

"FOR EXAMPLE"

At the end of the second Sidra we read today, we learned of Moses giving Israel the law relating to the Sefer Torah. He commanded them to place the scroll of the Law in the Ark, at the side of the tablets, and he declared: ve'hayah sham bekha l'ed, "and it shall be there as a witness against you."

What he means by this, as the verse is usually interpreted, is that the Torah will be a witness for Israel in those times when our people will have forgotten its spiritual mission, and, as in the days of King Josiah, will search for its purpose in history. At that time the Torah will reveal the nature of Jewish existence and the goals of Jewish life. Furthermore, the word bekha means "against you," that is, if Israel will begin to wonder at its fortunes or misfortunes, at the nature of its destiny and its fate, it will be able to search in the Torah which will testify to the purpose of Jewish living, and therefore reveal the reasons for the success or failure of the people of Israel.

However, when Maimonides codified this Law, he introduced one small change that is rather perplexing. In the end of the Laws of Sefer Torah, he describes the reverence that is required in the presence of the Sefer Torah, and he adds the words: she'hu ha-ed ha-ne'eman le'khol ba'ei olam, for it is the trustworthy witness to all "who come in the world," that is, to all

human beings. Now the difficulty is this: The Torah says it will be a witness bekha, for or against Israel, whereas Maimonides has the Torah being a witness le'khol b'nei olam, for all mankind. By what right did Maimonides universalize the function of Torah as a witness, and extend it from Israel to all humanity?

I heartily recommend a solution offered by my revered teacher, Rabbi Joseph B. Solovitchik, who, in the Jewish manner, answers this question with another question. At the time of the giving of the Torah, Israel heard only the first two of the Ten Commandments mi-pi ha-gevurah, from God Himself, as it were. Afterwards they asked Moses to be the intermediary and relay the Divine Word to them. Thus we read: Va-yanu'u ha-am va-yaamdu mi-rabok, the people trembled and stayed at a distance, va-yomru el Mosheh, and they said to Moses: daber ata imanu ve'nishmaah, you speak with us and we shall listen, v'al yedaber imanu Elohim, pen namut, for we are afraid that if God speaks directly to us we may die.

What a strange thing to say! People wait all their lives for that brief moment of ecstasy when they will hear the clear word of God, when all their inner doubts and anxieties will be stilled by that over-arching certainty of a direct revelation of God. We pine away our entire lives, if we are religiously sensitive, for that precious moment of an encounter with God as the greatest experience known to humankind. Yet, here is an

entire people privileged to hear two commandments directly from God -- and pleading that they've had enough!

The answer suggested by Rabbi Solevitchik is this: The people of Israel feared disembodied commandments, philosophical principles, abstract ideals. A code of law or book of philosophy is simply too remote, too distant for ordinary human beings: Va-yaamdu mi-rabok, they were repelled and stood at a great distance from this sort of possibility. They were afraid that Torah is not realizable in life, that it was too sacred, too sublime, and that therefore they would never be able to observe it properly and hence, pen namut -- the Torah would become a source of punishment and death. What they wanted was a living example that the Torah was indeed realizable and practical in every day life. They asked Moses, therefore, that he should demonstrate the feasibility of Torah by living the Commandments before their eyes, rather than merely transmitting them abstractly.

This, then, is what they said to Moses: Daber ata imanu -- you speak it with us, you translate the ideals of Torah into practical life, you exemplify the ideas and ideals of Torah in our midst, ve'nishmaah -- then indeed will we observe and obey, for then we will have living proof that the Torah is not too remote and distant, but it is part and parcel of our lives and realizable in the turmoil of everyday life.

Now we understand the words of the Sidra. When Moses

says to his people about the Sefer Torah that ve'hayah sham bekha l'ed, it shall be a witness, it does not mean "for" or "against" the people of Israel. Rather, as the great author of "Bekhor Shor" said, the word bekha in this context means "through you," that is, Israel must become the agent and the instrument through whom Torah is revealed to mankind. All of mankind must listen to the testimony of Torah about a living God, but they have no direct access to the Torah except through the way it is lived and realized by the people of Israel.

Ve'hayah sham, bekha, l'ed: and the Torah shall become, through the agency of Israel, a witness of God to all mankind. As the "Kingdom of Priests" we must teach not by lecturing but by living, not by preaching but by practicing, not by didactic telling but by demonstrating. Thus shall we be the true and loyal edim, witnesses, to Torah and to God. This, indeed, is what Maimonides said: She'hu ha-ed ha-ne'eman le'khol ba'ei olam, the Torah is a loyal witness of God to all mankind. It is unnecessary to add, of course, ^{that} Israel is the agency of that sacred and eternal testimony.

What a marvelous introduction to the great High Holiday season we are about to enter! Torah must be lived, not merely lectured. If we want our children to continue in the path of Judaism, it is not enough to send them to school; we have to be for them an example. If we want them to be knowledgeable Jews, not ignorant semi-literate Jews, we have got to study ourselves --

and not only must we study about Judaism, but we must immerse ourselves in studies in Judaism. It is simply not enough to read Bellow and Malamud, not even "Commentary," but we must plumb the genuine Jewish sources if we are to exemplify the study of Torah for our children. It was the late Ludwig Lewisohn, himself an eminent man of letters in our century, who bemoaned the fact that Jews had been transformed, in our days, from the "the People of the Book" to "the People of the Book-of-the-Month!"

If, indeed, we are determined that we shall allow our own children as well as ourselves to bear the witness of Torah to the existence of the living God amongst us, we have got to undertake the study of Torah in all seriousness this year. That is why I ask you at this time, at the eve of the great High Holidays, to determine and resolve that this year will be a year of study -- for the men, the study of Talmud and Rambam in the classes provided for them in The Jewish Center; and for the ladies, who have in our day rightfully experienced the emancipation of their intellects and talents, the study of the courses we provide for them as well. To be a witness means to testify through living, through example.

It is appropriate to conclude these remarks with the words we shall begin to recite tonight, at the Selihot services: mi she'anah le'Mosheh be'Horev hu yaanenu, may the Lord who answered Moses at Sinai, and taught him how to teach by example, answer us as well and give us the courage, the fortitude, and the insight to emulate our teacher Moses.