

"The Month of the Door"

The aliyat reggel, the pilgrimages prescribed by our Sidra for the three major festivals, were no pleasure trip for the pilgrims of ancient Judea. Their journey had to be undertaken in days when there were unavailable not only first class hotels, but barely inns of any kind. The pilgrim had to sleep on the ground instead of his accustomed bed; scrounge for food; be deprived of all comfort and conveniences; whereas had he remained at home he could have lived his normal comfortable life. Nowhere in the Talmud do we find that any special arrangements were made to accommodate these pilgrims who came to perform this sublime commandment.

Yet, interestingly, in next week's portion we find the description of another kind of traveler in the Holy Land. We are told that if a man murdered by accident, unwittingly, that we were to prepare for him a number of cities designated as "cities of refuge," to which the murderer could flee and thereby escape the vengeance of the relatives of his victim. The Torah tells us takhin lekha ha-derekh, you shall prepare the way for the murderer. And the Mishnah explains that mekhavnot la-hem derakhim mi-zu le'zu, the highways would be especially prepared throughout the country so that the man who murdered unwittingly would have no difficulty in making his way to the city of refuge. Throughout the country, at

every crossroads, there were signs exclaiming "miklat, miklat," i.e., "this way to the city of refuge."

Thus, while the pilgrim had no signposts prepared for him to facilitate his journey to Jerusalem, the murderer had every consideration prepared for him in order to make his way to the city of refuge as quickly and easily as possible. What discrimination! Here the pilgrim must wander from place to place, inquire at the door of every village or hamlet: "which way to Jerusalem?", while the man who was a murderer would find his way with the greatest of ease. We must remember that whereas many of these accidental murders were complete accidents, nevertheless, one may assume that usually such people who committed them were not always the most pleasant and honorable. The Rabbis, discussing these unwitting murderers, maintain that be'derekh she'adam rotzeh leilekh molikhin oto, usually, a man is led to where he wants to go in the first place!! The unwitting murderer has revealed in his "accidental act" what lay at the bottom of his unconscious.

Why this consideration for the murderer, and the apparent neglect of the pilgrim?

Permit me to commend to your attention an answer provided by one of the scholars of the Musar movement. This discrimination was purposely legislated by the Rabbis, he maintains, for the purpose of hinukh, education. The Rabbis wanted to make sure that Jewish children in homes throughout the country would have every possible opportunity to meet

with people who were decent and virtuous, and to minimize the opportunity to encounter people who had committed vicious crimes. Therefore they did not facilitate the way for the pilgrim, hoping that this oleh reggel would knock at every door along the way so that children should be able to meet people who are pilgrims, the people who are inspired to go to Jerusalem and sacrifice every comfort for it. Whereas, they wanted to make sure in the meantime that no Jewish child will meet with a rotzeiah, with a murderer. They therefore made sure that signs across the country would provide all the answers to the murderers' questions, so that children would not be acquainted with that type of individual, and not have him for a sort of model whom a child might want to emulate.

Now this idea does not completely accord with contemporary principles and practice. We have somehow come to believe that in order for a child to receive a well-rounded education, it is necessary for us to acquaint him with every sordid practice of contemporary society lest he grow up naive and unknowing. We feel that a child must be acquainted with crime and degeneracy, and we import such models of behavior into our living rooms through television and radio, and we bring our children to the scene of such negative ethical conduct in the movies and theatre.

According to this interpretation of our Sidra, the

reverse should be the case. We should not deny our children the knowledge of the presence of evil, but we ought to avoid any direct confrontation with it in their impressionable years.

Modern parents, unfortunately, do not always understand this. Many of us, motivated by genuine liberal instincts, oppose any censorship laws by government. This may be right or wrong, depending upon one's political and social outlook. But certainly no parent should conclude that because government ought not to be given the power of censorship, that a parent too ought never exercise censorship. If we want our children to grow up as decent citizens and good Jews we must carefully control their diet not only in food, but also in reading and entertainment. We must ease the way for that represented by rotzeiah to bypass our homes, whereas we must open our homes to that which is represented by oleh reggel.

This holds true not only for the home, the school, the camp and leisure time for children, but for ourselves as well. The Jewish heart and mind must be exposed to that which is valuable and creative and constructive, not the reverse. Wise human beings, from the Greek philosophers to the Sages of Hasidism, have maintained that a man is where his thoughts are, and that a man becomes what he thinks. If our thoughts lie with the rotzeiah, that will become the standard for our development; conversely, if our thoughts tend towards the oleh reggel, then that represents the kind of persons

we shall become.

We welcome, this week, the new month of Ellul. During this month, when we recite the selihot prayers, we shall repeat, fairly constantly, one of them which proclaims: lo be'hessed ve'lo be'maasim banu lefanekha, we have come before Thee, O Lord, not with any special claim on your love, or with any special record of good deeds; ke'dalim ve'rashim dafaknu delotekha -- we knock on your door like people who are poor and destitute. The great teacher of Kabbalah, R. Isaac Luria, has taught that dal ve'rash, the "poor" and the "destitute," are the symbols of the two months of Tammuz and Av, in which we fast and commemorate the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple. If so, says the Hasidic author of "Benei Yisas'khar," then following this same prayer, the month of Ellul must be symbolized by dellet, the door. Thus, we come from the experience of "poor and destitute" (i.e., Tammuz and Av) to "knock on Thy door" (Ellul). This last month of the year, the month preceeding Rosh Hashanah, is symbolized by -- the door!

¶ Indeed so! The door represents the entrance to our homes and our hearts; it is that which we may shut or open, depending upon whom we find at our doorsteps. Ellul reminds us that we must use that door: to shut it in the face of the rotzeiah, and to open it wide to welcome the oleh reggel.

Indeed, so does God Himself do. The first day of Ellul is the time that Moses ascended Mt. Sinai for the second time to receive the luchot, the Ten Commandments. Moses tarried there for forty days, and came down with the final and acceptable tablets on Yom Kippur. During this time, Moses prayed to God for forgiveness. And God closed the doors of Heaven on the sin of the golden calf, and opened them up to the petition of Moses and the teshuvah, the repentance, of the people of Israel.

On these days of Ellul, therefore, we remind ourselves about the doors of our homes and our very existence. And we turn to God and we pray to Him; petah shaarei shamayim le'tefillatenu, open the doors of heaven -- to our prayers.