

"THE EDGE OF INNOCENCE"

The interpretation by the fifteenth century commentator Don Isaac Abarbanel of the beginning of today's Sidra is more appropriate for a profound psychologist than for the accomplished economist and diplomat that he was. It puts Jacob's immortal vision of the ladder reaching to Heaven in a new light, and yields insights that are highly relevant to the condition of modern man.

The vision of the ladder extending from Earth to Heaven, with angels ascending and descending it, and the Lord on the top of it, is obviously pregnant with symbolism; and God's address to Jacob in this prophetic dream is patently more meaningful than would appear at first glance. Otherwise, Jacob would not have trembled with awe and sacred terror upon awaking.

The interpretation of Abarbanel, unlike the metaphysical and mystical comments of the other exegetes, is completely personal and psychological, and comes to answer the question of why this vision took place at this time and in this place. Abarbanel tells us that the opening words in today's Sidra, va-yetzei Yaakov, that Jacob went out of the Holy Land, does not mean that he left as a tourist; Jacob was in flight, a refugee from his brother Esau who had sworn to kill him. The hatred by Esau for Jacob was a result of the fact that Jacob had deceived their father Isaac and taken

the blessing, that Isaac had reserved for Esau, for himself. Now, the major content of that blessing can be divided into three parts: the promise of devekut, of communion or attachment between God and the bearer of the blessing; the promise of zera, posterity; and the promise that that posterity will inherit eretz, the Land of Israel. And now here he was -- Jacob, the recipient of the blessing -- without any of these three items! He was not in communion with God; commenting on the Biblical words va-yelekh haranah, the Rabbis expand on the second word and maintain that this was a place of haron af, it reflected God's displeasure. Jacob had no zera, no children; not even brothers, or parents, or friends, for he was entirely alone and forlorn. He had no eretz, neither land nor the fruit thereof -- nothing but the shirt on his back, reduced to using a rock for a pillow and sleeping in the open field.

And here, at this time, Jacob falls into self-doubt. He is nagged by guilt, and by the devastating thought: Maybe I was wrong! Maybe I should not have listened to my mother and deceived my father. Maybe I should not have taken the blessing from my brother Esau. Maybe it was not God's will. Maybe I have brought upon myself not a berakhah, blessing, but a kelalah, a curse! In the last Sidra, we read that Jacob was an ish tam, a man of wholesomeness, of ethical perfection; and no sensitive, ethical personality can fail to wonder at the rightness of his action.

Hence, in this crisis of self-doubt, of ethical perplexity,

of inner anguish, of moral torment, there takes place the immortal vision of Divine encouragement. Yes, says God to Jacob in this prophetic revelation, you are right to question yourself. But rest assured that your final decision and your ultimate objective were right! The means you utilized were wrong; hence you must now suffer exile and poverty and homelessness. But do not overstate your guilt. For it is inconceivable that the blessing of Abraham should be given to one of the likes of Esau. It was always the Divine intention that Jacob be in the line of succession of the Blessing of Abraham. Your goal, Jacob, therefore, is right. You may now stop torturing yourself and remain firm in your self-confidence.

Thus, the vision confirms the three major components of the Abrahamitic Blessing. The ladder is a symbol of Jacob's attachment to God; like a ladder, he can make his way, step by step, until he reaches the highest point of communion. God tells him, "The land upon which you lie I shall give to you," which is the second component, that of eretz. And then He gives him the promise of zera, or posterity: Your seed shall be as many as the dust of the earth, and you shall spread out in all directions.

This vision, then, is addressed to a highly sensitive man, psychologically tormented by doubt and laden with guilt. It assesses this guilt both truthfully and realistically. Thus, Jacob reacts both fearfully -- va-yirâ, and thankfully -- his famous vow,

va-vidor yaakov nedder.

I say that this insight is pertinent to us, because the problem of guilt and self-doubt is more intense than ever in this complex, anxiety-ridden age; and because modern man, in his alienation and perplexity, lives not in an Age of Innocence, but on the edge of innocence. We are skeptical about ourselves, about our real worth, about our innate dignity. We question our own motives, our virtue, and our innocence. In our complicated society, life is shot through with ambiguities, riddled with contradictions, beset by intricate problems to which there usually are no simple answers. It is not that we do not want to do right; it is simply that we often do not know what is right. And so we walk the thin edge of innocence, and, all too often, cross the boundary and fall into the abyss of moral error and turpitude.

Of course, there are many ways -- five, to be exact -- in which individuals deal with guilt.

Some suppress it into their unconscious; they are simply not aware of it. It then reveals itself in the form of neurotic symptoms.

Occasionally we do something that is definitely wrong, we are fully aware of it, and we are filled with commensurate guilt -- which is as it should be. For this, the Jewish tradition recommends viduy, confession, as part of teshuvah, repentance. It is a healthy medicine for a healthy guilt.

Sometimes people are overburdened with guilt, their peace

of mind destroyed -- but the crime they regret is no crime; it is all an illusion, unreal! They suffer needlessly and punish themselves without reason. It often is my lot to speak with such people who blame themselves for business crises, for domestic difficulties, for children who go wrong -- when it is all really due to circumstances beyond their control, and therefore no reason exists for any guilt. Perhaps the most poignant case of such illusory guilt occurred just a little over a year ago. At that time one youngster sobbingly confessed to his mother that he was responsible for an accident which caused misery to millions of Americans. The youngster was returning from gym practice and, as young boys sometimes do, swinging a broomstick, when he struck a utility pole. At that moment, the great blackout occurred. He was sure that he had caused the blackout by striking the pole! So we must be careful not to assume that we are the cause of some evil phenomenon, when it is really a matter of coincidence and independent of what we have done or said.

But in between the last two cases, there is a fourth category: the large number of good and decent people who, like Jacob, are less than perfect. But, because they are deeply moral and attuned to the divine in man, question themselves, overreact, and suffer. Jacob, in this sense, is a modern man, caught up in complex dilemmas. Like Jacob, we are not always sure that we are. We are faced with difficult decisions, and we decide; yet we remain



with a residue of nagging thoughts that maybe we should have done differently. We question how we have acted towards father or towards brother. In business affairs, like Jacob in his dealings with Laban, we sometimes barely skirt the borders of propriety. Again, like Jacob, in his dealings with Joseph, we may have mistakenly shown favoritism for one child over the other. But because of our fundamental decency, because we want to do what is right -- like Jacob who is the ish tam -- we often overreact and we blame ourselves, and even hate ourselves. To us, therefore, this morning's Sidra is a reminder of the vision that Jacob once beheld in that forlorn and desolate field on that strange and cold night: Ve'hinei anokhi imakh, "Behold," says God, "I am with thee." As long as you are aware of your inadequacies, you will overcome them. As long as you consciously strive to be an ish tam, you are, in My eyes, both innocent and lovable. Banish the guilt, and get on with the business of making life more livable, and man more true to the divine within him.

But this is not the end. I mentioned that there are five categories dealing with guilt, but I described only four. What is the fifth?

I feel that apologies are in order before I continue. I beg your indulgence and pardon in talking about this fifth class on this Sabbath day. I fear it will disturb if not destroy your oneg shabbat. If it desecrates the serenity and the sanctity of this Sabbath, if it brings back evil memories -- like removing the

stone cover from a snake pit and watching the serpents and the scorpions scatter -- it is only because the Talmud warns us not to be mi she'yesh be'yado limhot v'eino moheh, one who is able to protest a wrong but does not.

Let it then be said that there are people today who fit into a fifth class: those who are clearly guilty, beyond a shadow of a doubt, but who disown and deny it. I speak, as you might by now suspect, of the recent news from West Germany.

I say what I say without denying the fact that there are some older Germans, especially those connected with the previous regime, who were brave and heroic in leaving Germany or risking life and limb in protesting Hitler's policies. I recognize that there are some young Germans who are thoroughly ashamed of their elders and who seek, in some manner, to do penance. And yet, I speak today not of individuals but of a government and the conscience of an entire nation.

One of the rudest shocks that any of us could have received was the news that a man by the name of Kurt Keisinger has been nominated as chancellor of West Germany. This is a man who, in his maturity, was a card-holding Nazi throughout the entire war.

There is now talk of his name being withdrawn; but it makes little difference whether this is done or not. The fact that it was attempted by the leading circles of Germany tells us something significant and it speaks volumes. It means that only our

protest can stop them, that nothing else matters. Furthermore, the possible withdrawal itself is not even related to the main fact of his past, but is merely a matter of internal politics.

For 21 years those of us who would not forget or forgive were told that we are undemocratic and illiberal and practicing guilt by association with regard to the Germans. Even the Ben Gurions have pleaded with us to consider that this is a new Germany and that we must forget the past and look to the future.

And now 8 out of 96 delegates to the State Parliament of Hesse are old Nazis in new disguises. And the greatest insult of all is the effrontery to recommend as a leader of democratic Germany -- a former Nazi! And consider the temerity of how blandly it is passed off. Keisinger himself tells us that in his heart he didn't approve of Hitler's policies, and that he didn't pay his dues. The "Hamburg Welt" apologizes for Keisinger on the grounds that he did much for Germany after the war, cementing its relations with France and Europe. The "Bild Zeitung" dismisses the entire matter as "a youthful error." What typical German arrogance, what ruthless chutzpah!

In antiquity, Nero fiddled while Rome burned; in our days, Keisinger and the likes of him filed reports while the ovens of Auschwitz burned overtime, their obscene smokestacks belching forth the smoke of Jewish bodies.

This week the press told us about the attempts to extradite



a German physician who was a "Selektions-Doktor" in Auschwitz, who with the motion of a finger could condemn a person to death, or to unbearable life. A little over two weeks ago, the wire services told of another Nazi who was apprehended crawling from some hole. He was accused of lining up 2,000 Jewish children of the ages of 6 to 12 and making them stay in formation, in their places, completely undressed for three days and three nights in the bitter December cold until they froze to death. I think of them often; they have not left me for one moment since I read the report. They were of my own generation. They would today themselves be fathers and mothers of children of the same age as when they perished -- tortured to death by Nazis, whose organization included a Keisinger, who nursed his private displeasure at such evil deeds -- while continuing to draw a salary from the departments headed by Goebbels and Ribbentrop!

This people knows no guilt! And if we will not protest, who will? Do we have the moral right to keep silent? I say No, a thousand times No -- six million times No! I am one of those who believe that we should never let them forget. I commend to you the suggestion of Pete Hamill in the Thursday edition of the New York Post who says that, "The streets of Germany should be plastered with the pictures of the dead. High school graduation ceremonies should be held in the ruins of the concentration camps. Someone should remind these people that they killed a lot of innocent strangers, that most of the killings were murder and that people

are still living, scattered across the face of the earth --(in this very congregation!) who cannot sleep at night because of the fear that was placed in them because of Germans."

We cannot, must not, dare not, shall not forgive or forget. Let us never be distracted by apologists for West Germany. If we are told that considerations of "Realpolitik" should make us keep in mind that there is a Russia to contend with; let us remind them that there is a Buchenwald to consider. When we are asked, "What does the young generation know?," let us answer: "What the old one bequeathed to it: a heritage of Treblinka!" If the history-minded apologists tells us to remember Versailles, let us, in turn, remind them of Dachau. And if there is someone who puts forth the name of Adenauer, let us reply with the name of Keisinger!

So there is a category of people who, beast-like, dismiss and disown their guilt. Compare them, if you will, to the people of Jacob who actually feel heavy guilt -- for denying a spiritual blessing to a murderous and blood-thirsty Esau! -- who feel nervous and uneasy because they had to defend themselves against a conniving Laban!

Perhaps this same overdeveloped Jewish conscience ought to move us to an al heit about how we have allowed modern Germany to get away with it; how we have permitted Reform Rabbis to preach reconciliation in Western Germany; how we have failed to protest the economic build-up of Germany by the United States; how we have failed to protest the reunification of Germany, which has become a sacred cornerstone of United States policy. And who knows --

maybe Israel ought to feel guilt too because it has been going too far and too fast in the process of national reconciliation!

But it is Shabbat today, my friends, and I believe I owe it to you to leave you with a far more pleasant thought. Therefore, in conclusion, let me tell you the story of the Berditchever Rabbi, the great Hasidic "lover of Israel." It is told that one morning, in reciting the Blessings at the beginning of the Service, the Rabbi, to the consternation of his followers, omitted the Blessing Barukh atta...she'lo asani goy, "Blessed art Thou, O Lord our God, King of the world, who has not made me a heathen." The Hasidim were troubled by this matter, and they finally decided to send the oldest from amongst them to the Rabbi to ask him for the significance of the omission. The Rabbi explained that early that morning he awoke with a feeling of deep depression. He felt desclated, cheerless, deep in a blue mood, when the entire world seemed dispirited, and forlorn, and a black cloud hovering over his heart. He looked all about him for some opportunity to snap out of the doldrums. He found nothing, and his sense of dejection increased. But suddenly he realized: -- "I am a Jew, a Jew! How wonderful, how happy, how marvelous it is -- I am a Jew!" And out of sheer joy and overwhelming happiness, he cried out, "Blessed art Thou, O Lord...she'lo asani goy, You have not made me a heathen!" "Therefore," the Rabbi continued, "since I already made this blessing early in the morning, I did not recite it now in its usual place."

And so, my dear friends, when we read of a Keisinger and his likes in Germany; when we compare the ferocious condemnation of Israel in the United Nations -- no matter what one may think of the wisdom of the Israel raid -- compared to the minor slap on the wrist administered to the Syrian murderers; when we contemplate every day the loss of conscience and the absence of elementary decency in the world all about us -- then, let us all feel at peace with ourselves, let us all be proud, thank God, and offer a blessing to the Almighty: Barukh atta...she'lo asani goy; let us be happy to be Jews.

It is a wonderful way to have a "Gut Shabbos."