

"HEART TRANSFORMATIONS"

The Jewish tradition has maintained that the central theme of all prophecy, from Moses to the last and the least of the prophets centuries later, was that of teshuvah, repentance or return to God. Each prophet formulated the theme in terms relevant to the context of his own time, whether of international politics or national uprightness or personal morality. Each prophet summoned his contemporaries to return to God and to execute the divine will in his own lifetime.

The source for this most significant of all Jewish values and precepts is today's Sidra. And at the climax of the exhortation and command to do teshuvah we read three words that strike us as somewhat unusual: ve'hashevota el levavekha, "And you shall return to your heart." Apparently, the Torah considers the lev, heart, as the repository of man's noblest and finest instincts -- in the language of the Jewish tradition, his yetzer tov, his good inclination.

However, this is somewhat surprising. For we are all acquainted with the passage which we read twice daily, in which the Torah, in Shelah (parshat tzitzit), warns us that: ve'lo taturu abarei levavkhem, "and you shall not stray after your hearts." The heart, in other words, is the source of man's moral weakness, his propensity for corruption or, again in the termin-

ology of the Jewish tradition, his yetzer hara -- his evil inclination.

Which, then, is it: is the heart the source of man's nobility or his degeneracy, his good inclination or his evil inclination?

This question is, of course, not biological. The word lev or heart in the Torah's language is meant as a symbol for man's thinking and feeling capacities, and as such is the term we use for his fundamental nature. When, therefore, we ask whether the Torah considers the heart as identifiable primarily with man's yetzer tov or his yetzer hara, we are asking a profoundly spiritual, anthropological question: what is the nature of man according to Torah?

In Western thought, opinions have generally clustered about two opposite attitudes, represented by Rousseau and Freud. Rousseau believed that man is essentially a "noble savage," that his instincts are pure and constructive, but that he is corrupted by society. Freud, contrariwise, maintained that man's essential nature is his id or libido, that it is grasping and acquisitive and sexual, but that these primal instincts are modified by the society in form of the super-ego. For Rousseau, then, the lev of man is essentially that of the yetzer tov; for Freud it is the home and source of yetzer hara.

In our contemporary world, pock-marked by hatred and violence, we have tendered towards the view that man is essentially

a violent animal. Especially popular today are the experiments and conclusions of Prof. Lorenz, who in working with animals, particularly primates, has maintained that man possesses inborn aggressiveness, and that it is futile to try to reform what is his essential nature.

What then does Judaism say? Of course, Judaism posits for man both a yetzer tov and a yetzer hara. There are two sides to man's nature, one good and one evil, one constructive and one destructive. He is neither completely beast nor completely angel. Yet it is important for us to ask: granted that Judaism does not subscribe to a simplistic view of man, he does possess these two antipodal qualities in tension with each other, which predominates? Which describes the more fundamental nature of man -- his good inclination or his evil inclination?

I submit that deep down, in the innermost recesses of his being, man may be characterized primarily by his yetzer hara. The evil inclination is stronger, more effective, more realistic, more consequential. Man is naturally predisposed to aggression and violence. At the very beginning of human history, the Lord declared yetzer lev ha-adam rak ra mine'urav, the inclination of the heart of man is but evil from his earliest youth. So that the question of questions for man's survival is: what shall we do about it?

The great Hasidic sage, R. Shneour Zalman of Ladi (author of Tanya), tells us that Judaism presents us with two approaches to

our problem.

The first he calls itkafya, suppression or repression. The function of man is to repress his yetzer hara, to subdue his passion and his propensity for violence and aggression, and, at the same time, strengthen and affirm his yetzer tov. In the language of the Rabbis, le'olam yargiz adam yetzer tov al yetzer ra-- a man should always seek to incite his good inclination to subdue his evil inclination. He must not allow himself any peace, always seeking the victory of his yetzer tov.

Now, under normal circumstances, normal people can avail themselves of this technique of itkafya, asserting their pacific, irenic, good natures, becoming non-violent and non-aggressive, and overwhelming their yetzer hara. The trouble with this, however, is that there are very few such "normal" people around, and that in our times "normal" circumstances are quite abnormal. Furthermore, the yetzer hara is quite obstreperous, and simply will not oblige most people by submitting to conquest by the yetzer tov. Furthermore, the yetzer tov is notoriously placid, calm, and it is almost irrelevant to say that one should "incite" it -- it simply never gets angry (maybe because it itself possesses no yetzer hara).

Hence, for the baal teshuvah, the man who seeks to return to God and assert his moral gestalt, for one who has experienced within himself the stirrings of violence and hatred and competitiveness, the yetzer hara, and desires to control himself, itkafya is



simply not germane. He must instead seek the second method that Judaism offers in this confrontation of man with his inner self: that which is called it'hapkha, turning about, transforming the heart, using the powers of evil for good. It'hapkha means not to avoid your own darker nature, but to sublimate the yetzer hara, to use it and exploit it and transform it and harness it and channel it. To the question, "what do we do about violence and aggression and hatred and the yetzer hara?", Judaism answers by reformulating the question to read: "what do we do with it?"

Man cannot long exist without some of the manifestations of yetzer hara: competitiveness, violence, acquisitiveness. Even hatred is useful, for it is a part of human nature. I recall with special poignance the slogan that the Czechoslovaks pasted on their walls during the Russian invasion: "Hate Intelligently!" Our problem then is not to repress the yetzer hara, but to sublimate it, to use the enormous powers of the yetzer hara for ends and goals determined by the yetzer tov. For indeed the method of it'hapkha, in contradistinction to itkafya, does not see the yetzer tov and yetzer hara as equally pitted antagonists. Instead, it sees the yetzer hara as the repository of enormous undirected powers, with the yetzer tov being impotent -- save for the task of identifying the goal to which the powers of yetzer hara should be applied.

The great Rabbi Meir, who knew men from all aspects -- from the Roman as well as the Jewish -- made the following remark-

able comment. The Torah, in describing the various stages of God's creation of the world, tells us that at the end of each step in the creation, God said, "It is good." After the creation of man, however, God said, "And behold it is very good." What was "good" about man, and what was "very good?" Rabbi Meir answered: tov -- zeh yetzer tov, "'good' -- that is the yetzer tov, the good inclination." And tov -- zeh yetzer ha-ra, "'very good' -- that is the yetzer hara, the evil inclination!" The yetzer tov is only good; the yetzer hara is -- very good! And the reason is clear: she'ilmalei yetzer hara, were it not for that evil inclination, R. Meir teaches, a man would never build a house or plant a vineyard or marry a woman. Devoid of passion and aggressiveness and acquisitiveness, he would never build a business or have the ambition to further his knowledge or get married and beget children. Without the blessed yetzer hara, there could be no progress, no civilization, no culture, no human community. When this yetzer hara is allowed to stumble forth from the heart of man blindly, he can wreck destruction all about him. But when it is channelled by the yetzer tov, then it builds and creates and constructs.

The Torah therefore commanded the baal teshuvah -- which includes most of us: ve'hashevota el levavekha, "and thou shalt return to thy heart." Return to your heart, to your basic self,

to the powerful yetzer hara which you bear within you -- and take it in hand and control it! This return to the "heart" must not be one of idle curiosity about those imponderable forces that stir within you. It must not be a confrontation with your own primal energy which results in your submission to it. Ve'lo taturu aharei levavkhem -- you shall not stumble and stray behind your yetzer hara, allowing it to take you on a wild spree through life. One must not act towards his innate propensity for violence and aggression like a tourist, taking in the sights, absorbing the pleasures without assuming any of the responsibilities. (Perhaps there is indeed a linguistic connection between taturu and the "tourist" -- in a manner we have alluded to.) Rather, we are commanded to "return to your heart," to exploit and harness the powerful storms and mighty tempests that rage within ourselves.

This sublimation, this redirection of the yetzer hara, this channelling and transformation of the heart, requires enormous moral strength. "Heart transformations" require as much wisdom and talent and courage as "heart transplants" require daring and nerve and skill of the scientist. Judaism is not a religion for weaklings. Torah is not a sanctuary for the infirm and the spineless and the despairing. It makes demands upon our strength, it challenges our power, it summons us to great acts of heroism.

Of course, Judaism offers the Jew the blessing of peace and serenity. But its major function is not therapy for the dis-

tressed, although it contains that too. It offers us peace and joy and satisfaction, but only after undergoing strenuous battles within one's self in an attempt to transform the heart and re-direct the yetzer hara. Certainly Judaism offers "peace of mind," but not as a door prize for all who seek easy admission into the House of Judaism. Rather, it is a trophy that is wrested after a long and arduous inner struggle that may take years and that taxes our deepest resources of fortitude and strength.

So that if there is anyone here today who is confronted with a great moral decision, who sees two ways in front of him and whose yetzer tov has informed him that one is mostly right and the other wrong, one moral and one immoral, and he must choose -- remember that merely identifying your alternatives is not enough. For at that point the yetzer tov has finished its task, and can do no more. Thereafter it is powerless. Now comes the great decision: to take the yetzer hara in hand, to "return to the heart," to transform it, to use all the blind energy and passion and strength and power within you that could be used for the wrong decision -- and channel it into the way that you know is right and noble and decent, no matter how difficult.

The Torah's demand for teshuvah, that we return to the heart, means that we must bring to our Jewish activity not the yetzer tov -- the fact that it is Jewish already shows that we have exercised our yetzer tov -- but our yetzer hara. Our work for



synagogue and school, for Yeshiva and charity, requires of us that we employ those tremendous powers that lie dormant within us. We must recognize that the study of Torah requires not pleasant bedtime reading, but a powerful will that can overcome obstacles of inertia that are strewn along our paths, that place demands upon us, that we use the same kind of passion that is used for satisfying our material and physical appetites, the same kind of ambitiousness that characterizes a young man out to make his first or second million. Even prayer must never be too calm and flabby. The Besht, the founder of Hasidism, has taught us that real prayer, deep prayer, living prayer requires the gambler instinct. When the Besht prayed, he told us, when he confronted the Source of all life, he felt that his very existence was threatened with extinction as he stood before God, and "with every word or two words of prayer I never knew whether I would survive alive" -- that is the kind of nerve that is required for prayer! It means that when we attend to our charities, it is not enough to write out a check. If we do that, we have obeyed the yetzer tov. Rather, we must exercise the yetzer hara -- and submit to all the difficulties of institutional politics, to search out the poor and the unfortunate and discover their needs before they are forced to articulate them, to use wisdom and skill and strength and understanding and initiative for the poor, for institutions, for Israel,

for all that is worthy.

As we enter Rosh Hashanah and the season of teshuvah, the Sidra urges us to return to the heart and transform it, to evoke from within ourselves the deepest and most powerful forces of our personality, to draw them out of the darkness and expose them to the light of Torah, to allow the passive yetzer tov to direct the powerful yetzer hara, channelling it, so as to remake our very selves and to endow us with moral strength and power.

When we will have returned to our hearts and transformed them, we shall then be ready for the next verse: ve'shavta ad ha-Shem Elohekha, "and you shall return to the Lord your God."

Having done that, we may then turn to God and demand of Him to fulfill His promise, given in this morning's Sidra, that when we have returned to our hearts, and through transforming them returned to Him, then ve'shav ha-Shem et shevutekha, "and the Lord shall return with your captivity," and bring all of us a year of redemption and peace, of happiness and health.