

"UPSTREAM"

I have spoken several times in the last few weeks on what I consider is and should be the philosophy of modern Orthodoxy: a total commitment to the Halakhah while living in this world and participating in it fully -- culturally, economically, and politically. We spoke critically, even if warmly and lovingly, of a new tendency noticeable in Orthodoxy in recent years to recoil, to recede from the larger community and ignore all those whose interests do not coincide with ours. Our thesis was that this withdrawal from the world, this refusal to confront contemporary life, is not a viable philosophy for Orthodox Judaism in our times. I believe that this is a theme that needs constant reiteration, continuous consideration, and deep reflection.

Today, however, I wish to emphasize the other side of the coin: the caution that we must exercise never to lose ourselves in the world, not to be overly impressed with the great culture in which we live.

This point is made with consummate skill in a comment by the Kabbalistic Midrash Ha-ne'elam on a famous passage in today's Sidra which we will all recognize from our Prayerbook: va-yehi be'meso'a ha-aron, and it was when the ark set out, that Moses offered up a brief prayer, asking God to rise (or: reveal Himself), and that His enemies scatter before Him. Those who paid careful attention to the Torah reading this morning will have noticed that this brief passage of two verses is surrounded, on either side, by a special mark -- the inverted Hebrew letter nun. These two nunin hafukhin, inverted nuns, are part of our Masoretic tradition. What do these strange symbols

which appear nowhere else in the Torah -- ~~mean~~? The author of Midrash Ha-ne'elam spares no words in describing their enormous significance. They are, we are told, kevodo shel ha-Kadosh barukh hu mammash, ve'hem ikkaro shel olam, the very glory of God, and the foundation of the world. It is because of this that Jacob blessed his children with them; for one of Jacob's chief blessings for his grandchildren was ve'yidgu la-rov, let them be plentiful. The word yidgu is derived from the Hebrew dag, for "fish." Another word in Hebrew and Aramaic for fish is nun. Thus the ~~Wargum~~ reads, for the blessing we just mentioned, u-khe'nunei yamma yisgun--- let them be as plentiful as the fish of the sea.

Furthermore, this Midrash continues, the Almighty excluded idol worshippers from the fraternity of these two nunin, and that is why the pagans always bear enmity towards Israel. But, finally, u-v'elu nunin atid ha-Kadosh barukh hu li'ferok lehu le'yisrael al yedei mashiah -- the Almighty will redeem Israel and bring the Messiah by virtue of these two nunin, the inverted Hebrew letters nun.

Thus, in sacred extravagance, holy hyperbole, and marvelous mystery, the Rabbis offer us not a mere play on words to delight our literary sense, but exciting spiritual insights that go to the heart of our problem.

For what they mean is that the letter nun means "fish," and therefore the inverted letters, the nunin hafukhin, symbolize fish that are willing to swim upstream, against the tide, against the currents and tendencies of their surroundings. It is this remarkable quality which characterizes the true Jew and distinguishes him from the pagan. The authentic Jew must be able to dissent, to keep apart, to be unpopular, if necessary, to oppose the tide, to swim upstream. A man who cannot

swim upstream cannot affirm his own independent judgement against the mob. He neither respects himself nor loves himself, and one who does not love himself, cannot love others. And our Torah commanded us: "love thy neighbor as thyself," not "hate thy neighbor as thyself."

The upstream tradition of Judaism means that we must dare to be different. It means that when religious observance is frowned upon, we must frown right back and follow the dictates of our conscience and the teachings of the Halakhah. It means that when religion is popular but for the wrong reasons -- such as social and esthetic reasons -- we must not hesitate to say so openly and urge people to practice their religion for the proper motives. When others, for instance, consider it good style to indulge in uninhibited and unrestrained lavishness, whether in the pagan ornateness of the funeral, or the vulgar exhibitionism of the gala Bar-Mitzvah, we must not fear to affirm our upstream mentality; to assert the delicacy of Judaism's democratic traditions, its insistence upon simplicity and the emphasis upon the spiritual and the religious. Whenever we find society in violation of the sacred ideals of Judaism, we must become the nunin hafukhin, those who are willing to go upstream and not downstream. We must do so even if we are emaciated, even if the pagans bear us enmity because of it.

The upstream tradition of Judaism also means to dare to be alone. The very heavy emphasis of the Midrash on the theological significance of the nunin -- that they represent the very glory of God and the foundation of the world -- shows that true religious distinction comes not when it is easy to be religious, but when one's loyalty is tested in the crucible of heroism. That is why profound religious thinkers and philosophers from Professor Whitehead to Rabbi Soloveitchik speak so often and so broodingly of loneliness as a major component of religious

thought and experience. To be different, to go against the tide, often leaves man with a feeling of aloneness; but that is what makes man worthy and life worthwhile.

(Concerning the nunin hafukhin, Rashi declares that these simaniyot, these special symbols, come to show that she'ein zeh mekomo, this is not the proper place for the passage va-yehi bi'neso'a ha-aron.

(Indeed so! Any place is rarely the "right" place for the Ark and the Torah! How beautifully Rashi hits upon an eternal and tragic theme: the unfortunate quality of being out-of-place that so often characterizes truth and dignity. As a people of Torah, we have been declared exiles and foreigners, she'ein zeh mekomo, in almost every land on this globe. Jews who today remain loyal to Torah and the message of va-yehi bi'neso'a ha-aron, often have that feeling -- and they are correct! -- that they can never find their proper makom even in "normal" Jewish society today!

(The Ark cannot abide the moral ambiguities, the ethical ambivalence, and the complacent rationalizations of people who ignore Torah and yet lay claim to decency and rightness. To follow the upstream tradition of Judaism means to accept beforehand the great risk of discovering, at every point of your life, she'ein zeh mekomo -- that you have failed to strike roots in any specific historical society, that you have no real makom in the world of compromising men and rationalized ideals.)

To be different and unpopular and risk loneliness is often extremely difficult and painful. Hence, the quite normal desire for assimilation by the minority to the majority, the desire to emulate the non-Jew and adopt whatever is not particularly Jewish. This tendency is reflected in an anecdote which is part of the bitter-sweet folklore of our

people, which often possesses more wisdom than many a philosophy book. It is told of a makkil, an enlightened non-believer, that he received the honor of reciting the blessing over the Torah. He performed this act with great devotion, concentrating with obvious piety and sincerity upon the words asher bahar banu, thanking God Who has chosen us from all other people to give us the Torah. When he was asked by the congregants why he, a non-believer, demonstrated so much piety in reciting this blessing, he answered in explanation that he very genuinely meant what he said. "Now that God has given the Torah and the commandments to Jews, I feel I need not observe them; had He given them to the gentiles, I would have been impelled by my desire to emulate everything non-Jewish to accept upon myself the terrific burden of studying Torah and observing the mitzvot!" This, indeed, is the downstream tendency so typical of many Jews who may not admit to it openly: flowing gently with the tides of the times into the cisterns of assimilation and the backwaters of oblivion.

But the way of Torah is different; it is the way of differentness. There was a gentile prophet who said of us that we are am le'vada yishkon, a nation that dwells apart and by itself. What Balaam meant was Jewish originality, spiritual uniqueness and validity. The upstream tendency of Judaism means that a Jewish home must be different from other homes; that the Jewish synagogue must -- in its structure, its worship, its ritual, -- be unlike other houses or worship; that Jewish education must be different from the usual; that Jewish tzedakah must not be the normal kind of charity; that a Jewish university must be more than just a good ordinary university; and that Israel must be more than just another political entity. This is what the Midrash meant when it said that God would bring the Messiah by virtue of the inverted nun: that

the Jewish vision of redemption is that we, finally, will be true to ourselves, that every nation will be itself and every individual himself or herself. The defferentness of the State of Israel does not mean that it can have no diplomatic relations, no foreign aid, no exchange students. It does mean that, involved with the world, it nonetheless must not surrender its own soul and abandon its own uniqueness.

This, then, is the meaning for us of the inverted letters. We must never swallow Western Civilization whole. We must always stand a bit aside. We must never forget that it was Western Civilization that produced that obscene execration called Auschwitz -- and it was the philosopher Santayana who warned us that he who forgets history is doomed to relive it. The nation that gave us Auschwitz was the most advanced in the world -- scientifically, technologically, and culturally too. Only recently I read that one of the leaders of the Gestapo, Heydrich, of accursed memory, used to gather his friends to his home twice a week for a "gemutliche Abende" of Bach, Mozart and other priceless musical compositions. When he became Governor-General of Czechoslovakia, he set for himself two priorities above all others: to liquidate every Jewish man, woman, and child in his territory; and to rebuild the Prague Opera House as a center for music lovers of all Europe. Now this does not mean that music and culture, science and engineering, are "Trefah". It does not mean that we can or should resign from Western Civilization. It does mean that we must keep somewhat aloof, that we must adopt a critical stance and not embrace it blindly. It means we must exercise dissent and criticism, intelligence and judgment. It means that we must confront all of modern culture, but not necessarily capitulate to it; we must face all the facts of contemporary life but select for ourselves only what is worthy while

rejecting all that is morally abominable, never succumbing to that which affronts our conscience as Jews and as humans. It means that va-yehi bi'neso'a ha-aron, the march of Judaism and Israel through history must often be characterized by nunin hafukhin, by going upstream, by opposing the tides of the times.

This afternoon we shall read in the Ethics of the Fathers the famous Mishnah: ezohi ha-derekh ha-yesharah she'yavor lo ha-adam, which is a right way that a man should choose for himself? -- Kol she'hi tiferet l'oseha ve'tiferet lo min ha-adam, whatever is fitting and proper for the one who does it, and fitting "to him from the man." That last idiom is usually taken to mean: that his actions are regarded appropriate and proper by society. But more careful study of the idiom reveals an entirely opposite meaning! What the Rabbis meant was that the right way for a man in life is not only one that is fitting for him generally, but that is also fitting for him min ha-adam, from the man, it must accord with his own inner self, it must ~~issue~~ <sup>flow</sup> from the deepest recesses of his own spirit and conscience. The right way is one that is not dictated by the taste and temperament of others, but by my own inner conscience; by my convictions, not those of my contemporaries; by my standards, ~~not~~ those of my society; by my faith, not ~~these~~ of my friends.

This is the way we must choose for ourselves. It is the way of va-yehi bi'neso'a ha-aron, the way of the Ark of the Law in its peregrinations through the wilderness of time: whether it is with the tides or against them, upstream or downstream, our way shall always be: ha-derekh ha-yesharah, the right way.