

"SINAI DESANCTIFIED"

In preparation for the great event of revelation or Mattan Torah at Mr. Sinai, the Almighty commanded Moses, ve'higbalta et ha'am saviv, "and you shall set bounds unto the people round about the mountain, saying, take care that ye go not onto the mountain or touch even the border of it; for whosoever touches the mount shall surely be put to death...Whether it be beast or man, it shall not live." And then, ^{immediately thereafter} in the middle of this verse we read ~~immediately~~, bi'meshokh ha-yovel hemah ya'alu ba-har, "but when the Ram's horn sounds, then they may come up to the mountain." One of the most incisive commentaries on the Torah (Meshekh Hokhmah, Yitro) has observed that whereas the Almighty is quite severe in warning the people to stay away from the mountain during the time of revelation, He rather abruptly grants permission to scale the mountain thereafter. Usually when a strong prohibition is proclaimed, some time passes before an exemption or suspension is granted. Yet here, right in ~~the~~ middle of a verse, the Almighty switches from a marked prohibition to a clear permission: when the ram's horn sounds, then they shall go up onto the mountain. Why the suddenness? Why is God, as it were, so anxious to provide the heter immediately after pronouncing the issur? The answer our commentator provides to this question touches on one of the fundamentals of our Jewish faith that is of perennial relevance and significance: it was, he says, a protest against the pagan mentality, both ancient and modern. Every religion, pagan as well as Jewish, knows of a category called "the holy," something known as kedushah or holiness. There is, however, a vast difference between how the pagan and the Jew understand and conceive of the holy. The pagan identifies it as something magical, something objective, a miraculously inherent quality. The holy object was holy, to his mind, and always will remain so -- it is the religion of totem and taboo. Kedushah is conceived as independent of and remote from man.

To the Jew, however, kedushah is not at all absolute and magical. There is nothing

in all the world that is holy in and of itself, without being made holy. Holiness comes about only when God descends to meet man and man strains to rise to meet Him. When the encounter between man and God is done, when God has withdrawn His Shekhinah or Presence, and Man has retired from the moment of spiritual elation -- then kedushah vanishes.

This is why, according to our commentator, the Almighty so abruptly informed Israel of the desanctification of Mt. Sinai immediately after emphasizing its holiness. Bi'meshokh ha-yovel, when the Shofar sounds, indicating the end of revelation, then hemah ya'alu ba-har, let them scale the heights of the mountain and see that this is a mountain like all other mountains, with vegetation and foliage and insects and wild beasts. There is nothing inherent in the mountain to make it different from other desert mountains. Let the Israelites appreciate that God did not reveal himself at Mt. Sinai because Mt. Sinai is holy, but Mt. Sinai is holy only because and when God revealed Himself on it. And when Mattan Torah is over, when God has left and man has returned from the great historic encounter, then kedushah disappears. To this very day we do not consider Mt. Sinai holy.

To put it simply: for the pagan, kedushah exists independent of God or man. For the Jew, kedushah comes only when God calls upon man or when man calls upon God. There can be no kedushah unless there is a mekadesh - a sanctifier, someone, whether he be divine or human, to impose holiness. This is a conception of holiness which is indeed one of the most important principles of all Judaism. It is so fundamental to the life of Torah that it was made clear to us 'ere the first word of Torah itself was revealed.

Thus, the holiness of a synagogue issues from the intent of the man and women who frequent it; a synagogue is not holy in and of itself. If people come to a "shul" to pray and study Torah and practice mitzvot -- ^{and submit their lives to the judgment of its teachings} -- it is holy. If the praying is subservient to social experience, and the study secondary to status-seeking, and the mitzvot are ignored and the Halakhah is compromised and people

seek in the synagogue a confirmation of their prejudices and failings and religious inadequacies.-- the synagogue is not holy, no matter how impressive its religious architecture. In Judaism, a synagogue possesses kedushah not because of its furnishings, but because of its worshippers; not because of its religious art, but because of the devout heart; not because of the money spent on it, but because of the feelings spilt in it.

According to traditional Jewish teaching, a sefer Torah is holy only if the sofer, the scribe, was pious and his heart and mind directed to God. If the scribe is a skeptic, even a learned one, if he has reservations in his commitment to the life of Torah -- then he may boast ^{of} the most beautiful handwriting and the most expensive parchment, but it is not holy; it is just another piece of fancy penmanship.

You can not have a religion unless you are religious. There will be no Judaism, unless Jews are Jewish. There is nothing sacred, unless we, in our own lives and by our own conduct, sanctify. Kedushah comes into being only when there is first a mekadesh, someone -- either God or Man -- willing to bestow holiness upon the object or place.

But what does it mean "to sanctify," to "be religious," to "be Jewish," to be a mekadesh?

I believe the major answer is: to be dissatisfied; never to rest on your laurels; never to be complacent; never to accept the religious status-quo as sufficient for us. In the realm of spirit and Torah, either we advance or we retreat; we can never stay in the same place. To be a mekadesh, to give dignity and meaning and sanctity to all those institutions in our life and in our society that we cherish, we must resolve never to be satisfied with sentimental mementoes of a static and moribund faith, never to allow the flicker of the spirit to remain enscenced in our hearts without illuminating the world about us.

Jewish tradition tells us that in the camp of the children of Israel in the

Sinai desert, shortly after they received the Torah on Shavuot, there were two Arks. Ehad she'yotzei imahem le'milhamah hayah bo sefer Torah, v'ehad she'sharuy imahem ba-mahaneh hayu bo shivrei luhot (Tosefta, Setah).

The Ark they took with them in their wars, in their conquest of Canaan and their conversion of a land of pagan idols into a Holy Land, that Ark contained the Sefer Torah. The Ark that was stationary, that remained with them in their camp, that Ark contained not a Sefer Torah, but the jagged remnants of the tablets of the commandments which Moses had broken in his anger at the Children of Israel, who worshipped the Golden Calf.

When the Ark is conceived as being stationary; when it is not allowed to interfere in the personal strivings and adventures of a man's life; when it is kept only for its historical and sentimental or ornamental value, then it cannot contain a Sefer Torah. It then holds in it only shivrei luhot—pitiful remnants of broken commandments. These, too, have historical and sentimental value. They are a tender, moving reminder of the past. But the commandments are broken. They are irrelevant. They are meaningless. They have lost their vitality. Their ability to influence the lives of men is gone.

When, however, that Ark is yotzei imahen le'milhamah, when it follows -- nay, leads -- them in their wars, in their daily struggles for bread and shelter; when it is near to them in their moments of crisis and decision; when it forms the pattern for their dreams, the basis of their prayers, and the substance of their hopes, when it is taken along into their offices and shops and stores and factories; when it is made part and parcel of life and is held up as a living guide to Present and Future and not merely as a sentimental souvenir of an over-idealized Past; then it contains no shivrei luhot, then it holds within its sacred precincts the Holy Torah itself whose Parchment is beautiful in its wholeness and whose letters, though Eternal, are timely.

The Ark that remains in the camp, detached from and uninvolved in the Jew's life, may be ornamented, polished, and outwardly attractive. But it is merely

a pretty casket for the broken corpse of a religion that once was and is no more. The Ark that travels with him may be dirty with the soot of the great highway of Life; it may be soiled from the tender caresses of hands stained with the grime of honest toil. But in it lies the Sefer Torah, a dynamic, living, pulsating heart that beats in a divine rhythm of unceasing vitality; and through which flows the life-blood of countless generations of scholars and saints, of Prophets and Poets, of just plain good Jews who lived Jewish lives and found favor in the eyes of G-d and man.

In order to be a mekadesh, in order to infuse our lives with the dignity of kedushah, we must prefer a Torah that can fit into the suitcase of our vibrant personalities over a large and stately one that remains nobly ignored and unattended in its majestic loneliness in the Ark in the synagogue,

As we prepare for the summer vacation period, let us remember that neither this synagogue or any other will retain its kedushah unless each of its members and worshippers remains a mekadesh throughout the summer vacation and thereafter.

It means that wherever we go we must remember to abide by all the principles of Judaism whether it be by our ethical conduct, by scrupulously checking the kashruth of the various resorts which we patronize, or by our observance of the Sabbath. We cannot and must not expect that summertime is a vacation from religious responsibility, and that the synagogue will be awaiting us with open arms when we return without in the least diminishing its own sacred integrity.

On this holiday of Shavuot, when we commemorate the giving of Torah at Sinai, we must ^solve that each of us becomes a mekadesh in the circles in which he travels. We must begin to understand that our faith is not only a heritage from the past but something that will create for us a future. We must understand that the Torah depends upon us even as much as we depend upon it. We must therefore affirm that we shall not be isolationists in our Yiddishkeit -- we shall not keep it for ourselves but attempt to share it with others, whether it be through personal example, through conversation, through support of Yeshivot, or by any of its means with which we are acquainted.

May the Almighty grant that as we rise for the Yizkor and commune with our own thoughts and our own memories, we recall that great principle of Judaism, the fate of Torah depends upon us. The fate of kedushah depends upon us. The fate of the future depends upon us.

May we fulfill our sacred responsibilities in the eyes of God, in the eyes of man, and in the eyes of generations yet unborn.