

"BALANCING THE
BOOKS OF LIFE"

A SHABBAT SHEKALIM SERMON

preached by

RABBI NORMAN LAMM

on February 23, 1963

Shevat 29, 5723

THE JEWISH CENTER

NEW YORK CITY

The prolonged New York City newspaper strike has adversely affected not only the economy of our community, but also the democratic process which requires an informed citizenry intelligently to decide upon its course. It constitutes no less than a national disgrace.

Yet, as with everything else, we must be able to see the silver lining about the cloud. There is a redeeming feature to this otherwise intolerable state of affairs. We moderns have an insatiable appetite for constant stimulation by dramatic, world-shaking events. Our emotions feed on headlines, and our minds like to be jarred by exciting news of colossal proportions. Now, for several weeks, we have learned that life can be quite interesting even without these external stimuli. We have learned to fall back upon our own inner resources, without being incessantly pricked and shocked by big threats, terrible scandals, imminent attacks which usually do not materialize. We actually can get along without those big headlines which, in but a few hours, are valueless, surpassed by newer "extras" that shriek at us from the newsstands. Life, we have discovered, has its own justification in the little things that occur to us every day.

This same idea is contained, in somewhat different form, in a Midrash quite appropriate for the Sabbath on which we read of the *shekalim* Moses collected from the Children of Israel for the purpose of the construction and maintenance of the Tabernacle. The Midrash relates (*Yalkut, Pekudei*) that when Moses completed the building of the Tabernacle, he turned to the Israelites and said, now I shall give you a report of the *shekalim* you gave me. When Moses completed his accounting, however, he discovered to his dismay that his books did not balance. Tradition records with fine precision that the deficit was exactly 1,775 *shekalim*. Moses was deeply concerned by this discrepancy. He was distressed and perplexed. Now, he thought, *Yisrael motz'in yedehem lomar Mosheh natlan* — the Israelites will have reason to say that Moses took the money, that he dipped his hand into the till and helped himself to communal funds. It would not have been the first completely unfounded suspicion or accusation against Moses, who was by no means a popular leader. But then, *he'ir Ha-Kadosh barukh Hu et enav ve'raah otam asuyim vavim la-amudim*. The Lord illuminated his eyes, and he realized that he had honestly and honorably spent the missing *shekalim* on the *vavim* or hooks which kept the Tabernacle together; for the Tabernacle was a portable, prefabricated Temple, and the parts connected to each other by means of these small metal hooks. When Moses told this to the Israelites, *nitpiestu al she'asu et ha-mishkan*, they were appeased and satisfied that they had undertaken the whole project of the building of the Tabernacle.

What is the essence and the moral of this story? It is that even a Moses can overlook the plain, the simple, the unassuming. Yet there can be no *nitpietu*, no inner or communal peace, unless we account for that which the *vavim* symbolize: that which is vital and necessary, but not always glamorous and exciting. Even a Moses can sometimes forget that life is made not by the headlines, but by the stuff that usually does not even appear in the back pages of the newspapers.

Is that not true of all of life? A career or profession is a success or failure not because of the rare triumphs or glaring disappointments that come forcibly to public attention, but because of day to day conduct and gradual progress. In fact, the big achievements are usually no more than the result of long, patient plodding.

This is no less true of domestic life. The happiness or sorrow of husband and wife are mostly not the result of the big windfalls or the great tragedies, as

much as what we do with the countless little irritations or minor opportunities and satisfactions that come our way.

It is so with all human relations. The test of loyalty comes not in the dramatic moments, but in the dull years; not in how you handle the crisis of a lifetime, but in how you handle yourself in a lifetime of crisis; not in the singular moments, when heroism is expected of you, but in the endless hours when nothing is expected of you because no one seems to care very much. It is not on the peaks of joy or in the valleys of grief, but on the plateaus that roll on endlessly, day by day, that the business of living is carried on; it is there that a man can gather for himself hope, or that the bones of his destiny can be left to parch in the merciless glare of despair. Unless we can learn to see the thrilling in the ordinary and the exciting in the routine, the thrilling and the exciting soon appear to us quite ordinary and routine. If we enter into the ledger of life only the sensational, the scintillating, the breathtaking, then, like Moses, we shall discover a deficit in our accounts, and find that the books of life do not balance.

I do not deny that life requires high points and low ones, excitement and pageantry, in order to relieve the dullness and monotony which can become the death of the spirit. But it is a sign of immaturity to live only for the heroic and the histrionic and the headlined, as if life were a show that must constantly entertain us, as if we agreed with Shakespeare that "all the world's a stage, and all the men and women merely players"; for then we must also agree with the bard that "life . . . is a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing."

Part of what troubles our Jewish life in America is our tendency to accept as valid that dubious thesis that it is only the dramatic and extra-ordinary that counts. As a result, the typical program for synagogue course for adults is something built around birth, Bar Mitzvah, marriage, and death — as if Judaism had little to say about the prosaic events that come in between. We have taken to heart the brilliant dictum of Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch that the "catechism of the Jew is his calendar" — and we have conveniently forgotten that the calendar has 365 days, not just a dozen fasts and feasts. But this string of colorful holidays is not yet Judaism. Our authentic faith is expressed through Halakhah, by means of which our sublime ideals are put into practice in the everyday life of the individual, and the judgment of Torah permeates every aspect of the human enterprise.

Perhaps most representative of the *vavim*, the significant but unspectacular hooks, is education, especially Jewish education. *Hinukh*, let it be admitted, is at best a dull undertaking — even with the latest techniques of programmed instruction. You cannot "show results" in education as you can in other fields. Progress is slow and requires patience. Yet without it, nothing else is very meaningful.

The Tabernacle has been compared, in the Jewish Tradition, to *Knesset Yisrael*, the Congregation of Israel. Indeed, all parts of the Tabernacle symbolize the various agencies that constitute the Jewish community. There were the *yeriot* or curtains which keep the hostile draughts from penetrating within: these are the "defense" organizations that seek to protect us against the anti-Semites. The roof symbolizes the social service agencies which offer shelter and succor to the poor, the lonely, and the homeless. There is the *mizbeah* or altar — on which we offered up as sacrifices the flower of our youth for the State of Israel. There is the Ark, symbol of the synagogue. And there are the *vavim*, the hooks — the sign of Jewish education. How unattractive these functional little objects are compared with all the rest! Yet — take these "hooks" away

and all else collapses like a house of cards! Perhaps that is why we are always making appeals for the *yeshivot* — because regular Torah study is unappealing to a generation accustomed to dramatic stimulation, to shocking need, to pitched battles. Jewish education can offer no moving pictures of a Sinai battle or a new pipeline to the Negev, no gripping story of a forlorn and hungry orphan, no stirring photo of the aged and sick in need of a hospital.

Indeed, sometimes educators and sponsors of Jewish schools begin to feel the same concern Moses did: perhaps we are wrong. With all these legitimate requests and needs pressed on our fellow-Jews, do we have the right to agitate for support for Jewish education? Maybe we are mistaken in siphoning away funds for something so prosaic.

At such moments God illuminates our eyes too, and we behold those *vavim la-amudim*, the hooks which connected the pillars with all else. Then we draw inspiration and courage and we realize that if there is no Jewish education, there can be nothing else. Fail to educate our youth today, and in fifty years the American Jew will have no feeling at all left for the State of Israel; he will be totally unimpressed with the U.J.A. Stop teaching our youth, and the hoary Jewish tradition of *Tzedakah* must come to an end — even as, unfortunately, the Jewish tradition of sobriety and modesty has begun to ebb where Torah living has been abandoned. Without *hinukh* there will be no Jewish heart to which a Federation will be able to appeal. Unless we teach Torah to our young and old, there can be no synagogues worthy of the name. And as for the defense agencies — if there will not be increased and more extensive Jewish education, supported by the Jewish community, there will sooner or later be no Jews left to defend against the anti-Semites! Let the federations in the various communities throughout the country, those who have refused to support their day schools, remember that well. Only by considering the *vavim* can there be a thriving Jewish community: *nitpietu Yisrael al she'asu et ha-mishkan*.

It is a worthwhile lesson to take home with us from today's reading of the portion of *Shekalim*: If sometimes we feel that the ledger of life shows a deficit we cannot account for; if the books of our life do not balance, and the expenditures of effort and emotion are not compensated for by an income of joy and peace and satisfaction — it may be because we have been overlooking the obvious and the routine, and paying a bit too much attention to the sensational and the dramatic which, in the long run, often prove ephemeral and transient.

Let us remember that, as we say every morning, we are and can be happy: *ashrenu mah tov helkenu, mah na'im goralenu, mah yafah yerushatenu*. How happy are we that we have a faith which teaches such great and good ideals, inspires us to the martyrdom of *kiddush ha-Shem*, offers us beautiful and dramatic ceremonies like a Seder or Neilah. But happier still are we that *all of life* is holy for us: *ashrenu she'anahnu mashkimim u-maarivim v'omrim paamayim be-khol yom, shema Yisrael . . .* we are doubly happy that we can recite *every day* the words of the Shema, and bring God into every aspect of life.

Life may seem dull — but it need not be so. Life can be a poem. And the poem of a man's life is not written all at once, in a sudden frenzy of inspiration. It is carefully composed of the little verses contributed by every day nobly lived; by the rhyme of the *Shabbat* concluding the stanza of every week; by the rhythm of a consistent aspiration for a life made beautiful by Torah.

Then indeed — *ashrenu*, happy are we. And on this day that we welcome the happy month of Adar, may we be happy — we, our families, all Israel, and all the world.