

### A MOTHER'S REPROACH

On this Hol Hamoed Pesah, when we read Shir Hashirim, the Song of Songs, I invite you to explore with me one of the many intriguing verses in this lovely book.

At the end of Chapter Three, we read: צאִינָה וּרְאִינָה בְּנוֹת צִיּוֹן בְּמֶלֶךְ  
שְׁלֹמֹה בַּעֲטָרָה שֶׁעָטָרָה לוֹ אִמּוֹ בְּיוֹם חֲתוּנָתוֹ וּבְיוֹם שִׂמְחַת לְבָבוֹ

"Go forth O ye daughters of Zion, and gaze upon King Solomon, even upon the crown wherewith his mother hath crowned him in the day of his espousals, and in the day of the gladness of his heart" (Song of Songs 3:11).

Why is this verse so strange? The Rabbis of the Midrash told us why:  
אָמַר ר' הֲנִינָא בְּר' יִצְחָק חֲזַרְבוּ עַל כָּל הַמִּקְרָא בִּזְוָה יִצָּא מִצִּיּוֹן שְׁעִטָּתָה  
בְּתִשְׁבַּע עֶטְרָה לְשֹׁלֹמֹה בְּנָה (שֶׁהִשְׁרִי)

"We searched through all of Scripture, and could find no record of Bathsheba having made a crown for her son Solomon."

The Midrash thereafter proceeds to offer a solution to the question based upon its allegorical interpretation of the book. However, I commend to your attention the answer provided by Rabbi Moshe Alshech, one of the great Rabbis of the school of Safed four centuries ago. He maintains that our verse certainly does refer to Bathsheba and Solomon. He explains it as follows: The *יוֹם חֲתוּנָתוֹ*, the day of Solomon's espousals, refers to his marriage to the daughter of Pharaoh; the *יוֹם שִׂמְחַת לְבָבוֹ*, the day of the gladness of his heart, refers to the culmination of his life's work, the dedication of the Holy Temple in Jerusalem. Moreover, both events took place on the very same day!

What a startling contradiction -- a man who spends his life striving for one great goal, the erection of a national sanctuary for his people, and on the same day that he achieves that transcendent ambition, attaining the heights of his life, he sinks to the nadir as well with his personal decision to marry the Egyptian princess! Whether she converted or did not convert, whether he had to marry her for reasons of state or did so because of personal indulgence, is irrelevant. The fact is that on the day that he dedicated the Holy Temple, that is the day that he married the daughter of Pharaoh!

R. Alshech refers to the passage in the Talmud (*Sanh.* 70b) where we are taught that Bathsheba bound her adult royal son to the post -- the equivalent of a contemporary spanking -- and said to him, "What, my son? What, O son of my womb? What, O son of my oath?" Noticing that Solomon was carrying on in the manner of the oriental potentates of that time, merry-making and drinking late into the night, she was sorely distressed and said, "*הֲכֵן יוֹדְעִים שְׂאֵבֶיךָ יִרְאֵה שְׂמִי'ס הִיא, עֲכָשִׁין יֵאָמְרוּ לוֹ*" , Everyone knows that your father was a God-fearing man (and did not carry on in such a manner); now they will say that your mother taught you such behaviour!"

So, his mother was furious with Solomon for his personal misconduct, especially for the glaring inconsistency of dedicating the Temple and marrying the daughter of Pharaoh on the same day. And, says R. Moshe Alshech, *it is this very reproach that was the crown which Bathsheba made for Solomon, עֶטְרָה שֶׁעָטָרָה לוֹ אִמּוֹ !*

What do we learn from this -- other than that even in antiquity people would blame mothers for the misdeeds of their sons? Basically, two things: a fact and the approach to it -- the prevalence of ambivalence and incongruity in human character, and the need not to accept this condition but to protest it in a certain manner.

That such inner contradictions are the lot of all men is obvious. Human character is much like New York weather this April -- within a short time, Winter and Summer follow each other! If Solomon, the wisest of all men, can betray such incoherence in his personality, then certainly the rest of us are afflicted with the same weakness.

Have we not met such people all our lives? The type is all too common -- the man who is eager to be generous and help friends, but equally ready to humiliate wife or children; to *daven* with *kavvanah*, and cheat on the job; to give charity generously and proclaim himself thereby a "good Jew," and yet ignore the laws of *kashrut* or any other sancta of Judaism; the man who is a good provider but a bad father; the youngster with a *kippah* on his head and foul language in his mouth; the one who eats kosher, but does not deal kosher or sleep kosher or talk kosher or act kosher.

Such inner contradictions are especially noticeable with people who are more eminent, great leaders, people of achievement. The Rabbis taught: *כִּי הַגָּדוֹל מֵחֵבֵר* *וְיֵצֵר הָרָא*, Whoever is greater than his fellow, possesses a greater *Yetzer Hara*, a greater libidinal impulse. It is a reflection of *בְּיָמֵינוּ חֲתוּלָּה וְיָבִיט שְׂמֵחַת צָרוֹ*. In Solomon's case it was dramatized even more, because he was the wise king, and because of the simultaneity of both the high point and the low point of his life, which made it more poignant and more striking. But it is a human failing to which all of us are prey.

So, this inner fragmentation and incoherence is a universal phenomenon. It is a part of life, and you cannot escape it. By attributing such inconsistency to Solomon, Judaism sensitizes us and makes us more understanding and tolerant of the human foibles of all men.

And yet, "there's the rub!" There is a real danger in asserting this tolerance: by acknowledging the universality and ubiquitousness of such character inconsistency, we are tempted to become reconciled to it and accept it -- and thus legitimize it!

As a Rabbi, I meet with such legitimations constantly. It is expressed in a slogan: "Everyone has his own *Shu'chan Arukh*!" That basically means that you accept as valid digressions and transgressions and, ultimately, do what you want. But if we do that, it is the end of all effort to improve character. And in religion, it means -- to use the deceptive but revealing vocabulary of a certain movement -- the reduction of Halakhah from the level of sacred law to mere "standards" or "guidelines." And that spells the end of Torah. It robs us of any motivation to grow psychologically, spiritually, or religiously.

The Rabbis of the Jewish Tradition were averse to any kind of trade-off of strengths and weaknesses of character. They put it quite bluntly: *אֵין מַצוּה מִכְנִיחַ עֲבִירָה*. A good deed does not extinguish an evil one. A man is judged by his good deeds and by his evil deeds, but there is no neutralization between them. Jarring inconsistencies and glaring disjunctiveness remain as facts of a fragmented character, and by no means can we balance and "extinguish" the evil by the good.

The limitation and lessening of such inconsistency is the function of criticism. It is the duty of parents and teachers -- and also friends. Thus, the Torah teaches us: *קוֹכַח תּוֹכִיחַ אֶת עַמִּיתְךָ*, "Thou shalt surely rebuke thy friend."

We are often told, as parents and teachers and Rabbis, to be "accepting," and "affirming," and "non-judgmental." Oh, how often I have heard that last term: "you must be non-judgmental!" And of course, the advice is correct. We must do just that. But not always! If we are always to be accepting and encouraging and non-judgmental; if there is never to be any *תּוֹכִיחַ*, any criticism or rebuke; if, as a parent, I never scold my child; if, as a teacher, I always accept sloppy work without comment; if, as a Rabbi, I cater to the whims of my congregation and never call them to account -- then I am guilty for leading them astray, because then even a Solomon can deteriorate!

Genuine criticism always issues out of love. True love is manifested in helping the beloved to grow beyond his or her limitations or weaknesses or foibles or failures. This can be attained only through *תוכחה*.

But this *תוכחה* (reproach) must be done lovingly and encouragingly. Remember that of the Four Sons of the Haggadah, even the *רשע*, the Wicked Son, is still a "son!" He is one of the *ארבעה בנים*, "the Four Sons." We do not throw him out of the house. We must not isolate him from the community. It is he himself who has opted out, not we who have rejected him: *נפשו הוציא את עצמו מן הכלל*, "he has taken himself out of the community." But we want to keep him. That is why our answer is not one of violence and aggressiveness, but one, strictly speaking, of education. We are not told *הקהה את שיניו*, knock out his teeth, but *הכה את שיניו*, blunt the edge of his teeth, teach him that his argument is fallacious, and try to draw him back.

Both sides of the argument, the need for rebuke and the need for doing it gently, are evident in a statement of the Rabbis and in an interpretation of that statement by one of the great Musarites. The Rabbis said: *הוכח תוכיח אפילו אלף פעמים*, you must rebuke your friend, even a thousand times. In other words, rebuke must always be given, even if it is necessary to repeat it a thousand times. But the Musar interpretation is: you must break the one *תוכחה* into a thousand little pieces, and administer each painlessly, until you have added them all up into one item of rebuke!

This too was taught by Bathsheba. She scolded and upbraided her son Solomon. But it was not a sharp, hostile rebuke. It was, instead, *עטרה שעטרה לו אמו*, "the crown wherewith his mother hath crowned him," a *mother's* reproach -- direct and unadorned, but with love and sympathy and caring.

Solomon wore many great crowns -- the crowns of royalty and of wisdom and of power. But his greatest crown was the one his mother gave him! It was the refusal to accept his own weaknesses, his own ambivalences and inconsistencies and incoherences, his own penchant for self-indulgence even with the excuse that he was building the Temple!

It was a crown of rebuke by a mother to her own beloved child -- angry but not hostile; harsh but not mean; hurting, perhaps -- but never hating.

It is this crown which our Tradition gives us on this Passover holiday by means of the verse in *Shir Hashirim*. As nature awakens from its long Winter slumber, as the earth bedecks itself anew with all the colors and tokens of Spring, we Jews adorn ourselves with the "crown of Solomon," knowing the complexity of man, understanding his inconsistencies, yet refusing to accept it -- especially in ourselves -- but always improving, always criticizing, and doing so with love and warmth: the crown of a mother's reproach.