and lean shoulders, because in their stout hearts there flourished a faith in Israel's aharit, a confidence in its future. This was not the daring of desperadoes. It was a heroism born of hope -- hope, despite the horrors; faith, despite the facts; trust, despite the <sup>r</sup>terrors; aharayut, because of the faith and the belief in aharit. It is because of this unique type of Jewish heroic hope that, millenia ago, a non-Jew by the name of Balaam beheld the Camp of Israel and exclaimed, u-tehi aharithi ka-mohu -- may my end, my aharit, be like unto Israel's! And generations hence, all the civilized non-Jewish world will join us, year after year, in everlasting tribute to the Jewish fighters of the Warsaw ghetto, hailing the memory of the martyrs to aharit. It is because of their exemplary courage and unexcelled sense of aharayut that, despite persecutions and oppressions, hatred and envy, a glorious aharit will prevail for the people of Israel.

It is this understanding of the theme of responsibility and faith in the future that makes the whole episode of the Exodus from Egypt, which we read today, so much more meaningful. Is not the behavior of the Israelites most strange? They were, after, the direct beneficiaries of the emancipation. And yet, at the first sign of crisis they cried out to Moses ha-mibli ein kevarim be'mitzrayim lekahtanu le-mut ba-midbar -- "is there a shortage of graves in Egypt that you have taken us to die in the desert?" Why the sarcastic innuendo?

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Even stranger is ~~a~~ response of Moses. Al tira'u, "do not be afraid." Hityatzvu u're'u et yeshuat ha-Shem, "Stand by and look at the help that God will bring to you." Ha-Shem yilafhem lakhem v'atem taharishun, "the Lord will fight for you and you will be silent." Is this an invitation to passivity, to quietism? Is this the way to forge a free people? Is this the kind of attitude which can inspire a Warsaw Rebellion or a War for Israel's Independence?

I submit that the problem that runs like a golden thread through the entire history of those days was one of responsibility. And like all responsibility, at bottom it was a question of faith; and in this case, specifically faith in the future. The Children of Israel were never over-anxious about leaving Egypt. They were pulled out by Moses, and finally pushed out by Pharaoh. Their gift of liberty was a gratis endowment by a gracious Divinity, and so they felt no responsibility for their own fate or destiny. As a matter of fact, they did not really believe they had any noble destiny or decent fate. They considered themselves not actors in a great drama, but puppets in a show doomed to an early closing, quickly to be forgotten. Their complaint about their not being enough graves in Egypt and dying in the desert, revealed specifically their lack of faith in the future and, hence, their lack of any responsibility for their condition. Tov lanu avod et Mitzrayim Mi-mutenu ba-midbar -- better to be slaves in Egypt, without responsibilities, than to die in the desert -- without a future. They saw no aparit, hence felt no aparayut.

And the answer Moses gave was not, as is ordinarily imagined, an invitation to further irresponsibility. Quite the contrary! He said to them: al tira'u, stop being afraid! If you want God to help you, if you want yeshuat ha-Shem, do not just sit around moping, do not just stand there with folded arms. Rather, hityatzvu -- stand up straight, stand on your own two feet, assert the strength and the courage and the sense of responsibility God has given you. Then and only then v're'u et-yeshuat ha-Shem, will you see the help of



the Lord!

That is why R. Judah the Prince in the Midrash (Mekhilta; see Torah Sheleimah Ex. 14:86) interprets the key phrase in Moses' response not as <sup>as</sup> declarative, "the Lord will fight for you, and you may keep quiet," but <sup>^</sup>interrogatory, as a question: Ha-Shem yillahem la-khem v'atem taharishun?

Do you really expect that God will fight for you, while you sit by as idle spectators, doing nothing? If you want to have an aharit, then you must learn to accept aharayut; and remember: it is worth taking upon yourselves <sup>a</sup>aharyut, because our people shall have an aharit. With these words, Moses led his people across the Red Sea, which the Lord split only after the Israelites had entered until the waters reached their nostrils. Only then, va-yosha ha-Shem ba-yom ha-hu et Yisrael mi-yad Mitrayim. On that day, ~~At that day~~ The day Israel acted proudly and with dignity and self-sacrifice and responsibility, did God deliver them from the Egyptians. And if va-yiru ha-am et ha-Shem if they learned to fear God, to accept the <sup>a</sup>aharyut of Torah and Mitzvot that He placed upon them, it was only because va-yaaminu ba-Shem u-ve'Mosheh avdo, only because of faith, only because of emunah; only because of their faith in God -- ~~because for~~ responsibility implies a religious personality; because they deserved others' faith in themselves -- <sup>for</sup> ~~because~~ responsibility implies reliability; and because of their faith in the future of our Jewish ideals, the Torah of Moses, the people of the Lord -- for responsibility implies faith in the future.

With this kind of responsibility, based on these kinds of faith, we too can, like our ancestors at the shore of the Red Sea, be caught up in a great song, in a life of Shirah, a perpetual, rising az yashir of felicity, of bliss, and of peace.