

"CAUGHT NAPPING"

The world is growing ever stranger, more alien, and more ominous for the Jew. The older we get, the less we seem to understand. Certainly, the last 25 years have been some of the stormiest of Jewish history, what theologians would call "apocalyptic" -- revealing something terribly unusual, a new dimension, the "finger of God" intruding into the affairs of man. All of us have a sense of great meaning impregnating the life of our times, but it is all terribly vague and we do not quite know what that meaning means. We know in our bones that the history of our age is extraordinarily significant, but we do not know exactly what that significance signifies.

For the State of Israel, events peaked during June 1967, and they have remained on a high plateau since. Diaspora Jewry has been in a state of disarray and disorientation during the last several months with the news from Poland and France, from the Arab countries, and now the United States.

The question is: How are we going to react? Indeed, even more fundamentally, are we going to react at all, other than the hysteria and resentment which seized us during the recent crisis? Our present nervous outbursts are understandable, maybe necessary, but not necessarily creative or even adequate. I am afraid that we will be distracted by all the shouting and the demonstrating, by the limited political victories we have won in

this city, and we will fail to confront the consequences of our new condition and to spell out their implications.

The reason for this fear is the perverse tendency of human nature to lapse into lethargy the moment that the greatest alertness is required of us. We somehow turn drowsy when great initiatives are needed. As we reach the very point of the climax of a crisis, when we have the opportunity to direct history and mold events and take matters into our own hands and become the masters of our own fate, we fall into a paralyzing coma, and allow events to direct us as we hypnotize ourselves with the belief that things will not change, that the "good old times" will continue into the future.

After three days of preparation for the giving of the Torah, we read *וַיְהִי בַּיּוֹם הַשְּׁלִישִׁי בְּהִיוֹת בְּבוֹקֶר וַיֵּר קוֹל אֱלֹהִים וּבְרָקִים...*, that on the morning of the third day Moses came to his people, and there was thunder and lightning and the voice of the shofar was very strong. Why the need for this eruption of nature and all this noise? The Rabbis (*שם"ר פ"א י"ד*) answer, somewhat surprisingly, that the Israelites overslept on the morning of revelation. The Jews were caught napping! And the Sages apply to them the words of God, as reported by the Prophet Isaiah (50:2), *לָמָּה זָכַרְתִּי אֲלֵי קוֹלִי אֲכִיל עֹדֶנּוּ* "Why when I came, was there no man? When I called, was there none to answer?"

It is for this reason, according to some of our authorities, that we have the custom of staying awake all night and studying Torah on the eve of Shavuot -- it is a kind of compensation for having overslept the morning of the first Shavuot when the Torah was given. For this reason, too, I believe, the shofar is considered today a kind of divine alarm to rouse us from our slumber; indeed, this is the famous explanation offered by Maimonides as to the meaning of shofar: שופר יעלה ויגיד "Wake up ye slumberers from your sleep."

It is a sad commentary on human nature that its most reprehensive gesture in response to crisis is not the clenched fist, symbol of resistance and determination; not the open hand, sign of generosity and brotherliness; not the furrowed brow, and indication of deep thought and clear analysis; but -- a yawn. עין פתוחה ופה פתוח.

Jewish history unfortunately supports this symbolic criticism of Israel by the Sages. Too often was it true that God came and found no man, called and heard no answer; indeed, even the שופר frequently failed to rouse them. Nature's and God's own alarm clocks went unheeded and failed to shake us from our slumbers. Hitler published his determination for a "final solution." As the Holocaust gathered momentum, there was still time to save many, many lives. But who would believe it? It was, in truth, too terrible to believe. So we assumed that the whole business was an aberration, that things would go on as they always had in the past,

that if we closed our eyes to it and dreamed a bit, the bad specter would go away. Even today we sometimes think about it in utter disbelief. We sleep.

Today, we find a not dissimilar reaction to the fate of Russian Jewry. Despite all we are doing, we are not doing anywhere near enough. Young Jewish students, almost totally without funds, seem to be doing more than the entire organized adult Jewish community, with the exception of a few individuals who have performed heroic service in giving voice to the "Jews of Silence."

היום אנחנו רואים תגובה דומה למצב היהודים ברוסיה.

Now we learn that the Jews in Egypt and Iraq and Poland have overstayed their visits, they have overslept. Perhaps the greatest tragedy of all is that of one of the Jewish victims of Iraq brutality, whose brother in America bemoaned the fact that the victim considered himself more Iraqi than Jewish, that he made it a point not to have any contacts with Israel. Here is a man who lulled himself into an assimilationist trance, into a patriotic stupor -- and the sleep was not at all comfortable, for it turned into a ghastly nightmare! Consider the tragic dimensions of that story: Here is a man who could have died defending the freedom of his own people in his homeland, the Holy Land of Israel. Even better, he could have lived heroically and with dignity as a Jew in the State of Israel. But he didn't, and when the time came to leave Iraq, he marshalled together all the rationalizations ne-

cessary for him to remain. So he slept. And in the end, his limp body dangled before the barking dogs of that mad Baghdad crowd, God rest his soul.

But let us not speak only of others. We American Jews are beset by problems that we, in our remarkable naiveté, thought had long been solved and no longer existed. We too are dormant; our noises and demonstrations do not mean that we are really awake to the realities. We are exercised terribly over Black anti-Semitism. I am more concerned over the White anti-Semitism that it evokes and will yet evoke, the latent Jew-hatred that will come crawling out of the white woodwork in response to the Black charmers. Black anti-Semitism may be crude and loud and even primitive. White anti-Semitism is subtler, quieter, more gentle and more "gentlemanly" -- and therefore a hundred times more pervasive and more dangerous.

Jewish destiny on this continent and throughout the world is tied in with the State of Israel. Justly or unjustly, we have reason to feel the identity of anti-Semitism with much of anti-Israelism. We are all up against the Wall of Silence. Who can doubt the quiet, brooding, and profound animosity against us as Jews that lies just under the surface of so many non-Jews.

Furthermore, anti-Semitism is only a part of the problem. Worse yet is the disintegration of a major part of the Jewish community. Jewish identity itself has come into question. All the

chickens of betrayal and apathy are coming home to roost after the years of ignorance and neglect of Jewish education. Thus we find an alarming increase in intermarriage, in attrition from our ranks, and in genuine self-hatred of Jews on the campus. If, as is true, Orthodoxy is growing in many areas and is stronger than it was before, it nevertheless is true that the major part of the Jewish community is progressively becoming more alienated. And while we ought to be happy that Jewish observance and learning is being strengthened in our own circles, that we are gaining somewhat, it nevertheless is most depressing to note that the largest segment of the community is gradually disappearing.

We American Jews must, at thi point of our story, snap out of our slumber and begin to confront our perilous conditions. If we hear the *קול ישראל*, then we must wake up and respond -- and not with a yawn.

First, we must make massive efforts at Jewish education. All that has taken place before is only a drop of the bucket. And this means not only money, and a great, great deal of it, but also a determined effort to show new respect and status for scholars and for Jewish knowledge and for the knowledge of Torah. Professor Leonard Fein of Boston, in an address to the organization of American Jewish federated charities, made a telling point when he asserted that all the money will be misspent if Jewish youngsters observe

that honor and status is accorded exclusively to people of wealth and politics and society, and that people of learning are neither recognized nor consulted as to the direction of the community. Actions speak louder than words, even than budgets. As long as young people see that it is the socially and economically prominent man who, alone, is respected by the community and whose leadership is solicited for it, then all the money we put into Jewish education may be wasted.

Second, we must give new and serious thought to Aliyah as a major alternative to our condition. Of course, the very idea of Aliyah as a serious option for American Jews is repugnant to the cherished dogma of American Jewish middle-class liberals; but I suspect that these dogma will not survive for long anyway.

I feel I would be derelict in my duty as a Rabbi if I did not forcefully bring to your attention the matter of Aliyah -- for your sake and for the sake of your families. Reject the idea if you will, but think about it first. I do not want to sound alarmist. Quite possibly, things will quiet down and the country will get back to its old ways and recapture its old strengths.

Perhaps those people who say: "Don't get excited, it will blow over," are right. Perhaps it will "blow over." But the word "blow" may be taken in its transitive and not only in its intransitive sense -- and instead of the storm "blowing over" in the sense of spending itself, it will "blow over" all that we have



built and accomplished and achieved in all these decades in America, that it will utterly destroy everything from our great institutions to our most precious values.

I make no predictions about the future of Jews in this country. But I do know that all the easy assumptions that all will go well because all has gone well in the past are a dangerous illusion. They are the marks of sleep, and it is a sleep that is comatose. Besides, the notion that all "has gone well" in the past is a pretentious fallacy. The "good old days" never existed.

No longer must Aliyah be the stuff of ethereal and endless debates. No longer must Aliyah be the idle speculation of "Zionists," who have been defined as two people who decide that a third should give money so that a fourth should emigrate to Israel. No longer must Aliyah be considered as idealism, as a mitzvah -- most unfortunately, the time for that too is almost past. Now is the time to consider Aliyah as a real urgent option for our own good and security and safety and future. This is our God-given opportunity for us by and for ourselves, to determine our future, and not to be tossed about by the tempests of history without as much as taking leave of us.

Maybe we shall decide against Aliyah. I suspect that most of us will. So be it. But let us do the deciding, let us do it with full knowledge and understanding, and let not our decisions be made for us by the impersonal forces of history. We must act or



refuse to act -- but we must do so responsibly.

When history opens a door for us, inviting us to walk through to new chambers and new corridors, let us consider carefully whether we shall take the step. But let us not be paralyzed into somnolence and remain asleep at the doorstep. For that door may close, never to open again.

I cannot get out of my mind the picture of the limp body of that Iraqi Jew swinging from the scaffold in Baghdad, surrounded by the howling mobs. How loyal he was to Iraq, how little he suspected what would happen. How gently he slept while the storm gathered. Neither can I get out of my mind the picture of that young Jewish student in a Pacific Northwest university, of whom I spoke two or three weeks ago, who damned Israel because it did not adopt his attitude to Vietnam, one of a number of Jewish students possessed of great moral passion who use that moral passion to denounce Israel and the Jewish community. They symbolize the two great threats -- of physical and spiritual extinction -- to which we must respond.

We must respond, and we must not sleep. We must neither shout nor yawn. We must do. At the very least, we must seriously consider. We must urge Aliyah as a living alternative. And we must, at the very same time, give new life to the spiritual regeneration of American Jewry. Both, though they seem to go in opposite directions, are necessary for each other.

Now is the time to wake up. We may now be confronting destiny. Let us be men, and let us be prepared to answer. When God comes, let us be there; when He calls, let us respond.

For if we sleep, then God too, *פדיוטא*, may be inert to us, and we shall be moved to lament, with David, *ה' ארם*, *ה' ארם* "Arise, O Lord, why dost Thou sleep?" It is a question which has no answer.

But if we are alert and seize the initiatives historically and spiritually, we shall be able to proclaim, again with David, *ה' ארם* "Behold, the Guardian of Israel neither sleeps nor slumbers."