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"THE MEANING OF OUR TIMES"

It is a truism that we live in stormy times. This is an age of tension and stress, when civilization itself stands at the brink of disaster, when new nations are being created amidst convulsions of terror and threaten to engulf the whole world in the flames of revolutionary passions. Life has become increasingly complex and difficult for all of us.

At a time of this sort, we each of us wonder: what does all this mean? Is there any significance to it? Does it make sense? It is right that this question be asked in and of the synagogue, and it is only fair to expect that we make a serious effort to explain to our people the meaning of the upheavals which we are experiencing.

The key to the understanding of the nature of our times is an intriguing passage in an ancient and revered text of the Jewish tradition, which expresses remarkably well the whole outlook of our Rabbis. In the Tanna de'bei Eliyahu we read that our civilization will reach an age of 6,000 years, and that this period of human history is divided into three cycles of about 2,000 years each. The first cycle is called Tohu - - Chaos - - because during these 2,000 years, beginning with creation, the spirit has not yet crystallized in the world and the life of man is essentially chaotic. The second cycle is called Torah, for during this time man begins to show receptivity to the word of G-d, and G-d Himself becomes more accessible to mankind. The last cycle of approximately 20 centuries, the one during which we now live, is called Mashiach, or the days of the Messiah. During this period, the forces of Torah and Tohu - - Spirit and Chaos - - are locked in a death-grip, battling for supremacy. Upon the outcome of this battle depends the redemption of the history of mankind. Mashiach or Messiah will come only when the struggle between Torah and Tohu is decided by the final triumph of Torah. And the exact time of that victory is to be determined only by us! We can, by our own actions, either hasten or delay the coming of the Messiah by joining in the battle between the two giants, Torah and Tohu.

Look about you and you will see in every phase of modern life the powerful conflict between the two forces of Torah and Tohu. On the one hand, there are the forces of Torah -- the spirit trying to assert itself in the life of man, the constructive tendencies of society, the creative urge which yearns to build and endure. On the other hand is Tohu: the force making for dissension and disunity, the recession to chaos and confusion, the will for destruction and darkness. There are many names that people have given to these opposing tendencies. Sociologists will call them the cohesive and the disintegrating tendencies. Psychologists will call them the life instinct and the death instinct. Perhaps laymen will refer to them in the simpler terms of right and wrong, good and evil. The most accurate descriptions are: Torah and Tohu. It is the battle between these leviathans that underlies most of the tension and even terror of our times.

Look at our international condition. Just 2 miles away from this very spot the leaders of the world are meeting at the United Nations. Is there anything beyond the conflict between Communists and Western Bloc, anything more fundamental? Yes, there is. It is the clash between Torah and Tohu. For the Western nations, despite their well-known failings and well-advertised sins, represent the basic concepts of the dignity of man, the freedom of the conscience, the right of the nations to self-determination. Only these can guarantee a life of the spirit, for they are ultimately derived from the Source of all life -- G-d. The Communist nations, whatever their accomplishments, are aligned with Tohu. They despise Torah, deny the existence of the spirit, and affirm that there is no G-d in the world. Without G-d and Torah, man himself has no inner value -- hence no preordained right to life, liberty, and happiness. Their technique has been, time and again, that of divide and conquer. Whether in the Congo or in the Middle East, they have spread Tohu -- chaos and panic.

In the State of Israel today a great battle is shaping up, a battle which will be fought not with guns but with ideas, not with weapons but with words, not with

logistics but with loyalties. What shall be the nature of the State? What kind of character will it develop? The forces of Tohu have their goals set: a secular state, devoid of all Jewishness, a third-rate imitation of the Western models, a country with a crime-rate like the others and the level of enetratinment of the others and the same range of literature as the others. The forces of Torah oppose this chaos with their goals: a sacred land whose people will enjoy the benefits of modern life while not surrendering one iota of their kedushah, where Torah will be studied and good deeds practiced, where our people will lead the kind of life which will become a beacon unto the nations. Which will it be: Torah or Tohu?

In our personal lives we are faced with that crucial choice. We can either observe the Sabbath, and enjoy its warmth and beauty for the whole week -- the choice of Torah; or we can lead a drab existence, a week unrelieved by a touch of the divine, the noble, the holy, the elevating -- the choice of Tohu. We can educate our children Jewishly, teach them of the spirit which penetrates the life of man and give them a purpose in life -- this is Torah; or we can allow them to remain ignorant of their tradition, not knowing why they are Jewish, confused as to what it means to be one, and in a state of utter chaos as to what it all means -- the way of Tohu. Which shall it be for us: ~~the~~ chaotic or creative? -- confused or constructive? -- silly or spiritual? -- Torah or Tohu?

Of course, we shall all strive for the victory of Torah over Chaos. Yet it is not enough to be told to be good and to mean well. What is important is: how shall we go about ensuring the conquest of Tohu by Torah? Is there a tried and tested way?

I believe there is. Our Rabbis alluded to it when they asked: when did the second cycle, the period of Torah, begin? And they answered: at the moment/^{when Abraham and}~~described in~~ Sarah left the city of Haran in their wanderings according to the word of G-d. The Torah describes it as: ve'ha-nefesh asher asah be'Charan, that Abraham and Sarah took along with them all the nefesh they had acquired in Charan. So that is how Torah begins! The first rule, the first technique is: bring along your soul, your

nefesh, your neshamah! There has to be enthusiasm, life, passion in our devotion to Judaism! There must be a "bren," an all-consuming loyalty in our espousal of Torah! Tohu will not be beaten down by half-hearted affirmations, by lip-service, or by half-conscious approval of good against evil. Only by nefesh, by putting our whole heart and soul into prayer, into work for Jewish education, the synagogue, the State of Israel, can we hope to hasten the era of Mashiach and put an end to the chaos of ignorance and malice which poisons our world. Remember that we are G-d's Chosen People -- not his Frozen People. Nefesh is the warmth that is needed to guarantee the victory of Torah.

There are some people who take their Judaism like the strong solutions dispensed by the druggist who puts, on his bottles, the warning "FOR EXTERNAL USE ONLY". They act as if Judaism is only a matter of applying from without, objectively, uninspiredly, without any inner involvement and commitment. But they are mistaken. Judaism will not do any good if it is for external use only. You cannot rub in a bit of it on the High Holidays, massage yourself with a prayer or two and an occasional "krechitz" and expect it to do good. It must be taken internally. Torah is a drama in which you must allow yourself to be caught up; it is filled with magnificence and awe, with the sublime and the terrible that aims at the very core of your heart. Ve'ha-nefesh asher asah be'Charan -- that is the only way to begin the campaign for Torah.

And from this there follows a second thought on how to work for the success of Torah over Tohu. If a man allows himself to be grasped by Torah, to bubble with life and enthusiasm, then he will not be satisfied to keep it to himself; he will respond to an overwhelming urge to share this greatness with others. Our Tradition explained the verse ve'ha-nefesh asher asah be'Charan with the emphasis on asah -- he made; that means, they said, that Avaraham megayer anashim, ve'Sarah megayeret nashim, that Abraham tried to convert the pagan men to his new faith, and Sarah pleaded with the women. Abraham and Sarah leaving Charan did not take along only furniture and business, securities and servants. They took along people -- people whom they had inspired and won over to the cause of Torah. Until these two began to preach to others, Tohu reigned supreme in the world. When they began to widen their circle of

influence that Torah emerged out of the chaos. If you want Judaism to have a fighting chance for survival, you must not only develop greater enthusiasm yourself, but you must be willing to go out and talk to your family and fellow-Jews and convince them. You must not only have nefesh -- you must make them!

Unless we are going to resolve to do just that -- work on our family and friends and acquaintances without shyness and embarrassment -- we stand accused of being what in Yiddish is known as "a Tzaddik in peltz." The renowned Kotzker Rebbe explained that epithet as follows: there are two ways to warm yourself. One is to put on a peltz, a warm fur coat to protect yourself against the wind and cold. The other is to build a fire. The difference between the two is that he who warms himself with a peltz does no good for anyone else. He is warm, but everyone else freezes. But he who builds a fire -- not only does he warm up, but all others can benefit from his fire too.

My dear friends, you who have come today have shown that you retain a loyalty to Torah, to the faith of your fathers. Today I ask you not only to fan that ember of Jewishness within you, but to share it with your children and all others. Don't be a "tzaddik in peltz." Don't hoard your Jewish sympathies. Let others find warmth at the hearth of your convictions. Not only must you have nefesh, but you must also make others susceptible to nefesh. Shyness is criminal today: Torah can lose if we crawl each into his own little peltz.

Sometimes people tell me: I'd love my daughter to be more Jewish -- but I don't want to interfere in her life. How remarkable that discussing questions of life and death, of ultimate concern, should be regarded as "interfering" as if it were a matter of what car to buy! Parents, I sometimes think, are far more sensitive to this than the children they fear to talk to! We Jews are not afraid to challenge the Police Commissioner of New York City on time off for Rosh Ha-Shanah -- but we are embarrassed about mentioning Kashruth to daughter or daughter-in-law! We badger Khrushchev about how he treats Jews in Russia -- and we are shy about talking to son or son-in-law about Talmud Torah for the grandchildren!

No, my friends, Judaism will not survive with such half-hearted, uninspired, frightened attitudes. If Tohu is to be stayed, if chaos in our hearts and minds is to be arrested, if Torah is to have a future in our country, we must have nefesh, neshamah, inner conviction and commitment -- and then the willingness to share it with all those upon whom we can have any influence. Perhaps we cannot succeed in every case. But in no case do we have the right or the privilege of not even trying. Judaism is not a private ritual; it is a public way of life. It must not be treated as a "Top Secret" document; it must be proclaimed from the roof tops. The armies of Torah may be directed by generals; but it fights with privates and corporals and sergeants. And unless we go over to the ideological offensive, we risk certain defeat. Each of us is under the obligation to share in this campaign for Torah and thus participate in bringing on the days of Mashiach. Only thus will we have a significant part not only in understanding the meaning of our times but in shaping their very destiny.

Our prayer on Rosh ^Ha-Shanah is: ve'yomer kol asher neshamah b'apo, ha-Shem Elokei Yisrael melek, u-malkhuto bakol mashalah -- may each of us be endowed with true neshamah, with the enthusiasm and the holiness of nefesh or neshamah, for only thus will the forces of Torah vanquish the destructive forces of Tohu, only thus will the Lord G-d of Israel be King -- but also this is needed: the willingness to spread the word of G-d and teach the Torah of Israel so that malkhuto bakol mashalah, so that all Israel and all the world come to worship the One G-d.