

"THOUGHTS OF SPRING"

Spring has always had a powerful, intoxicating effect upon human beings. In ancient days, particularly in agricultural societies, the coming of Spring and the experience of the rebirth of Nature under a carpet of velvety green was celebrated in religion, myth, and poetry. We modern city-dwellers are also not immune to the magic of this most charming of all seasons. We begin to emerge from our over-heated and under-ventilated apartments and make our way to the Park and Drive, reassuring ourselves that there really is a pulsating natural world beyond the steel and concrete that circumscribe our existence, hopeful that the colds and the rheumatism, the pains and the fatigue will soon go away. Surely, this euphoria, this exhilaration, this loveliness cannot not fail to find expression in Judaism. Indeed, to paraphrase the poet, in Spring, especially in the month of Nisan, and most especially on Hol Hamoed Pesah, does an old-and-yet-young nation's fancy begin to turn to thoughts of love --- love of God, of Torah, of Israel, of fellow man. Even as the first blades of grass and the first blossoms open up to the warm carresses of the Spring sunshine, so does the Jewish soul slowly turn to the God of Israel, who calls to us, in the immortal words of King Solomon in the Shir ha-Shirim we read this morning's, Kumi lakh rayati yafati u-lekhi lakh, "Rise up, my love, my fair one, and come away. For lo, the winter is past, the rain is over and gone. The flowers appear on the earth; the time of singing is come, and the voice of the turtle-dove is heard in our land... Arise my love, my fair one, and come away." These are the words God addressed to our people in the Springtime of our history, when He beckoned them to follow Him lovingly out of Egypt and through the parched desert of Sinai to the Promised Land; and these are the words He addresses to kelal Yisrael every year at this same time. For indeed, Spring/ is, above all else, a time for love.

How should this love express itself? Primarily through trying to know God. Maimonides taught, lefi ha-deiah ha-ahavah, knowledge and love are indissolubly intertwined. Our Torah Reading on this Sabbath of Shir ha-Shirim speaks of Moses' powerful yearning to know God ever more. And knowing God, the Netziv (Haamek Davar on Va'era) teaches, is a matter of studying Torah. Indeed, the Halakhah considers the blessing of ahavah rabbah to be a birkhat ha-torah, for this great mutual love between God and Israel is expressed through Torah. When you know what God asks of us, you know Him. And to know Him^{to}/is to love Him.

Solomon, in his immortal parable of Shir ha-Shirim, put it more poetically and symbolically--- and far more beautifully. Heviani el bet-ha-yayim ve'diglo alai ahavah, "he has brought me to the house of wine and his banner over me is love." Strange words, are they not? The sign of Solomon's love is --- taking his beloved to a tavern!! The Midrash, however, penetrated to the depths of Solomon's real meaning. The bet ha-yayin, the house of wine, symbolizes, ^{it maintains,} ~~they tell us,~~ Sinai -- or, the Torah. In what ways, are Torah and wine similar? How does this symbolize love? In three ways, the Rabbis tell us.

First, ke'shem she-ha-yayin megadel et ha-guf, kakh divrei Torah... Just as wine makes a man feel bigger, giving him a feeling of physical strength and confidence, so the words of the Torah. Torah, indeed, is megadel, it elevates us, it makes us worthier. Modern men often suffer a feeling of worthlessness, of inadequacy and impotence in the face of the powerful, mechanized, frightening, ^{impersonal} world in which we live. Psychologically, some of us spend all our lives in a kind of winter, where we huddle in an artificially warmed area, provided with all the comforts we can garner, but knowing full well that outside all is dark bleak and and/cold, that we are really fooling ourselves because life is indeed unfriendly, hostile, threatening. For such people, for whom all of existence is a "winter of discontent," the Torah on this day offers "the banner of love": Torah. For Torah teaches that God is concerned with you, even if no one else is. Torah, therefore, with its sacred regimen of mitzvot and its sublime doctrine of divine sympathy, can drive away these false feelings of nothingness, of the triviality of

humanity, of the ineffectualness of human endeavor. Like wine, it can exhilarate and make a man not only feel big but -- be big, spiritually.

The second similarity is this: u-mah ha-yayin kol mi she'ohavo eino saveia kakh ha-Torah. Just as the one who loves wine is never satisfied with what he has, but desires more, so Torah -- the more you have of it, the more you want. This indeed is a characteristic of love: it constantly seeks greater fulfillment. How important this is for contemporary men! In our prosperous society we are granted the opportunity of a wider variety of new experiences than most men before us ever had. Every mode of traveling is available to us, from cruises to flights to safaris. Every hobby and avocation is within our reach --- reading, money-making, amusement, amateur acting, painting, sports, flying, skiing -- we can taste of any experience our hearts desire. Yet, for all this, all we do is -- taste. We begin a **project** -- and we easily tire and become bored. Our lives are beset by a terrible ennui. We flit from interest to interest -- and in each we lose interest. Nothing seems able to hold us. Before we have become engaged in any new activity, we already are sated. We have had enough. Indeed, in the modern idiom, we have "had it." Even the normal pleasures of life fail to provide us with any zest. So we spend our days and years not quite knowing what we want, always discovering that what we thought was so attractive is really quite dull. We are beset by "dead ends" all about us. To such men and women, Solomon offers: the love of Torah. Try it, he tells us, throw ^{your} ~~me~~self into it, and you will discover that, like the lover of wine who never has enough, so Torah draws you in ever/ deeper, and the more you drink of its delights, the more you pine for it. Not only the study of Torah, but the full life of Torah and Mitzvot, whether in personal conduct/ or in supporting Yeshivot or other such institutions, gives your life direction and purpose and interest and a clear and endless road ahead. Here, indeed, is the way out of the vicious cycle of ennui and boredom and meaninglessness.

Finally, u-mah ha-yayin shotav nikarim, kakh divrei Torah. Just as people

recognize immediately those given to excessive indulgence in wine, so does the lover of Torah become immediately identifiable. Torah is more than an abstract discipline. It changes your life, it transforms your whole way of living, it makes a new person of you. Torah gives you a new identity, so that even a stranger, if he is perceptive, will recognize your spiritual strength even as he can recognize the emotional weakness of the wine-drinker who cannot stop. The Jew who does not want to become lost in the faceless crowd, who does not want to be consigned to eternal oblivion as just another clipher in an over-populated world -- let him take to Torah, even as others take to drink. Let him imbibe the precious draughts of the wisdom of the ages. Let him feel the warm glow of ahavat ha-Torah, and no longer will he be faceless and nameless. "All the world loves a lover" --- and how much more so the lover of Torah!!

These, then, are some of the Spring thoughts that come to mind on this Shabbat of Pesah and Solomon's Song of Songs. Our fancy turns to thoughts of love, and that means Torah. Like wine, Torah gives a feeling of elevation, a thirst for more, and an identity or way of being recognized by God and man. And although our society sometimes threatens to turn the wine of the atmosphere into vinegar; although occasionally a lingering winter rain and chilly wind make the Spring in our hearts seem far off; although our environment may be inundated with vulgarity, flooded with the debris of moral failure, drowned with derision for our old love and our old Torah, and eluded with doubts; nevertheless, again in the words of the Wise King, mayim rabbim lo yukhlu li'khabot et ha-ahavah u-neharot lo yishtefuha, "Many waters cannot quench love, neither can the floods drown it."

It is a sublime and heavenly romance to which the Jewish tradition beckons us this day.