

"MESSIAH'S CREDENTIALS"

The readings for the last days of Passover center about three great Jews: Moses, David, and the Messiah. These three focal heroes represent the lofty vision and define the grand sweep of Jewish history.

Because at the conclusion of Passover our eyes turn to the Pessach ha-atid, "Passover of the future," it is fitting that today we ponder the description of Messiah as it is given to us by Isaiah in the Haftorah of the last day of this festival.

If we read carefully, we find that the Prophet emphasizes two elements in his description of Messiah: the universal and the national, the function of Messiah towards all the world, and his role as the redeemer of the Nation of Israel.

Thus, we find both themes in the very same verse! Ve'nasa nes la-goyim v'asaf nidchei Yisrael, "And he shall set up an ensign for the nations and shall assemble the dispersed of Israel." Both the universalistic and particularistic themes are treated together. In Judaism universalism and nationalism go hand in hand.

Of special interest is the sequence. First comes ve'nasa nes la-goyim, then v'asaf nidchei Yisrael. First the Messiah will raise an ensign or flag for the gentiles only later will he gather the dispersed of Israel.

Why this order? Why does the Prophet assigned to Messiah first the function of speaking to the goyim, the non-Jewish nations, and only then to the people of Israel?

The answer seems to lie in an innate psychological trait of our people; a weakness endemic to the Jews throughout the generations. That is: we have always managed to reserve our greatest esteem, respect, and reverence for those who have already achieved their mark in the eyes of the non-Jewish world.

We have had a ^e penchant for judging our fellow Jews and ourselves with the eyes of non-Jews - a failing of which all of us, observant as well as non-observant, traditionalist as well as assimilationist, are guilty. We have been reluctant to accept as great those who have not first proved themselves in the world of the goyim.

What the Prophet is trying to tell us in the Haftorah, then, is that even the ^Messiah will have difficulty trying to help his people and v'asaf nidchei Yisrael, assemble the dispersed of Israel, unless he will first gain acceptance in the eyes of the other nations, ve'nasa nes la-goyim. Even Mashiach will make no headway with his fellow Jews until he will achieve a high Gallup rating, be invited to address the United Nations, and win an honorary degree from some Ivy League University. Only then will we regard ~~his~~ credentials as sufficient to speak on behalf of the G-d of Israel and fulfill the prophecies that have issued out of Jerusalem. Unless ve'nasa nes la-goyim, he will not be permitted to attempt v'asaf nidchei Yisrael.

Lest we imagine that this is too fanciful, an interpretation, let us go back to the first great Jewish leader of whom we read these last days of ^Passover: Moses. The great Bible commentator, Ibn Ezra, has given the same reason to explain why Providence directed that Moses, the greatest prophet of all times, should have spent the major part of his life, his most formative years, in the palace of Pharaoh as an Egyptian Prince, far from his own people. Ibn Ezra maintains that the Israelites of that generation accepted Moses' leadership, as much as they did, only because he had about him the ^a ~~Aura~~ of strangeness, of having won the plaudits of the royal goyim of Egypt. Had he ^{been} raised amongst his fellow Israelites, they might have dismissed his message as the rantings and hallucinations of a paranoid revolutionary. They would have had no patience for just another Israelite slave who had not proved his mettle in the higher classes of Egypt.

And, who knows?, perhaps that is why David suffered so, why his leadership was contested throughout his life. Unlike both Moses before him and the Messiah to follow, David came to his people not as a stranger, not as one who had already won his laurels in the eyes of the goyim, but as one of their own. And that burden, the burden of familiarity, he had to bear throughout his life. He was just one of the sons of the Israelite Jesse, and therefore lacked the glamour and Yichus of the Egyptian court of a Moses, or the ve'nasa nes la-goyim of Mashiach.

Is not this characteristic of us today as well? Do we not lay greater store by recognition achieved in the Gentile world than in the Jewish world by Jewish means? When any of our movements - of all shades and opinions - seeks to honor some individual or looks for an outstanding guest speaker, whom does it usually select? - a Jew or a non-Jew? And if a Jew, a Jew who has made his mark as a Jew, or one who has "raised an ensign unto the nations?" Even many of our religious organizations, at their conventions, make it a practice to invite, as the "star" guest, prominent political figures rather than authentically great co-religionists. We have given honorary degrees and testimonial banquets to Jews who have grown great in finance, law, science, and government. How often have we honored true Gedolei Yisrael? I do not recall that similar honors were ever extended - if they would have been accepted in the first place - to the Chazon Ish, Of Blessed Memory or - may he live and be well - the Tzcherbiner Rav. Is it not more honorable for Jews to reverse ^{rather} ~~the~~ great Jews ~~more~~ than Jews who are great?

Recently, a Jewish group won headlines by presenting Pres. Kennedy with a Sefer Torah. Another group had done so many years ago for Pres. Roosevelt. I appreciate the genuine sentiments behind this gesture. But there is something that troubles me about it. Would any other religious group present its most sacred object as a gift to a secular leader, especially one of another faith?

What was the deeper motive behind this presentation (if we permit ourselves some amateur psychological probing) ^atribute to a distinguished non-Jew, or an attempt for more status for Jews by showing that even an F.D.R. or J.F.K. accepts ^{our Torah} ~~it~~? Was it a way of honoring the President through the Torah, or the Torah through the President?

This characteristic has long been a part of Jewish nature. But it certainly is not desirable. It is not an evil; it is a sign of immaturity. A child measures himself by the hurrahs of other children and the accolades of adults. A mature adult has inner, independent criteria of merit. A weakling craves approval from those who are stronger. A strong and secure individual appeals to his own conscience and principles. In the words of contemporary sociology, the mature, strong personality is "inner-directed," ^(I omit the category of "tradition-directed" because, today, to be tradition-directed one must be inner-directed). ~~while~~ The immature, weak person is "other-directed." This tendency of anxiously striving for the ve'nasa nes la-goyim and insisting upon it before submitting to v'asaf nidchei Yisrael, this is a sign of immaturity and insecurity.

Is there really such a need for us to prove ourselves? Do we not publish too many books and statistics extolling the virtues of American Jews, not as Jews but as "contributors" to American "civilization" in various endeavors: Jewish actors, Jewish athletes, Jewish soldiers, etc.? Does a Jew in one of these professions who performs his tasks on, say, Yom Kippur and seeks to cover up his origins, really bring the benefits of his whole Jewish tradition to his American homeland? -- or is he, on the contrary, impoverishing America by denying it the richness of the Jewish experience? Is it not about time that we became more interested in Jewish Jews, in those who have contributed both to the Jewish and the non-Jewish world as Jews and because of Jewishness?

One Marc Chagall, whose contribution to art issues from a thorough Jewish background, is worth a million "Jewish" T.V. personalities or other such non-entities. ^y Arthur Szek is another genuine Jew. Those of you who have his beautifully illustrated Haggadah ought to read the dedication, in French, by the man who has been called the greatest illustrator since the 16th century. "I am but a Jew who prays through art. If I have worked, and in some measure succeeded, if I have found favor with the elite of the world, I owe it to the teachings, traditions, and eternal virtues of my race."

A Hasid once remarked to Rabbi Nahum Mordecai, "what does the Rabbi think about the new theory that Shakespeare was Jewish?" The Rabbi answered, "Very interesting. But it is enough for me that Isaiah was Jewish." ^P For the same reason, I believe, observant traditional Jews ought ^{not} share in the hero worship that is currently being extended to Prof. Martin Buber, carelessly hailed as "the greatest living Jewish philosopher," a kind of popular recapitulation of Moses, Maimonides, and the Baal Shem Tov. Buber has written a great deal, has made significant contributions to modern thought, and has won great acceptance and fame in the Gentile world. But for us, ve'nasa nes la-goyim alone should not be enough to qualify a man for v'asaf nidchei Yisrael. If Buber's thought has had a more profound ^e affect on Christian thinking than upon Jewish thinking, it is because he has preferred to locate himself, spiritually, in the world of the goyim and piously rejects the Torah of his forebearers. When a man lives in Jerusalem some thirty years and fails to visit a synagogue in this time, he forfeits any claim to the spiritual leadership of his people. And when he comes to New York for a lecture tour and elects to make as his temporary place of residence not a hotel, not the home of some distinguished Jewish scholar, but the Parish ^House of St. John the Divine, then he confirms the worst suspicions of his critics. He then yields any rights to appeal, as a Jew, for clemency for the arch murderer of our people now awaiting his fate in Jerusalem. And his excathedra comments on religion in Israel are gratuitous, hollow, and unconvincing.

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The genuine Jew will benefit the entire world, but -- as a Jew. It is not necessary to go out of our way to prove that every luminary of the Western world had some Jewish blood in him; that is a symptom^m of a basic inferiority feeling. It is far more important to make sure that those of us who are of indisputably Jewish descent act and live like Jews: decently, honestly, and honorably to Jew and non-Jew, and in accordance with all the precepts of our Torah and tradition, both ethical and ritual.

When the Messiah comes, he will come to an unredeemed, imperfect world. Therefore he will first have to "raise an en^ssign to the nations" and only then will we allow him to "assemble the dispersed of I^srael." But after he has come, we hope, the world - and that includes the Jewish world - will experience considerable improvement. Then, we pray, our pride will return to us, and not only we but all of mankind will be the beneficiaries. Then, in the closing words of I^saiah's grand prophecy, Tzahali va-roni yoshevot Tzion, ki gadol be'kirbekh Kedosh Yisrael. "Sing aloud and shout, thou inhabitant of Zion, for great is the Holy One of I^srael in the midst of thee." G-d is great "in the midst of thee." He will not have to bring credentials from prominent people. We will have learnt to become, collectively, "inner-directed." We will have learnt to value our own values, and to reverence our own sanctities. Then we shall "sing out and shout," and without fear and without inhibitions we shall declare the greatness of G-d, and the message of His goodness and His holiness shall come out from Zion and be proclaimed for all mankind throughout the world.