

"THE LEAP OF FAITH"

The distinguished^{ing} feature of this seventh day of Passover is the reading of the *שיר השירים*, that marvelous song of triumph offered up by Moses and Israel at the shores of the Red Sea. It is a sublime song, charged with emotion and filled with hope and gratitude.

And it is precisely because it is so lofty a song that a question presents itself: why is this shirah recited on the last days of Passover rather than on the first day, when we celebrate the exodus from Egypt?

The answer that I wish to commend to you reflects a fundamental of all of Judaism. The first days and last days of Passover are related to each other, but are not identical. Each commemorates a different historic event. The first days of Passover celebrate *אֶרְצָא אֶלְצִי*, the exodus from Egypt. The last days, however, recall a somewhat later event: the *פֶּסַח יְמֵי קָרְיָא*, the splitting of the Red Sea, which enabled the Israelites to escape and which caused the destruction of the Egyptians.

What is the difference in concept and meaning between these two events, the exodus and the crossing of the Red Sea, which we commemorate, respectively, on the first and last days of this festival? The difference may be expressed in two Kabbalistic terms:

אֶרְצָא אֶלְצִי (the impulse or initiative from below) and *אֶלְצִי אֶרְצָא* (the initiative from Above). Both these terms

refer to the dialogue or relationship between God and man. The first term, the impulse from below, implies the relationship that is initiated by man, when man first calls upon God and then God answers him. The second term refers to the initiation of the relationship by God. There are times that man ~~is~~ active, when he seeks to arouse the Almighty; and there are times that man is passive and silent, and God, as it were, comes down from above to awaken man and to call upon him.

Now the exodus from Egypt is a case of *אדם קדמך*: the Israelites were a phlegmatic and uninspired lot, they could not and would not help themselves. But God intervened in the course of human events and redeemed them from Egypt despite their own indifference. Thus the Torah tells us that God commanded the Israelites during the last plague: *אדם קדמך* *אדם קדמך* *אדם קדמך* *אדם קדמך* *אדם קדמך* let no man go out from the door of his house until the morning. The initiative for the redemption came from Above, while man remained quietly indoors. Thus too we read in the Haggadah on the Seder night: *אדם קדמך*, *אדם קדמך* *אדם קדמך* -- I, says God, redeemed you, I and no agent and no messenger, I and no angel, I and no one else. The exodus was an *אדם קדמך*.

The crossing of the Red Sea, however, was primarily a case of *אדם קדמך*. This great turning point in the history of the relationship of God and Israel was initiated by the Israelites. For despite the miraculous nature of the divine intervention in splitting

the waters of the sea, this was but the second step in this marvelous event. The Rabbis tell us that when the Israelites came to the shores of the Red Sea, they were surrounded on all sides by the Egyptians. A great debate ensued, and a fatal indecisiveness gripped them. While all this argumentation and deliberation was taking place, and as the threat grew with every moment, there finally arose one hero from amongst the people, the prince of the tribe of Judah, Naschshon ben Aminadav, who as an act of faith in God leaped into the sea, and was followed by the others. As a result of this leap by Naschshon who was willing to submit to death, God split the sea and allowed the Israelites to cross it in safety. It was the Israelite Naschshon who set off the great event of ^Bקריעת ים סוף. It is an illustration of human initiative in the great dialogue between God and man.

Which of these two is greater, the initiation from below or from Above? Which offers a deeper sense of fulfillment, a loftier sense of joy? Clearly, it is the אקצזיא פאמא, the courage by man to arouse himself and confront his Maker. It is when man is active rather than passive that he participates with God as a partner in the great act of creation and sustaining the creation. This is the ideal which Judaism seeks.

Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik sees an echo of this ideal in the Halakhah. Jewish law declares that after we partake in food we are to make a blessing, a ברכה אחרונה. Different foods require different concluding blessings. Now, there are seven famous species of food, the שבע מינים for which the Land of Israel has been praised.

These include such fruits as olives and pomegranates, dates and figs, etc. These seven foods require a concluding blessing known as *אשר נתת לנו* -- an abbreviated blessing which includes within itself a concentration of three longer blessings. It is only bread, however, which takes the full form of the three regular concluding blessings which we know as the saying of Grace or *ברכת המזון* (this latter is, in the Halakhah, also known as a form of shirah). What is the difference between the seven species and bread? It is this, that with the seven types of fruit man merely harvests; it is God who does most of the work, as it were. The fruit grows by the laws of nature: that is to say, by the will of God. Man is passive during this time, he merely has to gather it in. Bread, however, is much different. Here the wheat grows by itself, but it is up to man to do most of the work: harvesting and grinding, shifting and kneading, and the whole procedure of baking. The seven species, therefore, represent the *אשר נתת לנו* -- the initiative from Above; whereas bread represents the *אשר נתת לנו*, the initiative from below. It is for this reason that only bread takes the longer concluding blessing, the *ברכת המזון*, the full, expressive, complete form of shirah. So too, with the famous song of triumph of Moses and Israel at the shores of the Red Sea. It is chanted on the last days of Passover, when we commemorate the splitting of the Red Sea rather than on the first days when we celebrate the exodus from Egypt. For the event of the last days represents human initiative as against the historical event responsible for the first days, which recalls the divine initiative while man remains passive.

The importance of this principle can hardly be overrated. Indeed, twentieth century man is not always sympathetic to this doctrine. Whereas this country was settled and developed on the basis of an outlook which cherished work for its own sake and discouraged any form of laziness, we moderns pride ourselves that we have emancipated ourselves from this Puritan ethic. The realities of our society and our economics are such that we worship at the shrine of the short-cut. Honor and glory and riches await the man who can find the way to save one step in any of the many industries we have, or devise one small procedure in how to save work in transportation or communication.

Now, this is not to say that work as such, certainly unnecessary work, has any special inherent virtue. Some forms of work, indeed, may be demeaning. But our problem is that we have confused work with effort: we assume that just as we ought seek to shorten the load of work, so must we be exceedingly sparing with the expenditure of personal effort. As a result not only our economy but our very culture is affected by this philosophy of indolence. Hence there are all too many of us who despair of laboring through a reading of the classics, so we seek out "classic digests" which gives us the skeletal plot alone -- enough to make for educated conversation, without allowing us to become truly educated. We suffer from an information explosion, which yearly adds more and more to the amount of the material that must be studied; so we desperately look for "teaching machines" or "sleep learning" or other techniques whereby

the learning process can be made painless and effortless. Even religion has suffered invasion by the idolatry of the short-cut. Ordinarily the highest state of religious experience is that of ecstasy, a state that is attained only through long and arduous spiritual training and mystical meditation and profound contemplation. But today there is a new fad in the world: an attempt to achieve the height of ecstasy through a short-cut, by taking an "LSD" prescription or any of ^{the} other halucogenic drugs.

This is where we go wrong: our desire for easy triumphs and our penchant for quick victories. The adverse affects of this inclination are noticeable throughout our culture. One result of it is the cult of convenience. Many of us grow up with the idea that the world owes us a living, and if all our desires are not immediately satisfied we feel that we are "deprived." No wonder that so many young people resent the hard work necessary to make them successes in their careers or businesses, even during these times when training and college require more and more dedicated labors!

Another important effect is what might be called the dogma of painlessness, the unspoken assumption by which most moderns live, that we all have an a priori claim on a life of uninterrupted happiness. We have completely forgotten that a normal, sane, creative life will always have its frustrations and its setbacks and its moments of unhappiness and tension. We are startled and shocked by an occasional depression, and consider a blue mood as either a dreadful psychological

symptom or as an act of immorality by fate. We ignore the fact that an unbroken chain of happy moods can be achieved ~~only~~ by a steady diet of tranquilizers or by premature senility.

And then there is a dogma of effortlessness. We jealously hoard all energy, and refuse to release any if we possible can avoid it. (At the end of last centure, in an address called "The Strenuous Life," Theodore Roosevelt summed up his principles in this way: "I wish to preach not only the doctrine of ignoble ease but the doctrine of the strenuous life; the life of toil and effort; of labour and strife; to preach that highest form of success which comes ~~not~~ to the man who does not shrink from danger, from hardship, or from bitter toil, and who out of these wins the splendid ultimate triumph.") It is because we dismiss this advice as passe that today the problem of leisure is creating a nightmare for the leaders of our country and for our social philosophers. As automation continues and the work week shrinks, more and more time is made available for leisure. This could well become the most excitingly creative part of a person's life. Yet, it presents us with grave problems, for most people make the error of contrasting leisure with work, in that work requires effort whereas leisure is a time to relax, to do nothing, to "take it easy," and to indulge in a formalized laziness. Leisure is thus equated with a kind of temporary death: the cessation of all human effort, endeavor, and initiative. If properly understood, however, leisure requires as much or more effort than work, except that it is geared towards a different kind of result, one that is more

meaningful for the person himself. If, however, we allow the short-cut to become the cardinal point of the philosophy of leisure, then certainly it must degenerate into the sort of life that will progressively worsen as it is marked by nothing more than drinking, television-watching, and other personally unproductive occupations.

It is precisely here that we find some of the greatest problems for Orthodox Judaism. Judaism certainly appreciates convenience and happiness, relaxation and painlessness. But these are not the greatest good. We believe that *תורה* *תורה* is greater than *תורה* *תורה*, that only the former leads to true shirah or happiness, that the redemption initiated by the Naschshonian leap into the sea is greater than the one sparked by an exclusive divine intervention.

And it is in the very sanctuary of Judaism that the battle is taking place. Far too many people want their Judaism in painless little doses. Too many people want access to Jewish tradition and culture, but will not expend the energy, for instance, to learn Hebrew. Too many people want the benefits of a life of shirah, a life of faith in Judaism, without going to the expense of Kashrut or the trouble of Shabbat. Too many people would like to have the joys of Jewish marriage, with its stability and its serenity, without exercising the restraint required by the principles of taharah, Jewish marital law. Too many people come into a synagogue looking for inspiration instead of bringing some along with them; such people often listen to a sermon as though they were issuing a challenge:

"I dare you to inspire me!"

Indeed, too many people want the answers of Judaism to the dilemmas of modern man without exerting themselves to formulate the questions. But this is not in keeping with the great principle of the study of Torah: that the results are contingent upon the effort put into it. The solutions can come only if there is genuine effort in formulating the problems. We can receive the answers of Judaism only if we are willing to expend the energy to ask the proper questions. ↩

The teaching of Jewish law cannot be absorbed in one sitting. It requires the concern, the dedication, the application of each individual which is usually expressed in asking the *sh'le*, the proper kind of question. If we do not ask, God does not answer; for it is we who must initiate the conversation with the Almighty.

A great Rabbinical scholar of two generations ago, Rabbi Yaakov Zvi Meklenburg, was a Rabbi in the city of Koenigsburg, a large city not particularly distinguished by its scholars. After a period of time, Rabbi Meklenburg informed his community that he had decided to leave them. An emergency meeting was called, and the lay leaders of the congregation confronted their Rabbi and said to him, "Rabbi, why are you leaving us?" And the Rabbi answered, "because this is the first *sh'le*, the first question you have asked me since I have come . . ."

Indeed, Judaism valued effort as much as achievement. A life of shirah can come only as a result of the kind of faithful leap of a Naschshon. Of course, merely expending effort is no guarantee of success. It does not necessarily mean that we will achieve what we strive for. But at the same time it is true that a genuine application of one's heart and soul and mind will produce some result, even if it is unforeseen. Arthur Koestler, in his The Act of Creation points out that if one tries hard enough to discover India, he may find some America or other . . . So in the life of the spirit: application, endeavor, aspiration are virtues which achieve results, even if they are other than the ones we initially strived for. It is when Judaism begins to cater to the vulgar taste, and offers its spiritual wares at bargain rates, that it must fail, that the whole enterprise of faith must collapse. *p/ol*

לרוב הרש, our Rabbis taught us in the Mishnah: according to the pain is the reward. That is how Israel was redeemed from Egypt, and that is how modern Israel was redeemed in 1948. That is how Torah was given at Sinai, and that is how Torah will be triumphant in 1965.

The great need of our day is a Naschshon^b leap of faith. The leap of Naschshon was not an irrational, impulsive, impetuous act. He was the prince of the tribe of Judah. Like his brother-in-law, the High Priest Aaron, he was a deliberate individual. We too require such Jews: people willing to take pause, then take the plunge; to think and then to act; to be deliberate and yet be dynamic; to

consider carefully the risks, and then commit themselves irrevocably to the whole life and destiny of Judaism. In a well known passage, the Rabbis maintained: *שׁוֹרָה כְּשֶׁהָיָה יְהוָה לְיִשְׂרָאֵל* -- the marrying off of a man is often as difficult as the splitting of the Red Sea. Most parents of young, marriageable people will agree with this statement quite literally. Yet perhaps there is also a deeper thought. The "marrying off of a person" refers to the engagement of man by his Maker, to the betrothal of Israel by God. And this intimate dialogue between God and Israel is as rewarding and as difficult for man as was the splitting of the Red Sea -- it requires the difficult and dangerous Naschsonian leap of faith. For man to engage God meaningfully in his life, for him to feel betrothed by the Almighty, requires an active spiritual life and constant and ceaseless application. If we will undertake that noble but arduous task, we will experience the reunion and reconciliation with God that is the goal of all life.

For that indeed was the purpose of the exodus and the splitting of the Red Sea. The goal of the entire redemption according to the Torah was: *וְהָיִיתִי לָהֶם לְיְהוָה* -- "and I shall take you to Me for a people, and I shall be to you a God" -- the wedding of the Almighty as our God to Israel as his bride-people.