

"THE SHIELD OF ABRAHAM"

In the very first revelation to Abraham, God promises the patriarch: "And I will make of thee a great nation, and I will bless thee, and make thy name great, and be thou a blessing."

The Talmud (Pes. 117b) identified the four elements in this verse in a most unusual yet familiar way. The benediction, they said, refers to the Shemoneh Esreh prayer, and the promise was that henceforth and for all time the Name of God was to be linked with Abraham, with his son, and with his grandson. So the Rabbis said: ve'e'eskha le'goy gadol, zehu she'omrim Elokei Avraham, "And I will make of thee a great nation" refers to the expression, "The God of Abraham." Va-averekhekha, zehu she'omrim Elokei Yitzhak, "And I will bless thee" refers to the expression, "The God of Isaac." And va-agadlah shemekha, "I will make thy name great," refers to the expression Elokei Yaakov, "The God of Jacob." Thus it is that in the very beginning of our Shemoneh Esreh we bless God Who is Elokei Avraham, Elokei Yitzhak, and Elokei Yaakov -- God of Abraham, of Isaac, and of Jacob.

However, there is yet a fourth element in that promise, the final one, namely: ve'heyeh berakhah, "And be thou a blessing." What does this mean? To this the Talmud gave the following answer: Yakhol yihyu hotmin be'khulan, one might think that because the Name of God is linked to all three patriarchs, that therefore the

climax of the blessing, its hatimah or seal, would similarly include all three patriarchs. Therefore God says to Abraham, ve'heyeh berakhah, "Be thou a blessing," to indicate that bekha hatmin, the seal or climax of the blessing would mention only the name of Abraham and not the name of his son Isaac or his grandson Jacob. Thus it is that the seal of the first blessing of the nineteen of the Shemoneh Esreh is: magen Avraham, "Blessed art Thou, O Lord, Shield of Abraham."

What a strange remark! We can understand Abraham's joy at knowing that his child and grandchild would, like him, be bound up with the divine Name. Who of us would not give all he has if he could be assured that his children and grandchildren would follow in his footsteps of loyalty to God? But what is astonishing is the implication that Abraham does not want to share the lime-light with his own progeny, that he wishes to reserve the choicest part exclusively for himself -- only his name will be present in the hatimah or seal of the blessing, not that of Isaac and Jacob. Does this mean that Abraham was a spiritual egotist? Did not our Rabbis teach us that ein ha-av mitkanei bi'veno, v'ein ha-rav mitkanei be'talmido, that a father is not jealous of the achievements of his son and a teacher does not envy the attainments of his students?

An answer to this question is offered by the great Rabbi of Kotzk, who reinterprets the entire Talmudic passage. He maintains that it does not at all refer to the living personalities of Abraham, and Isaac, and Jacob, but rather to the values which they

symbolize in the Jewish tradition. Abraham has always been the symbol of hessed, of charity or love. It is he who prays even for the wicked men of Sodom; it is he who demonstrates noble generosity towards Lot; it is he who extends himself for Hagar. Isaac symbolizes avodah, service. This term comprehends both sacrifices and prayer; and Isaac was the sacrifice in the great Akedah, and it was he whom his bride Rebecca first met whilst he was praying. Finally, Jacob is representative of the quality of Torah, for he is described as yoshev ohalim, one who dwells in the tents -- and our tradition has identified these tents as the tents of Torah, the schools.

Therefore, when we say in our Shemoneh Esreh that we praise God Who is Elokei Avraham, Elokei Yitzhak, v'Elokei Yaakov -- the God of Abraham and of Isaac and of Jacob -- we are offering a symbolic affirmation of the Mishnah which tells us that al sheloshah devarim ha-olam omed, that the world rests on three great principles: al ha-torah al ha-avodah v'al gemillat hasadim, on that of the study of Torah, on service, and on the doing of good deeds. These represent, in reverse order, Abraham and Isaac and Jacob.

Yet, and this is the climax of the blessing according to the interpretation of the Kotzker, the greatest of all these qualities, the most preeminent of these three sublime Jewish principles, the one which alone can lead us out of exile into ge'ulah and is therefore the most redemptive of all, is -- gemillat hasadim, the doing of good deeds, the act of hessed, symbolized by Abraham. Thus, when the Rabbis quote God as saying to Abraham bekha hotmin, that

only he, Abraham, would be present in the seal of the blessing, they meant that good deeds of kindness are superior to study and to prayer (service) as Jewish qualities. Hence, when we bless God Who is magen Avraham, "the Shield of Abraham," we affirm in the form of prayer that hessed is greater than study or prayer.

Now, this is a beautiful and satisfying explanation -- but not satisfying enough. For to assert that gemillat hasadim is accorded greater value in the Jewish tradition than either Torah or avodah is to violate the spirit of the Mishnah which tells us clearly that al sheloshah devarim ha-olam omed, that the world rests on three principles, a statement which implies the equality of all three values. A world, like a tripod table, is unstable and wobbly if one leg is longer than the other two.

I would therefore venture the following modification of the Kotzker's interpretation of the Talmudic passage. All three values are equal in essence, in content. However -- and this is the whole point of the Agadah -- each of these three must be expressed and effectuated in a manner of hessed. It is possible to practice Torah and avodah and gemillat hasadim in a manner that is crude and undistinguished and ungracious; and it is possible to endow the same three acts with the seal of hessed, with love and with warmth. When, therefore, we mention only the name of Abraham in the seal of the blessing, as magen Avraham, what we are saying is that all three qualities, represented by the three patriarchs, must find their final

form or expression, their hatimah or seal, in the manner symbolized by Abraham: hessed.

Take avodah, or prayer, for instance. It is possible to offer up our service in a very ordinary manner: dry, dessicated, formal, and deadly boring. But it is also possible to express avodah in the form of hessed, to seal our prayer with love and with charm, by offering up our inner participation, our warmth, our passion.

An English poet once wrote that prayer must be

The motion of a hidden fire
That trembles in the breast.
Prayer is the burden of a sigh,
The falling of a tear,
The upward glancing of an eye
When none but God is near.

I think that helps us define what is meant by avodah expressed as hessed. I do not believe that this kind of loving service, this kind of prayer with charm, can possibly survive in an atmosphere of spiritual discourtesy where neighborly conversation takes precedence over the dialogue with God, where prayer is punctuated by the exchange of information about fashions, about the stock market, or about real estate deals.

I know very well that there are those who are irritated with such admonitions from the pulpit. They maintain that a dose of whispering and conversation is important in order to preserve the quality they refer to as "heimishkeit." But let us make it clear:

there are two kinds of "heimishkeit" -- one, when you bring your home into the synagogue, when you introduce into the sanctuary the spirit of the dining room and the living room and the office; and the second, when you take the spirit of the House of God and bring it into your own apartment and residence and place of business.

The first kind we can certainly do without. It develops into rudeness and crudeness. It is the second which is truly "heimishkeit," and which brings with it the possibilities of avodah in the form or seal of hessed. To practice the first kind of "heimishkeit" is to strip the service of any kind of hessed, and in effect to break to smitherns the magen Avraham.

Torah, too, can be expressed with or without the quality of hessed. How unfortunate when the principles of Torah, its halakhot, are dispensed as if they were programmed in a computer within the cranium and can be effected merely by pushing a mental button without regard for those to whom it is directed. Torah taught in such a manner, decisions of halakhah offered in such a spirit, are a violation of the principle of gemillat hasadim. The Torah itself is described in the Torah as be'fikha u-vi'levavekha la-asoto, "it is in thy mouth and in thy heart to do it." If we of the Torah community want Torah to be practiced in real life, la-asoto, then we must make sure that we know how to articulate it graciously, be'fikha, and that we know how to apply it charitably, taking into consideration the fears and the aspirations and the hopes and the sensitivities of bi'levavekha, the heart of each and every one of

those to whom we speak. A teaching of Torah is often rejected if it is presented in an authoritarian manner, with negativism and obvious unconcern for people. Yet the same principle when enunciated with hessed, with warmth and humility and compassion, will not only be accepted but even admired.

And this is true not only of a proclamation of Torah, but also of the response to it by people of Torah. If sometimes we are unhappy with a decision, and we have good reason to oppose it, let us do so --but always charitably, graciously, with hessed. One of our problems is that in our Orthodox communal controversies -- and there is nothing wrong with controversy as such -- the level of our debate has not been high enough. We must get rid of the strident accents of our public discourse. We must do away with the bellicose posturing and the ubiquitous belligerence that have tended to corrupt serious dialogue within the Orthodox community. Our expression of our opinions of Torah must be done with a healthy dose of gemillat hasadim.

(Thus, in commenting on the verse in Proverbs torat hessed al leshon'ah, the Rabbis ask: Is there, then, a Torah of hessed and a torah she'enah shel hessed, a Torah without hessed? And they answer: Yes, a torah she'enah shel hessed is the Torah one studies but does not teach, whereas a Torah of hessed is when one is successful both in li'lmod and u-le'lamed, in learning and teaching. What they meant is that one can become a great scholar even without hessed,

but without this "seal" he never can be successful in transmitting what he knows to others, for they will never accept it: ein ha-kapdan melamed, a man who is stingy and strict and ungenerous can never be a teacher. It is only when one has the quality of hessed that he can be successful in imparting his knowledge and in persuading others to accept the point of view and the whole spirit of Torah.)

This holds true not only for Torah in its formal religious sense, but for any principle to which we are deeply committed. In our times, for instance, our country is split down the middle in very serious dissent on questions of life and death, questions of war and peace, questions of poverty and wealth, questions of civil rights and their absence. The entire population is polarized as it has rarely been before in the living memory of most of us. Now, dissent is not bad for a democracy; it may even be very good. Only a short while ago we were complaining that the college population seemed to be asleep and insensitive to the great issues of the day. But dissent, too, must be performed in an atmosphere of hessed. When dissent becomes unruly and crude, then it reflects unworthily on the principle of dissent itself. When college students wish to make their opinions known in opposition to the Administration, that is a healthy sign of a vigorous democracy. But when their dissent is expressed in discourtesy to a Secretary of State or a Secretary of Defense, if there is no gemillat hasadim in their souls, no respect for the right of the so-called Establishment to have its

own opinions, then that dissent becomes dangerous and reprehensible.

Finally, the most interesting aspect of this interpretation is the conclusion that gemillat hasadim itself must be expressed in the form of gemillat hasadim! Even kindness must be effected in a kind manner. One can give alms to the poor in such a manner that he sustains the body and destroys the soul of the poor man by humiliation. It is possible to lend a man money, and thus perform a true gemillat hasadim, not taking any interest -- but taking a part of his heart away from him, for there is no hessed in such good deeds.

In our own society it is not usual for the donor to give his contribution directly to the recipient. It is usually done through an agency or an institution for which other individuals solicit gifts. No wonder the Rabbis say that the me'aseh, the solicitor, performs a greater mitzvah than the oseh, the contributor -- for all too often, alas, the solicitor is met with an attitude which is most discouraging. If I give, whether I give much or little, even if I do not give at all, at least I must do so in a manner of hessed, with grace and with charm. The solicitor is here to help me perform a mitzvah; he should not be the butt of my resentment. If I only give, that reveals an intellectual decision; but if I give with hessed, it reveals my character and personality. Merely to give, but to do so gruffly, means that I am more of a gomel than one who practices hasadim. Both are necessary -- at all times.

Let us therefore learn how to express all three great values, those of Torah and avodah and gemillat hasadim, in the way that Abraham would have wished: in the way of hessed, as has been taught to him by Almighty God, the Magen Avraham.

Having learned this, we shall then be able to turn to the Almighty Himself and ask of Him not only that He deal with us kindly, but that this kindness itself be expressed in a form of graciousness; not only that He be a gomel hasadim to His people Israel, but that He be a gomel hasadim tovim l'amo Yisrael -- that He perform good acts of kindness towards His people Israel.