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"THE WORSHIP OF LOVE  
AND  
THE LOVE OF WORSHIP"

A SERMON PREACHED BY  
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**I**N THIS season of the asking of questions, allow me to present to you two questions which are really one. They have no doubt occurred to many of us, and have possibly been asked of us by others who are not of our faith.

The first question concerns certain statements in the Haggadah. The Seder is, after all, a lovely, glowing experience. Freedom is celebrated amongst family and friends, with food and symbols abounding. We are happy and at home. Why, in such a pleasant atmosphere, introduce the harsh and jarring note of the *Shefokh Chamatekha*, the passage where we implore Almighty G-d to pour out His wrath upon the nations that know Him not and upon the kingdoms that have not called upon His Name? Is it not better to concentrate upon freedom for the oppressed than upon punishment for the oppressor? And why, on this lovely evening when parents and children are united in pleasant Jewish comradeship, must we magnify the *makkot* received by the ancient Egyptians? Is it not enough that they received *ten* plagues? What do we stand to gain by gloating over their inglorious end of fifty or a hundred or a hundred and fifty plagues?

The second question, related to the first, is one that we are called upon to discuss at more than one occasion, especially during this season. It concerns an ancient prejudice of the Western gentile world. A comparison is made between the two faiths, Judaism and that of the majority in our country, and our religion is made to appear in a most unfavorable light. They believe in Love, we believe in Vengeance. Their G-d is merciful, ours is harsh and demanding. We are primitive, they are civilized. Our spiritual growth has been stunted, theirs has long ago surpassed ours. And for proof they point to the Seder ritual, the *Shefokh Chamatekha* and the proliferation of the *makkot*. What have we to say to this?

First, it is pure ignorance that prevents one from noticing the Jewish emphasis on the theme of love — ignorance sometimes compounded by prejudice. Where but in the Jewish Scriptures are we informed that G-d is *El Rachum ve'Chanun*, a gracious and loving G-d? Is it not in the Siddur that, immediately before the Shema, we bless G-d Who “choosest Thy people Israel in love” and immediately after it we are commanded to love Him “with all thy heart and all thy soul and all thy might?” Even more remarkable is the way our Rabbinic Tradition understood the *mitzvah* of the Torah *ve'ahavta le'reiakha kamokha*, “thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself.” The Rabbis applied this verse even to the criminal condemned to death: we are to make his end, well-deserved though it is, as painless as possible! Love, in the Jewish tradition, must not be confined to the respectable only. Even the vilest human is entitled to it. From a Jewish point of view, in fact, we ought to retranslate that verse to read: “thou shalt love thy

fellow man as thyself" — not only your neighbor who may be on no lower a social level than you are. Love certainly is a most significant theme in Jewish religion and we do not need to graze in foreign pastures in order to discover it.

Second, Judaism well understood that to approach life through the rosy spectacles of Love alone is both unrealistic and ineffective. We emphasized Love, but never made a *cult* of it. There is evil in life, and if you are going to love evil, you are ultimately going to live evil. In order for Love to be effective and meaningful, it must go hand in hand with Justice. That is why we consider that G-d has both *midat ha-rachamim* and *midat ha-din*, the attributes of Love and Mercy, and those of Justice. The protest against evil is prelude to and part of the perpetuation of the good. To grow flowers you must not only love blossoms; you must also hate weeds. "Thou shalt love thy fellow man as thyself" requires the harsh and unattractive corollary of "thou shalt uproot the evil from thy midst." If evil is not suppressed, good cannot thrive.

Both Love and Justice exist in G-d's world. Both are necessary. But we, in our lives, must emphasize the aspect of Love. We do not *worship* G-d's love. We love to worship, and therefore imitate Him in His love. We do not wax poetic about Love. We try to practice it prosaically. It is not, for us, some distant *ideal*. It is a *principle* that governs our daily behavior. We are not satisfied with dwelling upon it in our *tefillah*. We rather emphasize it in Torah, make it part of our Halakhah or law, and therefore it becomes for us more real and relevant.

The Halakhah, too, reflects this idea. G-d has many Names in the Torah. Some of them are regarded as *shemot she'enam nimchakim*, Names which, if written down, may never be erased because of their sanctity. Certain other Divine Names are in the category of *shemot ha-nimchakim*, Names which, while holy, may be erased under certain conditions. What is the difference between them? Those which we may never erase are Names which describe some quality of G-d which man does not and may not share: vengeance, sternness, lordship. Those which are erasable are the Names which reflect a quality that man not only may share, but is duty-bound to imitate: lovingkindness, visiting the sick, compassion with the oppressed.

Third, in the words of a colorful figure in American history, "let's look at the record." The record does not show any genocide on the part of the Jewish people. We talked strongly against Amalek, but it was not we who utterly destroyed them. The chronicles of our people do not reveal that Jews ever built concentration camps. It was not Jewish genius that invented gas chambers. Our prophets did not incite mobs to pogroms against non-Jews. On the contrary, they saw visions of universal peace and righteousness. They reminded us that other peoples are also

G-d's children. We never went on crusades. We have no history of inquisitions. In fact, we passed into Jewish law the requirement that where we become dominant in a community, it is incumbent upon us to care for the gentile sick and poor and hungry no less than for our own.

It is not necessary for me to dwell upon the sordid picture presented by the "record" of the deeds of that faith which purports to be the "Religion of Love." On this very day in the Christian calendar (Easter Sunday) thousands of Jews throughout the ages fell victim to bloodthirsty mobs inspired by bigoted priests. Someone once said that if, on this day, after all that is taught in the churches about the Jewish people of two thousand years ago, there is no Jewish blood flowing in the streets, it is a sheer miracle.

How do you explain this paradox? A people who preaches love sheds blood. And a people crying *Shefokh chamatekha* extends the hand of peace. Perhaps there is a great psychological insight in the anecdote told of the famed and revered rabbi of about two hundred years ago, Rabbi Yonathan Ebeschutz. The bishop of his city met him one day and taunted him: "You Jews believe in a G-d of hatred and vengeance; ours is a G-d of love and mercy." The wise Rabbi answered: "I agree with you. You believe in a G-d of Love, and we believe in a G-d of vengeance. Therefore your G-d has taken all the love and left the hatred for you to practice. Whereas our G-d, having taken all the sternness and vengeance, has left us the practice of love and compassion!"

I submit that there is a profound truth in this tale. Only recently, in an article in a learned journal (John M. Morris, "A Phenomenology of Religious Growth," *The Crane Review*, Winter 1960), a minister conceded the very same idea. "The act of worship may become, and usually does become, a symbolic substitute for action. By giving 'lip service' to the object of worship, the worshipper divests himself of any further obligation to it." The ancient Egyptians worshipped fertility. One would think that they would therefore revere life and try to save it. Instead, they drowned Jewish babies in the Nile — a river which was, itself, one of the fertility gods of Egypt! During the Middle Ages, blood-thirsty warriors venerated a particular figure in Christianity who represented to them the virtue of gentleness; they thereby relieved themselves of any necessity of practicing that virtue, and in her name proceeded to destroy lives, families, and whole communities. "By worshipping gentleness, they did not have to be gentle." And the country which speaks loudest today about being peace-loving is — Russia! One may rightly suspect that they confine their interest in peace primarily to verbal gestures. How history repeats itself!

So too, "love" is praised most loudly by unloving people. Couples who are deeply devoted to each other do not have to be demonstrative in their affection,

whereas too open a display of emotion often reveals a lack of true love. "In the same way, the over-protective parent, full of 'smother love,' often shows a deep hostility toward his children; the anti-Semite often suspects his own racial purity; the censor is filled with the lusts he would obliterate."

The same principle operates in reverse. Those who give verbal expression to their enmity are the least likely to act upon it. Those who acknowledge, as we do every Wednesday morning, that G-d is an *El Nekamot* ("G-d of vengeance") are least likely to appoint themselves the official executioners on His behalf. To have to keep your righteous resentment pent up within, is like not being able to perspire — it keeps the poison inside your system and destroys it. When the steam of indignation at the humiliations and indignities we have had to endure builds up the pressure within us, we must have recourse to the Haggadah's safety-valve, and we must cry out: *shefokh chamatekha al ha-goyim asher lo yeda'ukha*. Yes, we have talked of vengeance — and we left it to G-d to practice, while we tried to act compassionately. We asked G-d to discharge His wrath and anger; this allowed us to regain our equanimity and pursue the ways of life without malice and evil.

Look at the Haggadah carefully and you will notice how these harsh expressions allowed us to remain a compassionate, merciful people. We multiplied, midrashically, the number of Egyptian *makkot* — and we concluded not with a pean to our own racial superiority, but with the *Dayyenu*, a confession of our own inadequacy. Who is it who most proliferates the *makkot* in the Haggadah? It is Rabbi Akiva — the very Rabbi Akiva of whom we are told *Ve'ahavta le'reakha kamokha, Rabbi Akiva omer: zeh kelal gadol ba-torah*, that he declared the love of fellow-man to be the greatest, most abiding principle in the Torah; the same Rabbi Akiva who taught that *chaviv adam she'nivra be'tzellem*, that every man is beloved for he is created in the image of G-d; the Rabbi Akiva whose own domestic life was a touching romance that was an inspiration for the ages. We read those plagues as recounted in the Torah, and at the mention of each we spill a bit of the wine from our cups, for we mourn the loss of any life even if it be that of our Egyptian enemies. At the very moment we issue our cry of *Shefokh chamatekha*, we open our doors to let our non-Jewish neighbors see how we observe our Seder. Let them observe that with all our talk of the wrath of G-d we are at peace and in friendship, that we announce *kol dikhfin*, whoever is in need, no matter what or who he is, let him enter and feast with us.

A famous story is related in the Talmud (Sanhedrin 39b): *Otah shaah, bikshu malakhei ha-sharet lomar shirah lefanav, amar lahem ha-Kadosh Barukh Hu, maasei yadai tovim ba-yam v'atem omrim shirah?* At the time the Egyptians were drowned in the Red Sea, the angels sought to sing praises to

G-d, but the Almighty stopped them, saying, how can you think of song when the work of My hands is drowning in the sea?

This is a beautiful Aggadah. But should it not occur to us to ask: why, if this is wrong, did not G-d stop the Israelites from singing *their* song of praise, the *Az yashir*? Should not the same principle apply?

The answer is simple, and it is the explanation of all we have said. The angels had no right to sing. *They* were not in exile. *They* did not suffer. *Their* children were not thrown into the mortar and cemented into the pyramids. *They* did not waste away in the labor camps, torn away from their wives and families. They, therefore, must contain themselves. They needed no release, no safety valve. Angels should not sing when humans are dying.

The Jews were different. It was they who had experienced the anguish and the pain. It was they who had tasted the darkness and the *maror*, the bitterness. It was their backs that were lashed by the whip of the cruel taskmaster, and their hearts that were pierced by the cries of their suffering children. They, therefore, *must* sing out a victory in full voice; not that this was their right, but that only thus could they rid themselves of their resentment, so that years later they could react benignly when G-d proclaimed to them, through His prophet, that even the Egyptians were their brothers.

We who are distant in time from the Egyptian bondage, we skip part of the Hallel, on the last six days of Passover, out of sympathy with our defeated enemies. But we nevertheless recite the major part of Hallel, for we still suffer much from the spiritual heirs of Pharaoh. We must hate hatred and berate brutality until (as Beruriah, the wife of Rabbi Meir, read the words of the *Tehillim*) *yitamu chataim min ha-aretz*, until sin vanishes from the face of the earth, until mankind learns the principles of mercy and love and compassion.

*Ba-yom hahu yihyeh ha-Shem echad u-shemo echad.* "On that day shall the Lord be One and His Name One."

