

"RENEWAL"

The emphasis on and the quest for the new is often considered a modern phenomenon. Traditional societies are said to be past-oriented, and modern societies future-oriented.

That is largely true, but it is not completely accurate. Thus, two hundred years ago, in Eastern Europe -- which, in its cultural isolation, was for all practical purposes in the Middle Ages -- there arose the movement of Hasidism which laid claim to being a "new way" in "the service of the Lord." Furthermore, one of the distinguished personalities in the galaxy of saints produced by the early generations of Hasidism, the Gerer Rebbe (known for his great work, the " *נתיבות שלום* "), finds the appreciation of the new in the Bible itself. In his comment on the verse which begins the special portion of this morning,





*פסח ראשון לך חודש*, "This month is unto you the first of the months," the Gerer Rebbe points to the word *חודש*, month, and comments on its root, *חדש*, new. Thus, the Lord not only gave to Israel the month of Nisan as the first in the order of counting of the months, but He granted to Israel both the privilege and challenge of *חידוש*, renewal. "This month is the beginning of your renewal."



It is worth pondering, therefore, the role of the new and of novelty in Judaism as we read the portion of *אֲשֶׁר אֵלֶיךָ*.

At the very outset let us determine that we shall stay away from extremes -- both the extreme that declares that all that is new is bad, that *אֲשֶׁר אֵלֶיךָ*, and the one that looks upon the new as invariably good.

Life itself offers ample evidence to invalidate these extremes. Thus, hatred, intolerance, and cruelty are all old; vaccines, artificial limbs, and education rather than incarceration for the retarded -- are all new. At the same time, poison gas, the hydrogen bomb, and industrial pollution are all new, while Spring and love and sunset and friendship are all very, very old. Newness itself is neutral, and it needs further definition and understanding in order to form a value judgment.

Thus, the Gerer Rebbe points out that in Egypt our ancestors were confronted by two kinds of newness. One of them expressed the very depth of exile: *אֲשֶׁר אֵלֶיךָ* , "There arose a new King in Egypt." The exilehood of the Children of Israel expressed itself in their quest for the new being oriented to the innovations of their Egyptians overlords. The new expressed the Egyptian, not the Israelite spirit. At the same time, the signal for the redemption from Egypt was the commandment of the

Lord   , the inspiration to , the renewal that comes from within, and expresses the depths of one's own selfhood and identity. So that there is a form of the new that is approved, and a form that is disapproved. There is an authentic and liberating quest for the new, and one that is inauthentic and enslaving.

I suggest that we distinguish between them by referring to the inauthentic variety as , (Hiddush) or Novelty, and the authentic as , (Hit'hadshut) or Renewal.

What is the difference between them?

First, hiddush can degenerate into the pursuit of novelty for its own sake. The search for Novelty becomes self-activating, self-motivating, and self-validating. When this happens, hiddush begins to cast out the old, regardless of its value; and it does so carelessly, mindlessly, and recklessly. All that is not new is discarded in order to make place for the novel, even when the old may be more valuable than the new. When hiddush thus becomes irrational, we become slaves to chimerical Novelty, we develop this senseless passion for the new. This, in turn, evokes the reaction of rigidity by people who are determined therefore to be closed to all new expressions. That is how hiddush radicalizes religion, institutions, society, and families. Whereas hit'hadshut

avoids this simplistic approach. Mature Renewal recognizes that the validly new is often built on the old, and that, in addition, the old often contains new insights that must be discovered by persistent effort. Thus, the late Rav Kook of blessed memory, in a letter to his son (in the first volume of his *אמרי חיים*) writes as follows:

וכל דיוקן חסיד חסיד תלמידי חכמים שזכה להם ספרים ודברים שנתנו  
אין צורך לחזור עליהם ולהשכיחם ובהם אדם מקדשם חסיד  
האדם הישן, ולא יחלף להם בשום אופן. כי חסידם לא יקום כ"א  
כאשר יצא ממקור הישן... ודבר אחרים הוא השלמה בראייה.

The major disease of this generation lies in this, that it considers it unnecessary to review and understand deeply matters which are old; they seek the new in the absence of the old -- which can under no circumstances be achieved. For the new is firmly established only when it derives from the source of the old; as the Rabbis put it, the true servant of the Lord is one who reviews his studies not a hundred but a hundred and one times.

We recognize this as true in all branches of human knowledge -- the new is built on the old, whether in science or law or any other discipline. And we recognize it as true in all branches of human wisdom as well: the old is a mine filled with new insights.

I am not much of a fiction reader, but the majority of "novels" are just that -- novel; but they fail to achieve Renewal. As time goes on, all of them condense into the same old stories simply told in different ways. Rarely does one come across a classic

that has something genuinely new in it -- and that is new which can result in Renewal, which will offer new understanding, new perspectives, new dimensions every time you read it. Thus, we read the same Sidra every year -- the same stories, the same narrative, the same laws, and the same commandments. Only superficial people get bored by the repetitiousness. Intelligent people know every year there are new insights, every year new lessons, every year new horizons that are discovered in the old readings. This is Renewal, hit'hadshut.

Second, hiddush is ethically and spiritually neutral. The consequences of Novelty may be either advantageous or disadvantageous. The search for the new may result in *פ'זנה לזר קדן ער',* a Pharoahnic Novelty, that of building an Egyptian death-culture or pyramids based on slave labor -- or it can mean the innovation of beneficent creativity, the kind produced by Nobel-prize winners of the generations. But, because hiddush applies to the external and objective world, it is in itself morally indifferent. Technological progress is neither necessarily good nor necessarily evil.

However, Renewal or hit'hadshut, aims not at the external world, but at internal life, at the self, at the soul and the psyche, at character and personality. Hit'hadshut aims at creating newness not in the world of things, but in the world within.

Note the grammatical construction of the word *חידוש* -- it is reflexive: to make oneself new, to change oneself into something different and therefore something better. No wonder the Gerer Rebbe connected the word *חידוש* to *חדש חודש* -- the month or the lunar cycle is not really new, it is more a matter of renewal. Thus, hit'hadshut is always a moral act: a man must never be the same, but always renew himself.

Finally, hiddush for its own sake is meretricious, it is fundamentally illusory. The newness of *חדש* *חדש* is a bluff. The Rabbis told us that it was not really a new Pharoah; it was the same old Pharoah, only with new maliciousness: *חדש* *חדש*. Hiddush is all too often like the new car-styling -- which frequently means nothing but prettier and faster obsolescence. Too often, the passion for hiddush is the symptom of a spiritual malaise, of a threatening boredom, of an inner existential vacuum. People try to cover up the gaping and yawning chasm within their souls by a veneer of thrill-seeking Novelty. The search for innovation is so often not a reaction to dissatisfaction with the old, as much as to dissatisfaction with the self.

I recently saw a cartoon which I regard as significant. In it, we see Moses holding the Tablets as he comes down Mt. Sinai and a young man -- remarkably Hippie-looking -- says to him,

"Moses, could you redefine those commandments so as to make them more meaningful to the youth of today?"

That is the problem with hiddush. The Ten Commandments have just been given, but the passion for Novelty already considers them old! Too much of the call for relevance and redefinition and meaningfulness is utter nonsense. The "youth of today" ought, perhaps, be less pampered. Maybe, instead of bringing down the wisdom of the ages to the youth of today, the object ought to be to bring them up to that wisdom; to make the youth of today the mature adults of tomorrow, rather than confirming them in eternal adolescence. What we owe to the youth of today is to teach them how to discover new insights in the commandments of old -- the ability to renew themselves.

Hit'badshut is that building on the old, that preserving of the permanently valuable, even as we grope and search for the eternally valid in that which we have not yet learned, in the new. Hit'badshut means the renewal of the changing self, and it is that which gives Renewal the sense of permanence and true advancement.

Thus, we find two opinions amongst the later Talmudic authorities, as to the value of creative novelty even in Talmudic learning. Hiddush, the realm of novellae or new ideas and insights

in the study of Halakhah, was looked upon critically by Rabbi Hayyim of Volozhin, who felt that often the author of a hiddush will be so intoxicated with the pride of his discovery that it will lead him astray, will cause him to distort the objective truth in order to justify and vindicate his hiddush. Therefore, Rabbi Hayyim used to test his own פ'קד' extremely carefully, lest he become overimpressed and overanxious with establishing his own hiddush to the detriment of objective truth. He therefore counselled against feeling any special joy at offering a hiddush. Against him stood that great Talmudist amongst Hasidic masters, the author of "נש"ך", who welcomed the joy of hiddush, and who felt that the singular thrill of creative innovation in the world of intellect and Talmudic research was a positive good, it was the joy of mitzvah that ought to be encouraged. But whether we look askance at hiddush or welcome it, certainly both -- and all of Judaism -- agree that hit'hadshut is of the essence of spiritual growth in the Jewish tradition.

So on this Parshat Hahodesh we strive not for mere hiddush but for hit'hadshut. We shall not be satisfied with Novelty; we must aspire to Renewal.

The difference, in a practical sense, lies in the product of both quests for the new. Hiddush may make a man great, whereas



hit'hadshut will make of a man a great Jew.

When Rav Kook, of blessed memory, lay on his death bed, he was attended by the world-famous physician, Dr. Sondek, who was not an observant Jew. Rav Kook was much beholden to the great physician, and admired him greatly. During his last days, the sainted Chief Rabbi and mystic turned to the physician and said to him, "Dr. Sondek you are a great man. But I look forward to the day when we shall produce not only Jews who are great -- but also great Jews..."