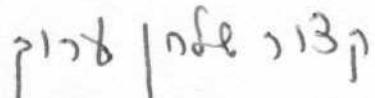




"THE TREES OF THE FOREST"
In Memory of Chief Rabbi Levin of Moscow

Orthodox Jews are often accused of being simplistic, of looking at life as a series of simple choices between black and white, right and wrong, good and evil. According to the popular prejudice, an Orthodox Jew has no spiritual problems. Any time he is faced with a question, he merely decides according to prescribed formulae which he can look up in his , his Code of Law. Often a non-Orthodox Jew will say, "I wish I could feel that way, it would make life so much easier!" That statement is often meant sincerely; occasionally, it is a disguise^d criticism for the benighted lack of sophistication by Orthodox Jews.

That attitude is both unfortunate and inadequate. Such an uncomplicated view is not in accord with life's untold complexities. And it is certainly not the attitude that Orthodox Judaism encourages.

In fact, this tendency to label everything as either absolutely good or absolutely evil, to see all of life as a clear battle between the Children of Light and the Children of Darkness, is referred to in theology as the heresy of Gnosticism or Manicheanism. This view of life as consisting of an ongoing struggle between absolute polarities is not a Jewish view. According to the Kabbalah, ever since Man took that first fateful bite into the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil,  and , (good and evil) appear mixed in the world. There is almost nothing that is absolutely good with no evil^{ad} mixture, and almost nothing which is absolutely evil with no redeeming feature whatsoever.

At the same time, we cannot agree with those contemporary moralists, whether they are referred to as the advocates of the New Morality, or Situationists or Relativists, who hold that every problem is so complicated that it is unamenable to simple solutions. These people maintain that since every situation is absolutely unique, there can be no objective moral code to guide us, and we must always rely on a personal decision made without recourse to external standards.

A Jewish view -- and here I admit to oversimplifying -- holds to the middle ground. Many ethical questions are fairly simple and can be legislated: we must give charity, we must not insult or hurt or kill or steal or cheat.

However, it happens even more often that life is ambiguous, and the choice of the right path is clouded, difficult, unclear, and complicated. At such times, a man is confused and perplexed. Yet, Judaism demands of him terrible, individual responsibility and orders him to embrace pain and risk in coming to a moral decision. In these complex situations, the Halakhah usually does guide man because the Halakhah has already considered such conflicts and complexities. It acknowledges that we have to choose not between absolute good and absolute bad, but between the more good and the less good, the more evil and the less evil. So that the Halakhah does offer us guidance in such complex areas.

Nevertheless, there are times when life throws up new dilemmas, when we have no clear guidance in our sources, and man is thrown back on his conscience, his integrity, his *side* *אלוהים*. He must search the sources, and although he can find no clear answer, he

must at least look for spiritual guidance in the directions he must take. And he is responsible for his answers.

The tendency for life to become complicated and morally ambiguous increases as we go from a simple and primitive society to a more urban and technological one. But it is universally true. Even in primitive societies, men faced such moral dilemmas.

Look at the life of the Patriarchs. Abraham and Isaac had their moral dilemmas, such as in the case of the abductions of their respective wives and the schemes they had to devise in order to survive these difficult situations. Since then, commentators in the Jewish tradition have been divided as to whether they acted rightly or wrongly. This is an indication of the conflicting claims on their own moral consciences and the difficulties they no doubt experienced in coming to a decision. Perhaps the most noteworthy example is that of the ^{נצ'ל} when Abraham was commanded by the Lord to offer up Isaac as a sacrifice. He was confronted by a very cruel dilemma: On the one ⁿ had [^] was the universal moral principle against murder, a principle that has its sanction in the Divine Law. On the other hand was the direct prophetic revelation in which God commanded him to do a certain act. As it turned out, Abraham's decision was right and grief was averted by God's suspension of His revealed command. But Abraham had to suffer the torments of hell before he reached his decision. So that Abraham and Isaac had their moral ambiguities to which they had to react. But by and large, their lives were fairly simple and the moral decisions they had to make were usually direct and did not entail too many complications.

Jacob, however, lived a whole life full of tensions. This is

perhaps the distinguishing mark of his biography.

Let us take one example, that of the stealing of the blessings from Isaac. Jacob had the following choice to make: on the one hand, he could deceive his father, and thereby get for himself the *ברכת אברהם*, the "Blessing of Abraham," by which is meant spiritual eminence for himself and his descendants after him. On the other hand, he could choose honesty and integrity, and allow his brother Esau to deceive his blind father, losing the blessing of Abraham for ever after. It was not an easy choice. He chose the first alternative -- according to most authorities, a highly questionable if not a wrong choice. But it was not an easy one and he had to bear responsibility for his actions.

So, if we investigate every crucial step of his life, we find that he frequently had to skirt the border of propriety, and walk the thin line between the ethical and the unethical. So it was with his business dealings with Laban -- and if we read carefully how he explains it to his wives we see some of the torment and anguish that went on in his soul; and so it was with Dinah, with his relationship with his wives, and his relationship with Joseph and his brothers. Always there were moral dilemmas the solution of which caused inner struggles in Jacob.

Perhaps most symbolic of this constant tension within Jacob is his wrestling with the Angel. Some Rabbis maintained that the angel looked like a thief, and others maintain that he looked like a sage and a scholar. The answer, I believe, is: both! That was the essence of his problem. He found it hard to identify his antagonist. He struggled between the appearances of good and evil and he had to make fatal decisions between them. The struggles were not easy. Ultimately,

he won and he emerged victorious -- but, **וְיָצָא מִן הַמִּלְחָמָה**, he left with injuries as mementoes of his inner agonies.

No wonder that the Rabbis said of him **אֵלֶּיךָ בָּחַרְנוּ הַקָּדוֹשׁ בְּרַעְיוֹנֵנוּ**, that Jacob was chosen by God, but God did not bring him near to Him; instead, Jacob had to come close to God on his own. Jacob was a chosen man, but he had to struggle valiantly in order to come close to God and climb on the moral and spiritual ladder. And no wonder that at the end of his days, as the aged Patriarch appears before Pharoah, he says to him **"מָעָלַם וְנִי יָדַי קָשִׁי"**, "the days of my life were few and hard." Indeed, hard, difficult, painful -- not so much because of his outer problems as because of his inner ones.

The Rabbis taught: **לֹא יֵשֶׁתְּ דֹּר לֹא יֵשֶׁתְּ**, there is no generation in which there is not a figure like Jacob. The Jacobian figure is the one whose life is spent in such remorseless and merciless struggles. And if we want to point to a Jacobian figure in modern Jewish history, the most blatant example is that of Rabbi Yehuda Leib Levin **ר' יְהוּדָה לֵב**, the recently deceased Rabbi of the Choral Synagogue in Moscow and Chief Rabbi of Moscow Jewry. He became a most controversial figure in Jewish life. Consider the tragedy of this man -- and tragedy should not be confused with mere grief. (Grief is a fact, a state of bereavement. Tragedy is the spiritual anguish of having to choose not between right and wrong, but between two rights or two wrongs, between two goods or two evils, where a man knows that whatever he chooses he rejects something that may have been the better choice.) Rabbi Levin's tragic choice was this: he could refuse to submit to the Soviet

government and so keep his personal honor intact and his reputation blemishless, but then he would abandon the Jewish community, those who relied upon him. Or, he could sacrifice his own reputation and honor, follow the Soviet "line" and become an apologist of this cruel and oppressive government, and thereby effect a הצלה בורא, saving whatever semblance of Jewish life was left to the few stragglers who still attended his synagogue. He chose the second of the two alternatives. Maybe he was wrong. Maybe his emphasis was misplaced. But let no man who has not been exposed to such cruel choices dare to judge him.

Perhaps the best analogy for this Jacobian man, Rabbi Levin, comes from another Russian-born Jewish sage, Rav Kook, who became the first Chief Rabbi of the Holy Land. In his commentary on the Siddur, Rav Kook points to a verse in Psalms which we recite Friday evening: ה' יצאנו ביום הזה, that when the redeemer comes to Zion, the trees of the forest will sing. But why, asked Rabbi Kook, should the trees of the forest offer song to God? The Jews will sing, the oppressed will sing, the disadvantaged and the persecuted will sing, for the Messiah will redeem them; but why the trees of the forest? Rav Kook's answer contains a great poetic truth. A forest, he said, is the place where shelter is offered to all kinds of animals. But it is the place where, as well, the beast feeds on his unfortunate prey, where violence and bloodshed and murder take place, where the strong devour the weak. The trees of the forest cover up this violence and this bloodshed. Consider their intolerable burden: appointed by God to offer shelter from the blazing sun, the trees are at the same time assigned to cover up all these crimes and these atrocities.

When Messiah will come, and the light of justice will penetrate the depths of the forest, the trees will be relieved from their merciless obligation to cover up -- against their will -- the misdeeds of the strong against the weak.

Rabbi Levin saw this as his historic burden: to cover up the atrocities of the Soviet government and thereby save what he could of the Jews in his charge. It was a pitiless task.

A day will come when Soviety Jewry will be free, when redemption will come to Israel and through Israel to the world, and then we shall better be able to judge his choice in the perspective of history. We may then discover that he had no alternative, that his choice was a morally correct one. But even if not, I believe it was an honorable choice, and that he was a man who had to struggle, who has heir to cruel and tragic choices. It is therefore not for us, but for God to judge this Jacobian figure after the Redemption.

ענין זה כי האל, כי האל שפוסק הלאה, ופוסק הלאה
הצדק והאמת באמת.

For then, before the Lord who redeems His people and the world, we shall find that God will bring all nations to justice and He will judge all peoples, and all individuals as well, not only by their "faithfulness," but also by their faith in God and in their willingness to come, honorably and decently, to hard and difficult choices.