

# REWORKING THE PAST

Last week, I met a man whom I had not seen for six or seven years. I recognized him, but I did not recognize him. I was puzzled. Then I realized the source of my confusion: he had grown a beard in the interim. Because of the beard, I did not recognize him, and because of the beard I did recognize him. The reason for this was because he now looked startlingly like his late father!

In discussing this with him, I appreciated his inner feelings. He thought to himself: I am now a mature man, and spent a good part of my life carving out for myself my own life, my own personality, my own niche. Now I want to recapture my father's image and make it my own, not only psychologically and spiritually but, if at all possible, even physically.

This otherwise unimportant encounter brought to my mind the problem of two forces that strive for supremacy within each of us: continuity vs. discontinuity, rootedness in the past vs. innovation and novelty, reverence for the old vs. the search for the new. In Hebrew we might refer to these as המשך (continuity) vs. חדוּשׁ (innovation). This phenomenon is well-nigh universal.

It is in this sense that I consider Shemini Atzeret a metaphor for man. For Shemini Atzeret, according to the Halakhah, has a rather hybrid nature. In one sense, it is merely a continuation of the Sukkot holiday, of which it is the eighth day. In another sense, it is an independent and autonomous holiday in its own right. Thus, the Halakhah teaches that in all ways it is part of Sukkot, except for six laws -- represented by the acrostic בְּפֶלֶךְ ק"ש"ב -- in which it is חַג לְפָנָי יְצִמּוּ, a holiday by itself. Hence, like the eighth day of Passover, there is no special mitzvah of appearing in the Temple, as there is on the three pilgrim festivals. And in this sense it is merely the end of Sukkot. But unlike Passover, we recite the שהח"נו on Shemini Atzeret, because it is a holiday in its own right. Thus too, we can understand the two different versions of the name for this festival as used in the prayer book. In some prayer books we refer to this day as יום השמיני עצרת החג הזה, it is the eighth and concluding day of this (Sukkot) festival. Other prayer books read יום השמיני חג העצרת הזה, the eighth day which is the Atzeret festival, emphasizing its autonomy and separateness, not as המשך but as חדוּשׁ. So that Shemini Atzeret in itself symbolizes the tension between the old and the new, between continuity and autonomy, between the unbroken continuum of the past and the bold assertion of independence into the future.

I do not necessarily refer only to the rebellious rejection of religion and tradition, although that certainly would be an illustration of what I am talking about. Rather, I am more interested in the fact that even in religious consciousness itself, both tendencies prevail. The Israelites at the shore of the Red Sea sang, "This is my God and I will glorify Him," and in the same sentence, "the God of my fathers and I will exalt Him." We approach God both as new human beings, expressing our own unique, spiritual quest, and as children of a long tradition and an ancient heritage who come with the past as our credentials. We ourselves, in our prayers, refer to God as אֱלֹהֵינוּ, "our God," and אֱלֹהֵי אֲבוֹתֵינוּ, "the God of our fathers." David, in the Hallel we have been reciting all week long, says: אֲנִי עַבְדְּךָ. אֲנִי עַבְדְּךָ בֶּן אֲמָתְךָ פְּתַחַת זַמּוּסֶרְךָ, "O Lord, I am Thy servant, Thy servant the son of Thy handmaid, Thou hast loosened my bonds." It is when a religious individual appreciates that he is both the servant of God as a separate human being, and also the servant of God because he is descended from a long line of servants of God, that he can experience a sense of liberation and redemption.

The Shemini Atzeret metaphor, this dual nature of the day, refers not only to man, but to every day of life. Every single day when we wake up, we are presented with the problem of *המשך* vs. *חידוש*, of continuity vs. striking out in new directions. We can't very well ignore all the past; that would be sheer irresponsibility. We have to pay old debts, and collect them as well; we nurse old resentments, and try to cherish old loves and loyalties; it is difficult indeed, and also not advisable, to break all the old patterns of conduct. At the same time, if a day is to be meaningful, one must feel that there is some open-endedness to it. It reminds me of the line in the song, "Today is the first day of the rest of your life." Every day, every new day, must hold the promise of openness, opportunity, surprise, novelty.

In this sense, the Shemini Atzeret metaphor is essentially the biography of man. A baby knows only *המשך*, only Sukkot. It conceives of the mother as an extension of himself, of his very own body. As a youngster, he sees himself as organically part of the family, no matter how tense and divisive it may be. When he comes into adolescence, he begins to assert himself, he follows the *דרך קשב* of autonomous development, towards a personality that is *חג לכבוד עצמו*, a festival in its own right. Later on, if he is wise, he will have the perspicacity to appropriate both: the continuation of the past, even while he develops his own self.

For indeed, both are necessary. If we conceive of ourselves only as *חג עצמו*, and assert only our independence, we are insecure and rootless, we are floating monads in an ocean of loneliness. But if we are only part of the past, if we see ourselves only as *המשך*, then we turn stale, staid, and stodgy. In the conflict and tensions between the both, we have the beginnings of creativity.

But true and full creativity is achieved not by mere adjudication of the conflicting claims of each tendency, not only by striking a balance or compromise between *המשך* and *חידוש*, between the continuation of one's parent's life and the development of one's own integrity. Rather, creativity comes in the combination of both tendencies into a new synthesis: so that as himself, as a person who is unique and independent, a man can rework and redeem the past! What I am trying to express is an apparently irrational idea, but one that is beautiful and exciting and so very Jewish: *החיים מכפרים על המתים*, the living can atone for the dead; children can make up for their parents. In a world which declares, with spurious claim to scientific credentials, that the future is determined and closed, we Jews, so curiously, proclaim that even the past is not closed and dead. The past can still be saved, it can still be vindicated! The very idea of teshuvah (repentance) itself partakes of this irrationality: the spiritual attainment of the present can actually change the record of the past. (This thesis, challenging the idea of "necessity," has been expounded by an alienated Jew, Lev Shestov, in his book, Athens and Jerusalem.)

The Midrash teaches: *כָּל הָעֵצִים כְּשֶׁרִים לְמַעַרְכָּהּ חוּץ מֵאֵשׁ זֵית וְשֵׁשׁ גֶּפֶן. שֶׁהֵשֵׁמוּ יְהוָה קִרְבָּן לְגִבִּי מַזְבֵּחַ; הַצֵּלוּ הַפִּירוֹת זֵאִי־נֹת*

"All kinds of wood from all kinds of trees may be used to build the fire on the altar, except for the wood of the olive-tree and the vine, because olive oil and wine are used in the sacrificial service. Hence, the fruit have saved the trees." It is the application to the vegetable world of the principle of *החיים מכפרים על המתים*, of children who can change the lives of parents already gone to their eternal reward.

Mentioning this Midrash, the Ramban (commentary to Torah, end of Noah) adds: *תִּרְחַק מִצִּיּוֹן בְּאֶבְרָהָם שֶׁהָצִיל אֶת תִּרְחַק מִצִּיּוֹן בְּאֶבְרָהָם שֶׁהָצִיל אֶת תִּרְחַק מִצִּיּוֹן בְּאֶבְרָהָם שֶׁהָצִיל אֶת*, thus do we find that Abraham saved his father, Terah, who otherwise would have been condemned to eternal perdition, that Terah should merit the life of eternity. Even Abraham, the great iconoclast, the

one who began the greatest revolution in the spiritual history of mankind, did not entirely break off from the past. Indeed, he went back, as an independent human being of tremendous personal achievement, and improved the past, saved his father, redeemed all that had gone before!

In the Haftorah of this Shemini Atzeret, we continued the Haftorah of the second day Sukkot. Both of them speak of Solomon's dedication of the Temple that he had built in Jerusalem. Who built the Temple? - Solomon. Who consecrated it? - Solomon. Yet all through his great prayer and blessing, Solomon remembers and reminds his people that it is his father David who envisioned it, who dreamt of it, who planned for it.

The whole chapter concludes with the verse which relates the events of that historic dedication to the day of Shemini Atzeret:

בַּיּוֹם הַשְּׁמִינִי שָׁח את הָעָם וּבֵרְכוּ אֶת הַמֶּלֶךְ וַיֵּלְכוּ זָאֲהָלֵיהֶם  
שְׂמֵחִים וְטוֹבֵי לֵב עַל כֹּל הַטּוֹבָה אֲשֶׁר עָשָׂה ה' לְדָוִד עַבְדּוֹ וּלְיִשְׂרָאֵל עַמּוֹ

"On the eighth day, he (Solomon) sent the people away, and they blessed the king. And they went to their tents happy and glad of heart because of all the goodness that the Lord had done to His servant David and to His people Israel."

The Midrash asks: We can understand the "goodness" that God had done to Israel (the Midrash describes the felicity which came upon the people that night). But what goodness was done to David, who had been long dead? And the Midrash answers: When Solomon wanted, at this event of dedication and consecration, to bring the אֲרוֹן (ark) into the inner sanctum of the Temple, the gates of the Temple cleaved one to another, and would not open. Solomon tried every means at his disposal to open them, but to no avail. He recited 24 psalms, but there was no response. He then decided to command the doors to open by exclaiming, שִׂאוּ שַׁעֲרֵיכֶם רֵאשִׁיכֶם ("O gates, lift up your heads"), but he received no response to his royal command. But then, when he said the words אַל תִּשָּׁקַח לִנְפֹשׁ מִשְׁיַחְךָ זִכְרָה לַחֲסֵד דָּוִד עַבְדְּךָ, "Do not reject Thy anointed, remember the grace of Thy servant David," he was immediately answered and the doors opened. At that moment, the face of the enemies of David turned black as a pot on the stove, and all Israel knew that the Holy One had forgiven David because of that sin (i.e., the sin of Uriah and Bathsheba).

So, Solomon showed the world: a son can, by virtue of his very own talents, open the doors to his father's Temple; he can bring in his own autonomous kedushah to his father's sanctuary; a son can redeem his father's reputation, restore his father's standing in the eyes of God and man!

If a man is, like Shemini Atzeret, a חֵלֶךְ נָפֶרֶת (a holiday in its own right) he can, as such, enhance all of Sukkot whose latest link he is. Creativity, therefore, consists in being and developing your own self, and then using those talents to reveal and fulfill and ennoble the past out of which you emerged and which is an ineradicable part of yourself.

Is not this the meaning of Kaddish? By virtue of a child arising and declaring קְדוּשַׁת הַשֵּׁם, the sanctity of the Divine Name, by living the right kind of life, he atones for his parents who already are departed from this earthly scene.

So, if a son is more devout or more scholarly or has more moral sensitivity than a parent, he is at one and the same time "doing his own thing," and he is carrying over the past into the future on a new plateau, on a higher niveau -- enhancing the past, while revealing its true roots and latent potencies, demonstrating that his parents must have possessed such potential qualities of devoutness or scholarship or ethical sensitivity or charitableness, which only now are being expressed in the life of the son or the daughter.

So Shemini Atzeret expresses not only the tension between *המשך* and *חידוש*, between continuity and autonomous innovation, but also the concept of *תיקון*, of transformation and restoration and improvement of the past.

As a "holiday in its own right," Shemini Atzeret becomes an *עצרת*, a closing factor for all of Sukkot, tying it up, integrating it, revealing its new dimensions and its concealed sanctity.

It is with such thoughts that we prepare for Yizkor. We are different from our parents, and that is as it should be. In so many ways we are our parents, and that is as it should be. But above all else, how we live, how we give, how we conduct our homes and our businesses and our lives, how we study Torah and how we relate to the People of Israel and especially to God, can fulfill the unrealized dreams of our parents, can express their hidden powers, can atone for their blemishes, and can bring a new ark into the temples of their memory.