

"O LORD, HOW LONG?"

A 357 The prophet Isaiah, in our Haftorah reading for this morning, gives expression to a fearful and heart-rending question which in its poignant brevity reflects the dismay and perplexity of religious Jews of the Twentieth Century at the dilemmas and disillusionments of our age. In this sixth chapter of the book, in which we ^{read} are told of the beginning of Isaiah's prophetic ministry, he is told by the Lord that he must remind and demand, reproach and command, warn and promise his people Israel in order to win them back from their wonted ways to the ways of Torah and G-d. It is a difficult mission at best, and an unenviable task even under the most ideal circumstances.

Does G-d at least encourage the reluctant prophet? Does he at least promise him that ultimately his efforts will prove successful and his work will bear fruit? No! Listen, instead, to the strange prediction.

וְיָשָׁא יְהוָה אֶל יִשְׂרָאֵל וְיֹאמַר אֶל הָעָם
וְיֹאמַר אֶל הָעָם וְיֹאמַר אֶל הָעָם
וְיֹאמַר אֶל הָעָם וְיֹאמַר אֶל הָעָם

"And He said: 'Go, and tell the people: Ye will hear indeed, but not understand; and ye shall see indeed, but not perceive. For the heart of this people is fat, and their ear is heavy, and their eye is shut ...' "

What a discouraging beginning! What a depressing future! The prophet will preach, and his words will go in one ear and out the other. The people will see him but they will not care to know what bothers him. They will have obtuse hearts, heavy ears, and closed eyes. The prophet will rush to them trying to save them in time -- and they will turn their backs on him. How this must have grieved the noble, sensitive prophet. How pained he must have been, not so much by the personal failure of his mission, but by the unbearable tragedy of his people. The more he calls them to return, the farther they wander, the more he preaches, the more oblivious they remain to his message.

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So, in utter frustration, and in a heart heavy with pain and grief at the pitiful plight of his people, he cries out: Ha-shem, ad matai: -- "O Lord, How Long?" How long this obtuseness, how long the shut eyes, the heavy ears? How long the obliviousness to the oblivion in which they are plunging? How long the blindness to Torah, the abandonment of all that is beautiful and noble in G-d's world and G-d's word? O Lord, How long?

Is not this the very same reaction that we committed Jews share when we observe the unJewishness of our surroundings.⁷ We notice the widespread desecration of Shabbat, and within us there comes a voice: "O Lord, How long?" We observe the fraud of "kosher-style," and we feel like crying out: "O Lord, How long?" We read about so many young people who remain college sophomores throughout their adult life, speaking with a dogmatic flippancy about a religion of which they know nothing, and we say: "O Lord, How long?" We have lived to see the State of Israel rebuilt, a miracle if there ever was one, clear testimony to the historic direction by the one G-d, and nevertheless G-d and His Torah seem to suffer from studied neglect in the Holyland._E "O Lord, How long?"

Look at it this way. Our people have been suffering from a long process of spiritual decay, of religious disintegration, since the Emancipation some one hundred and fifty years ago. During this century and a half many marvelous things have happened. Most important amongst them are the great holocausts of Europe and the miraculous founding of the State of Israel. Yet our tragedy is that our people have not reacted as they should! Shim'u shamua ve'al tavinu. We have heard the historic news but have failed to assimilate it into our world view. Re'u ra'o ve'al teda'u. We have seen the singular acts of destiny, but have failed to integrate them into our lives. Hashm^eyn lev ha-am ha-zeh. Our hearts, let us admit it, have grown callous and insensitive, prosaic and dull, fat and only semi-conscious.

until

And what is the answer? The prophet quotes the word of G-d in three verses

וזה שמואל אדם והוא נחמה שלמה למחנה, וכתב ביום שבת וזוהי חזונוה ברכי הוואר,
יחד עם זה שיהיה ולמה והיה למחנה, כמלאה ובמלאה ואלו של כל אברהם ים, שם קורב

"And He answers: 'Until cities be waste without inhabitants, and houses without man, and the land become utterly waste ... And if there be yet a tenth in it, it shall be eaten up; as a terebinth, and as an oak, whose stock remaineth, when they ^{cast their} ~~can't bear~~ leaves, so the ~~holy~~ seed shall be the stock thereof.' "

I believe that these three answers are three indications of the turning point in the entire religious character of our people. Allow me to mention them to you, although in somewhat a different order from that of the prophet.

First is: Zera kodesh matzavtah. Israel is the Holy seed, which is the stock. How long? ~~Until~~^{Until} our people realize who they are. Until we become aware of the fact that we are Holy seeds -- descended from saints, from men of G-d. Until we realize that we ourselves are the seeds of Holiness.

Oh, we Jews are not really oblivious to the greatness of our forbears. Quite often do we brag about our "Yichus." The trouble is that we all too often dissociate zera from kodesh, the "seeds" from the "Holy." We have all too often reduced the soaring statures of our saints to fit the minuscule standards of our own society. We have secularized the heroes of sacred

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history. We have acknowledged that our people were brave, that they were bright; we have forgotten that they were primarily Holy. Of Moses, the man of G-d, we have made a mere liberator. Of Isaiah, who saw the vision of Holy, Holy, Holy, we have made a mere social reformer. Jeremiah has become for us a diplomatic moralist, rather than the lofty visionary he was. Amos is not the stormy prophet, but a pre-modern proponent of economic equality. The Maccabees were not the great battlers for the Lord, but nationalistic insurrectionists. And Rabbi Akiva, perhaps one of the greatest figures of all Jewish history, in his saintliness and his wisdom, was merely a shrewd revolutionary, plotting against the Roman Empire. We have divested the great ones of Israel of their Kedushah, their Holiness, and have begun to view them with the reducing spectacles of our own lives. The turning point, then, will come when we stop viewing the giants of Judaism merely as social reformers and labor leaders and military heroes. True, they were that too, but they were far more. They were men of Holiness! Which means that we, the stock of Israel, are zera Kodesh -- Holy seeds!

And if so, then we can attain the spirituality of our heritage, for we are the Holy seed. When we know that we are heirs to the religious greatness of our forbears, we can appreciate our own spiritual capacity. The very nature of our heritage of Kedushah places the obligation of an inescapable destiny upon us.

Having made us aware of the fact that we have a sublime spiritual potential, G-d now impresses upon Isaiah the necessity to realize how terrible is a failure to live up to that potential. This second answer consists of three haunting images: a ghost town, a deserted house, and a ravaged meadow. Common to all three is the tragedy of wasted potential, aborted possibilities, unfulfilled functions.

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Instead of busy city squares, we have all the facilities of civic life, but dead silence reigns. Sha'u arim me'ein yoshev.

Instead of returning home and being greeted by the excited and warm voices of loving relatives, we have walls and furniture and artifacts -- but our echo rebounds in the great emptiness. U'vatim me'ein adam.

Instead of green living forests, life filled and colorful meadows, we have only scorched tree stumps and charcoal skeletons, abandoned by the birds and even by the insects. Ve'ha-adamah tish'eh shemamah.

Town, house, earth: All are present, ready and waiting to be fulfilled and used, but -- they are wasted, unspent, unused.

It is not difficult for people to sense the tragedy and utility of such haunting scenes. What Isaiah is told is that Jews will remain senseless to G-d and Torah until they realize that just as it is tragically absurd to have a town without society, a home without family, a forest without life, so is it a criminal matter to have a Torah and not observe it, a soul and not develop it, a spirit and not exploit it. O Lord, how long? you ask. -- ^{until} ~~Will~~ your people understand that they have the capacity for spiritual richness but are letting it atrophy; ^{that} they have the potential for noble character, and are squandering it by neglect.

Having learned the first point, that we are zera kodesh, we must now appreciate the senselessness of that destiny of Kedushah unfulfilled. We must realize that assimilation and irreligion and unJewishness for the Jew are an abortion of the spirit. Unstudied Torah is as ghastly as a ghost town. Unobserved mitzvot are as painfully frustrating as a home without the sound of children. Untapped character potential and unused capacity for love are as agonizingly dismal as a dead forest. When they will learn this they will have learned to understand, to know -- and to return to G-d.

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But there is yet a third requirement before the complete answer to Ha-shem, ad matai can be given. Granted that we are zera kodesh, Holy seed, and granted that it is bad to waste good potential. But the question is: Does Jewry still have this potential? Is it not perhaps true that as a result of one hundred and fifty years of going downhill, that the direction of Jewish development is irreversible? Is it not possible that the integrity of Judaism, as we have known it in the past, can ⁿever be reestablished?

And the answer given to the prophet is: Ka'elah ve'cha'alon asher be'shallekhet matzevet bam.

"As a terebinth, and as an oak, whose stock remaineth, when they ~~can't~~ cast their ~~bear~~ leaves, so the Holy seed shall be the stock thereof."

What a powerful image! Here is a giant, stately oak, reigning over the landscape. Suddenly, violence strikes -- whether a gale, a fire, or the wielding of an axe by humans -- and the leaves are cast off, twigs snapped, branches broken and twisted. It is a condition of shallekhet. Nothing remains but the bare trunks, a solitary stump, "the stock thereof" -- a mere matzevet. Gone is the majestic oak, only the stump remains as a sign of death, an indication of perdition and an irrevocable loss. So, one might think, the people of Israel, the zera kodesh, are like this oak when all its branches and foliage have been torn from it. Is this not the end?

No! The very gist of G-d's message is the secret of the encouragement He gives to the reluctant prophet. He gives him the courage to begin his stormy prophetic ministry -- for there is still life left in that matzevet, that stock or stump. There is vital sap in the trunk. When you will snap out of brooding over the lovely past and the lowly present, you will see the possibility for a lofty future! Matzevet bam! That trunk still has the juices of life, it can still regenerate, it can still produce shoots and ultimately branches and twigs. Of course it is difficult! Of course it

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tries one's patience and tests one's faith. But it must be done.

Ha-shem, ad matai? How long will Jews remain strangers to G-d and Torah? Until we realize that there is plenty of vitality left in those Jews who do remain loyal. Until we realize that matzevet bam, that the trunk of the oak of Israel is intact within but we must be willing to start over again -- even from scratch! The turning point for all Israel will come when those Orthodox, loyal Jews will be willing to gird themselves and to rebuild the institutions of Jewish life from the very roots. So will we live to see new branches, new twigs, new leaves -- and ultimately, new acorns!

This is in essence the summary of Zionist history from its beginnings until its successful culmination in the State of Israel. There were bold visionaries who were able to see the pathetic stump of the people of Israel -- but they detected life in that matzevet and they nurtured it and nourished it until it blossomed again.

This is the story of the Orthodox community in America. No matter how often we complain about the heritage of neglect left to us by the early generation of Jewish immigrants in this country, we must acknowledge with thanks what they have done for us. Thirty or forty years ago when people were near despair because of the great shallekhet, the great attrition of Judaism, when the oak of Israel was hacked by the axes of assimilation, they remembered that matzevet bam. Tired though they were, they began to rebuild the tree of Judaism from its very roots. They built synagogues. They built yeshivot. They built mikvaot. Of course, some attempts failed -- just like some attempts to graft a new branch of a tree must fail. But whatever we have today, whatever benefits we have inherited from the past, is their doing. It is due to their faith, and their indomitable spirit is a tribute to Isaiah's everlasting influence on his people.

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Today we still have much left to do. Only a branch or two have really "taken." There is much left for us. No one here is free of the obligation to assist in the miracle of recreating the oak of Israel. Here and there we already have acorns -- new yeshivot, where even the Talmud is studied by native born Americans with full zeal and enthusiasm.

We are now engaged in the struggle of spiritual husbandry, we are ~~on the~~ in transition, on the threshold between shallekhet and matzevet. We are between the spiritual void and the spiritual victory, between the diminution of Jewish life and its expansion. If we Jews who do attend the synagogue will spare no effort at reconstructing Jewish life with all the sincerity and integrity at our command, then we shall live to see once again, in its full pristine majesty, the dignified oak of our people.

These then are the three answers that G-d gave ^{Israh} ~~Israel~~ to his plaint. First, we must recognize the Jewish heritage as primarily a Jewish one, ourselves as zera kodesh, and the acknowledgment that Kedushah defines our very destiny.

Second, we must sense the futility and tragedy of wasting away our spiritual resources, by conjuring up the pitiful images of a ghost town, a deserted home, and a fire ravaged forest.

Third, we must have both the confidence that life and the power of regeneration within religious Jewry, and the willingness and initiative to start building Jewish life from the beginning, to recreate the tree from the stump, by recognizing that its roots strike very deep into Holy ground.

These are the prerequisites of the great return of Israel to G-d. May they be fulfilled in our day. And even as we return to G-d, may He return to us. Matai timlokh be'tziyon -- when, O Lord, will You rule again over Zion, soon in our days may You return to Your Holy City. May You be magnified and sanctified in Thy Holy City of Jerusalem. Amen.