

"THE GREAT DIALOGUE"

The Jewish year has two peaks or high points, one coming in the Fall with the months of Ellul and Tishri, and the other in the Spring with the month of Nisan, which begins today. The Fall peak includes Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur, Succot, and the month of Ellul preceeding them. The Spring peak consists primarily of Passover and the preparations for it by means of the four special portions, the arba parshiyot, and especially the month of Nisan. Both of these high points are considered of the utmost importance; both are regarded by the Talmud as two kinds of "New Year." Tishri is considered the Rosh Hashanah or New Year for shanim, in the sense that the year chronologically begins at that time, and Nisan is, as we read on this special parshat ha-hodesh the rosh hadashim, the first of the months insofar as reckoning the holidays of the year. Each of these represents a complex of moods, associations, and attitudes that are deeply ingrained in the Jewish experience and the Jewish soul.

What is the essential difference between them? One of the finest analyses was presented by Rabbi Yosef Yitzhak, the Rabbi of Lubavitch who died 14 years ago, in a work called "Kuntres Hai Ellul." I beg your leave to present to you the gist of his ideas, together with some additions, elaborations, and modifications of my own.

The story of man is essentially the story of his encounter with God, the confrontation of creature with Creator in the great dialogue between them. This dialogue does not necessarily consist of words that are exchanged; there are also deeds, feelings, and orientations that pass between the two in a state of mutuality.

The Zohar regards this dialogue between God and man as similiar, in many respects, to a human conversation: one side initiates it, and the other responds. The

Zohar uses two terms, depending upon who initiates the dialogue. When it is opened by God, then it is called itra'uta di-le'ela -- the impulse or initiative from above. When man begins this dialogue, it is called itra'uta di-le'tata -- the initiative from below. When either itra'uta receives a response, there is the happiness of fulfillment. If, Heaven forbid, there is no answer, there can be only tragedy and frustration. When man calls out to God and it seems as if the sky is leaden and the Heavens an impenetrable barrier returning only an empty echo of his own unfulfilled pleadings, then man suffers intense loneliness. And when God calls out to man and humanity turns a deaf ear to the divine invitation, then, so to speak, He too experiences solitude in that the divine plan for the world is frustrated.

Now, Tishri is a time of itra'uta di-le'tata, when man reaches out for God. And Nisan is a time of itra'uta di-le'ela, when God seeks to arouse mankind.

Ellul and Tishri are the months that come at the end of the summer, when the most intense and exciting and lively period of the year comes to an end. The leaves turn brown, life seems to slip away with the end of the season, and Nature seems to be dying. Man looks to the world for inspiration, and he is disappointed because he finds nothing. Nature is, at most, neutral, indifferent to his joys and his sorrows, apathetic to his search for meaning and his true destiny. Man is gripped by a sense of futility. He looks for signs of God's presence and accessibility, and he finds nothing. So he realizes he must look within himself, and by himself make the attempt to reach out for God. This is the itra'uta di-le'tata. The year draws to an end, the noises of the world silence the voice of God, and it is man who must arouse God and initiate the great dialogue. That is why in these months our tradition calls upon us to do teshuvah, for by our repentance we initiate a relationship with the Almighty. So too do we pursue tefillah and tzedakah, waiting anxiously for the response from Heaven.

The month of Nisan comes in the Spring; after a long, cold, and lifeless winter, the world comes to life. The reawakening of Nature is (to anyone yet

young in spirit and heart, and not soured by the years and embittered by time) a call from God to man. It is an itra'uta di-le'ela. With every bud and blade and blossom, with every waft of warm wind, with the welcome whispers of spring, we hear a call from God, a divine invitation to which we must and can and ought to respond with love and enthusiasm.

Historically, this is the season of God's arousal of Israel. It is the celebration of the Exodus! Our ancestors never wanted to leave Egypt. All they sought was an increase in wages and better working conditions. It was God who forced us out of Egypt. All the miracles that were performed were an expression of the itra'uta di-le'ela, as God came down to remove us from the "house of slavery" and give us our spiritual character and mission. So that during Nisan, the miracles of both history and Nature express the call from above, the itra'uta di-le'ela.

During this season we read Solomon's famous Shir ha-Shirim, the Song of Songs. This is, according to sacred Jewish tradition, a love song between God and Israel. And in it we find both ways of beginning the great dialogue. When the beloved, who represents Israel, sings ani le'dodi ve'dodi li, "I am for my lover and my lover is for me," that is the expression of the mood of Ellul and Tishri; for the beginning is made by man: "I am for my Lover." As a matter of fact, the Hebrew word Ellul consists of the initial letters of the phrase ani le'dodi ve'dodi li. And when the beloved sings dodi li v'ani lo, "my beloved is for me and I am for him," that represents the initiation of the dialogue by God, "my Beloved is for me," and is expressive of the mood of Nisan.

During Tishri, the season of the High Holidays, we implore God: anenu, ha-Shem, anenu, "answer us, O Lord, answer us." We have initiated the conversation, the relationship; now please respond to us. During Nisan, however, He implores us to answer Him. We refer to the Matzoh by saying ha-lahma anya, normally

translated "this is the bread of affliction." However, the Rabbis had another interpretation of anya: they said, she'onim alav devarim harbeh -- it comes from the word "to answer," for it is the bread over which we answer God's call, summarized in the tale of the Haggadah.

Indeed, God calls upon us in so many ways to answer Him! Freedom itself is such a precious gift from the Almighty -- all we need do is compare our conditions to the unfortunate one of our fellow Jews in Russia! It is an opportunity which is in itself a disguised call from God to do something with our lives. If we use the freedom of religion to reject religion, if we interpret it as the freedom from religion, than we are misusing democracy by offering a rebuff to the Almighty.

Youth, life, health -- all these are simple and natural opportunities which are an itra'uta di-le'ela, a call from God, inviting us to answer Him by making something holy and useful and purposeful of our lives.

Even an occasional failure and disappointment can be a good thing, a divinely given opportunity, a way that God calls to us to do something creative with our lives. Those who, from youth, have always had an unbroken chain of successes, are sometimes unfortunate. They do not know how to handle a difficult situation, they lose their sense of humor and perspective, and often may develop a distorted view of life. Failure is often the stuff from which growth and maturity are made. It can be an itra'uta di-le'ela, a way that God calls to us offering us greatness itself. No wonder that maror requires a blessing, a berakhah! Bitterness itself ~~Bitterness itself~~ can be a way that God calls to us, and we ought respond with a blessing of thanks.

This Shabbat, then, is most important for us to listen for the voice of God, for the itra'uta di-le'ela. It is the first day of Nisan, the season of miracles, the awakening of Nature, the welcome to Passover on this Parshat ha-hodesh.

It is also the Sabbath of Va-yikra, when we speak of "God's call", ^{to Moses and} for the *Israel, This then is a time for us to listen much more closely* kol ha-Shem in all aspects of life. For only if we listen will we hear.

For the Jew must always be like the beloved who symbolizes Israel in the Shir ha-Shirim, she who can say with all honesty and integrity: ani yeshenah ve'libi er, "I may be asleep, but my heart is awake." Sometimes we sleep, our moral senses are dulled; but inwardly our hearts must be sensitive and responsive.

We must be prepared to answer the call that comes to us from the distance; in the words of Solomon, kol dodi dofek, the voice of my Lover rebounds to me from afar, even as He comes close and knocks at the door and raps at the window: pithi li, ahoti rayati yonati tamati, "open up for me, my sister, my beloved, my dove, my undefiled one."

He who has ears will hear this call. He who has eyes will see it in the drama of a world waking up. He who has a heart will open it for the call and the invitation of God in this mood of Nisan, of Spring.

Let this be the beginning of our response to God's invitation in the great dialogue between the people of Israel and the God of Israel.