

"THE OTHER REVELATION"

It is well known that Shavuoth commemorates God's self-revelation, His giving of the Torah at Sinai. It is less well known that another revelation took place at the same time -- that of Israel to God! The response of Israel, in accepting the Torah -- that too was a revelation. If מתן תורה (the giving of the Torah) is God's revelation, then קבלת התורה (the receiving of the Torah) is Israel's revelation to Him.

God's revelation is a question of theology; man's revelation is a matter of religion. Today, let us speak of that other revelation, the revelation of man or of Israel.

Hasidim tell the following story: the Besht told a number of his Hasidim that he would take them along to Berditchev in order to visit a very great saint, R. Lieber The Great. When they came to his home in Berditchev, they did not find him. Whereupon they went to the market to seek him. From afar, they noticed that he was deep in conversation with what looked like an ordinary peasant. The Besht did not allow his followers to disturb R. Lieber because, he explained, the peasant was really Elijah the Prophet, in disguise. (There is a long history in the Jewish tradition of revelations of Elijah to saintly people). The Hasidim were amazed: how wonderful to behold R. Lieber in the process of experiencing a revelation of Elijah! But the Besht told them differently: it is not R. Lieber who has the זכות (privilege) to have a revelation of Elijah, but Elijah who is privileged to have a revelation of R. Lieber!

The late Prof. Heschel (who cites this story in his The Earth Is the Lord's) points out that, in the same sense, Hasidism as such was a sudden revelation of Jewish holiness which had been accumulating for centuries. This kind of revelation is the most important of all!

Our theme, then, is that קבלת התורה is as great as מתן תורה; that the response of נעשה ונשמע ("we shall do and we shall obey") is as extraordinary as the revelation of God in אניכי ה' אלקיך ("I am the Lord, your God"). If to God's revelation we reacted with the exclamation מי כמותי באלים ה', (Who is like unto Thee among the gods, O Lord), then to our revelation He responds, מי כעמך ישראל גוי אחד בארץ, (Who is like unto Thy people Israel, one nation upon the earth").

If such a human revelation were to take place today, what would our society have to show for itself in its self-revelation?

I believe the answer is a rather mixed bag. The most salient feature of our civilization, in almost all of its aspects, is that of technology, the advance in the use of tools. Technology has allowed us to enhance health, education, abundance, and convenience. Yet, it has often given us the means for more efficient mass murder. It is a rather moot question as to whether technology is good or bad; it is neither. It is what we do with it that tells us something about our moral character.

The Center for Science in the Public Interest has recently written that, "there are more scientists developing fruit-flavored deodorant sprays than new methods for detecting birth defects. More engineers are involved in electronic eavesdropping than in preparing 'child-proof' caps for hazardous house-hold chemicals. More talent is being used for color television and bigger bombs than in increasing food production and investigating the side effects of insecticides."

There is nothing wrong with the "neutral" use of technology which enhances the conveniences of man. But when we so ignore the urgent needs of man for survival and health, in favor of goals that are destructive of his life, spirit, and environment, then we are revealing a major feature of our civilization's character: the misuse of technology.

What, on this Shavuoth, do we reveal as Jews? Here too the reaction must be mixed.

For one thing, we ought to be satisfied that in our days we have experienced the reassertion of ethnic pride. There is still plenty of embarrassment that some Jews experience because of their Jewishness in the world today. But most of the younger generation no longer tries to "pass" -- whether they have decided so for and by themselves, learned it from our black neighbors, or gleaned it from the general winds blowing in the world today. They are no longer embarrassed by and ashamed of their Jewishness.

Does world Jewry reveal divisiveness in its intragroup relationships? Certainly, it is true that there is much controversy in our midst. But I do not believe that that is a major feature of Jewry in our times. Indeed, from a historical perspective, one may say that there is more unity today than there has been in most periods of Jewish history. The spectacular feeling of oneness that took place at the giving of the Torah -- as Rashi comments on

the singular שם ישראל ("and he -- Israel -- camped there"), that כאיש אחד בכל אחד, Israel was "like one man with one heart" -- has rarely reappeared in our long history. Since the brothers sold Joseph into slavery, that act of hostility has been more characteristic of our communal life than the unity achieved at Sinai.

So, I am pleased that today we can mention to our own credit that there is a large degree of mutual Jewish concern, such as the concern of American Jewry for Israel; of Israel for Soviet Jewry, opening up its arms and homes and purses; and the worry of all of us for the remaining Jews in Syria and Iraq. As a people, at the Festival of Revelation, we can be fairly happy with our gains.

Of course, the great negative feature of our lives is the question of our religious and spiritual continuity. And here we must accept it not only as a national but primarily as a personal challenge to each and every one of us.

As individuals, Shavuoth asks us what we are ready to show as we reveal ourselves to God: whether we possess an inner life, loyalty, commitment, a pattern of conduct which we are prepared and proud to reveal -- or ashamed to expose.

I suspect that most of us, if we are honest, are not quite ready for this "other revelation."

And yet, on a deeper level, the revelation of ourselves to God must be based upon another revelation -- the revelation of ourselves to ourselves!

And here, the Jewish tradition, especially the Hasidic one, has a great deal to teach us. Thus, the author of the Tanya, the father of HaBaD Hasidism, interpreted prayer as -- revelation. Normally, we consider Torah as revelation, yet R. Shneur Zalman tells us that all of prayer is revelation -- from ourselves to ourselves: it brings, from the depths of our subconscious to the level of our awareness, the inner divinity, the spark of God that lies dormant within us, the image of God that is immanent in us.

I spent last Saturday at a unique American institution: Camp Brandeis near Los Angeles, California. It is an adult version of the NCSY or YUSVY seminars that have been so popular in the East for our teen-age children. It affords Jewish adults, singles or couples, an elementary exposure to Judaism, with information and experience, in a manner that will hopefully keep them going and encourage them to deepen and intensify their Jewish

identity, concern, and commitment.

What were they doing there?, I asked myself. Here are people who, for the most part, were far-out Reform, unaffiliated, or assimilated. Some of them told me that not only they did not have a Bar Mitzvah, but that neither they nor their parents were married with huppah and kiddushin, by a rabbi in the traditional or religious manner. And so I wondered: what were such alienated Jews doing, spending a whole weekend listening intensely to an Orthodox Rabbi taking a "hard line" on such matters as belief in personal God, a personal Messiah, "who is a Jew," study of Torah, and above all, loyalty to Halakhah. I discovered the answer: they were revealing themselves -- to themselves! And it was the first step in revealing themselves to God.

It is interesting. I tried to impart as much inspiration and information as I could in the several addresses I gave this weekend. But of all the things I said and taught, I was amazed that they were most responsive to the following message:

I see in you -- alienated, searching, inquiring, but hesitant Jews -- true יראת ה' אלהים or fear of God. No, not 'fear of God' in the sense that an observant Jew means it, that is, awe, reverence, and piety; rather, I see in you true, genuine, literal fear! I detect in you that you are afraid -- afraid of committing yourselves, afraid of the consequences and implications of accepting a new life. Most of all, I suspect that you fear that you do not have what it takes to be genuinely religious, to relate to God, to respond to Torah, to do the Jewish thing. So let me repeat to you a tale that the Rabbis tell in the Talmud that may make you feel more comfortable.

Before a man is born, the Talmud teaches, while he is yet a fetus in his mother's womb, he is not alone. He is always accompanied by an angel, and the angel teaches him all of Torah. But the moment before birth, the angel puts its forefingers across the lips of the child and makes him swear that he will forget all that he has learned, and so the child comes into the world innocent of all knowledge of Torah.

What do they mean? Once we know how to read the Rabbis, it is fairly simple. They mean to tell us that although we come to Torah without any knowledge of it consciously, we have already absorbed it fully in the very structure of our personality. The

study of Torah is not the grafting of alien knowledge on a neutral mind; rather, all study of Torah is a matter of relearning, recollection, of remembering that which had been forgotten. It means that Torah and the Jews really conform to each other, they are appropriate to each other, they articulate with each other.

Hence, you can respond, because inwardly or naturally you already correspond!

Their search, their response, was a revelation to me. It was a revelation to them. I hope that on this Shavuoth of revelation, it was a wonderful, happy revelation to our Father in Heaven.

The great mystic, א"ר"י הקדוש (Rabbi Isaac Luria) once said that פתן יטרה (the giving of the Torah) is תיקון לחטא אדם הראשון, it somehow makes up for the sin of Adam.

Now, I am sure that the great Kabbalist had profound and esoteric thoughts in mind. But permit me to give his statement my own non-mystical interpretation.

When God called out to Adam, "אייכה" "Where art thou?", when He asked him to give an account of himself, to say once and for all who he was, what he was, what he desired, where he was going, Adam -- remained silent. As he later explained: ואירא כי ערום אהנכי ואחבא, "and I was afraid because I was naked and so I hid." Adam revealed nothing because, realizing his spiritual nakedness, he was afraid that any self-revelation would be a case of indecent exposure.

But at Sinai, when God revealed Himself in the words אנה', "I am the Lord, thy God," Israel -- though recognizing its failures and deficiencies and inadequacies, its own spiritual nakedness, responded with love נעשה ונשמע, "we shall do and we shall obey." It was a revelation of its willingness to clothe its spiritual nakedness with the words of Torah, to cover its bare head with the crown of Torah.

In this way, פתן יטרה made up the חטא אדם הראשון; the self-revelation at Sinai atoned for the non-revelation in Eden.

On this Shavuoth, may we -- as nation and as a community, as families and individuals -- reveal to our Father in Heaven the dimension of greatness and spiritual beauty which will be a revelation -- even to ourselves.