

"SPECIAL ASSIGNMENTS"

Our Sidra of this morning manifests certain stylistic peculiarities which are deserving of our attention. Surprisingly, the name of Moses is not once mentioned in this Sidra. Instead, three times in succession God addresses Moses using the pronoun v'attah, "and thou," as if to emphasize some special assignment given to Moses by God. Thus we read, v'attah tetzaveh, "and thou shalt command" the Children of Israel to bring olive oil for the Menorah; v'attah hakrev, "and thou shalt draw near" Aaron and his children to dedicate them to the priesthood; and v'attah tedaber, "and thou shalt speak" to all skilled artisans to prepare the vestments of the priests and the furnishings of the Temple.

The Zohar too recognized the unusual construction of this passage, and attributed to the repetition of the pronoun v'attah great mystical significance, a raza ilaah, a supernal mystery whereby Moses was able to commune more directly with the Shechinah. In other words, the Zohar acknowledges, in mystical idiom, that we are here confronted by a special assignment given to Moses.

What Divine secrets is the Torah trying to reveal to us? Let us analyze each of these cases briefly and see what the Torah says to us today -- openly, not esoterically.

Let us begin with the last case: v'attah tedaber el kol hakhmei lev, "and thou shalt speak to all the wise-hearted" to use

their skills in the prescribed manner in order to prepare the vestments and the Temple furnishings. Actually, a modern reader encountering this passage for the first time, might well be astounded. For our Sidra, to be truthful, probably appears to the eyes of one unacquainted with Judaism as little more than a manual for carpenters, weavers, and tailors. Such a person might justifiably ask: What business is it of Moses to instruct the artisans and artists in their work? What business, indeed, is it of religion to deal at all with art and crafts? Let Moses commission the artists, sublet the contract, and not interfere in the creative labors of the hakhmei lev.

Such protest makes eminently good sense in the context of modern secularism. Secularism teaches that life and society are to be viewed in segments, by compartmentalization. There is the category of the sacred and the category of the profane, and they should not be confused. On one side we have religion, and on the other side all else. Secularism does not deny the right of religion to preach its doctrine, nor does it deny to it legitimacy; it does not really care at all. It does insist, however, that religion is irrelevant to any activity that is not concerned with the other world. Let religion deal with theology, with heaven and hell, with paradise -- but let it not interfere with or pronounce judgment upon society and its varied problems. A secularist, therefore, would concur in a protest against Moses and the Bible in their concern with the hakhmei lev, the artists and artisans.

Yet this is precisely what the Torah wants to tell us: that this whole doctrine is false! Judaism cannot concern itself only with the Other World. In fact, it has precious little to say about that Other World, except that it exists and that it is a fine place in which to spend eternity. Our major concern is with this world, with poverty and wealth, with peace and war, with love and hate, with ambition and competition, with the daily grind, and grime, and guts of earthly life. That is why the Torah emphasizes the point: v'attah, "and you," specifically you, Moses, who are the embodiment of Torah and revelation, v'attah tedaber el kol hakhmei lev, it is you who must incorporate into the realm of Torah the art of the artist and the skill of the artisan. It is you who must break down all artificial boundaries and declare as limitless the horizons of Torah and the people of Torah. So does the "Keli Yakar" interpret our verse: K'dei she'yekablu atzilut ore ha-sekhel mimekha, the very inspiration and skill of the hakhmei lev must derive from the intellectual and spiritual genius of Moses and Torah. It is quite conceivable that Moses himself was not a skilled artist, that he could not even draw a straight line; but in the circle of Moses' universal interests, his atzilut, he included art and science and commerce and each and every expression of human creativity.

I am therefore disappointed when I hear of very Orthodox Jews who prefer to retrench to the comfort and security of the Synagogue or the Shtibel, or the Yeshiva or the Kollel, and ignore all

the rest of the world. This is an instance of succumbing to an anti-Jewish view, to the divorce of the v'attah of Moses from the hakhmei ley of the modern world.

I am therefore grieved when American Jews deny to Orthodox thinkers the right to be heard when they express an authentically Jewish view, issuing from the Halakhah, on the great social, ethical, and moral problems of our day, whether on the problems of peace or those of the proposed abortion law. I am both amused and saddened when people on the one hand chastise Orthodoxy for not being involved more in contemporary life, and on the other chastise us even more when we attempt to pronounce an authentically Jewish view which may not agree with all their prejudices. Are we, then, to be reduced to the areas of services, and Sabbath, and Kashruth exclusively, offering no moral opinions on matters of life and death -- and leaving that only to the consensus of the ignorant or the moral authority of the politicians?

I therefore am happy, and delighted, and proud when some consummately obnoxious non-entity, supported by a great majority of his white Protestant neighbors, in Wayne County, N. J., accuses Jews of being prejudiced in favor of more education. I gladly plead guilty to the fact that the culture and religion of Judaism are predisposed to education as a moral necessity for all people. It is true that I am amused and faintly irritated by the astonishment experienced by so many Jews who found their illusions in shambles --

illusions that because their Gentile neighbors greeted them politely every morning this indicated the end of all anti-Semitism, even the latent variety, among New Jersey WASP'S. But I am happy that Jews stand accused of provoking Jew-hatred because they favor culture and learning. I much prefer this to the revealing interview granted by a German Cardinal earlier this week in which, on the eve of accepting a Christian-Jewish Brotherhood award, he blamed Jewish assertiveness in provoking Hitlerian anti-Semitism. The senility of the old Prince of the Church was just sufficient to strip him of his hypocritical veneer of post-conciliar ecumenical euphoria and reveal the ugly inner force of the legacy of centuries of anti-Semitism, a Jew-hatred which survives even his own earlier attempts to become a civilized human being in the face of Nazi bestiality. If we have to suffer anti-Semitism, then let it be forthcoming for such reasons which enhance the glory of our heritage and our loyalty to it. For we are not a private cult, out of the mainstream of life. Moses and all he stands for, the v'attah that we represent today, includes the aspirations of all hakhmei lev.

The second instance of v'attah is the one with which our Sidra begins: v'attah tetzaveh et benei Yisrael ve'hikhu elekha, "and thou shalt command the Children of Israel and they shall take to you" pure, beaten olive oil for illumination in the Temple. Our Rabbis were intrigued by the word elekha, "to you." They said that God meant this rather specifically: elekha ve'lo li, "to you, Moses,

and not for Me," because lo l'orah ani tzarikh, "I, God, do not need their light -- but you and they and all mankind do."

What the Talmud meant to tell us by this is that we must never think we are doing God a favor by observing Judaism. To imagine that through our observance we are fulfilling a divine need is to revert to paganism and to primitivism. The true Jew realizes that God does not need our gifts; that a religious life is not a question of spiritual trade and religious commercialization.

Unfortunately, this is not always the underlying assumption of our lives. You will detect this primitive aspect of religion in the person who, when asked to contribute even more of his time and substance and energy to Torah, will respond with annoyance, "Haven't I already done my share?", as if what he has done so far has been a tribute exacted of him by an avaricious God who should have had His appetite satiated by now. When such a person suffers reverses, his question is always, "Didn't I do my duty? Why did I deserve this?"

Therefore, the Talmud interprets the words of the Torah clearly: elekha, ve'lo li: The Torah, with all its difficulties and demands and disciplines, is a gift by God to man, and our observance of the Torah is no gift by us to God.

That is why, too, the Torah uses the word ve'yikhu, "and they shall take." When we perform the genuine religious act, whether it be giving charity or lighting candles, we do not really

give; we take. Paradoxically, it is a law of nature and of Torah: when we give, whether it be love or happiness or charity, we really take; the more we transmit, the more we transcend; the more we do, the more we are.

Thus it is that one commentator, perhaps speaking tongue in cheek but alluding to matters of utmost seriousness, says that in this case the Torah uses the expression v'attah, "and thou shall command" to emphasize that God wishes Moses to instruct the Children of Israel in gathering the olive oil, in his own name, rather than God issuing the command by Himself: so that the Children of Israel should not foolishly believe that God needs the light, but rather understand from the command of Moses that it was meant for their good.

The third v'attah tells us of a sublime psychological principle that demanded of Moses that he scale the very heights of ethical and moral perfection. V'attah hakrev et Aharon ahikha v'et banav ito mi-tokh benei Yisrael le'khahano li, Nadav va-Avihu, Elazar v'Itamar, benei Aharon, "and thou shall draw near to thee Aaron thy brother and his children with him from amongst the children of Israel to minister unto Me; Aaron and Nadab and Ahihu and Elazar and Ithamar, the children of Aaron."

How difficult it must have been for Moses to preside at this dedication of Aaron and his sons as the founders of Jewish priesthood. His own children, Gershom and Eliezer, are of no im-

portance in Jewish history. Shortly after their birth is mentioned, they slip into total obscurity, lost to Scripture and Judaism and to world Jewry. What a prominent father -- and what obscure sons!

At the very beginning of the career of these two brothers, Aaron manifested great heroism. He was the oldest, Moses the youngest in the family. It would normally have been expected that Aaron be charged with the mission of being the teacher, the leader, the law-giver. But it was Moses, the youngest, who was chosen, and Aaron was to be subordinate to him. Yet the Torah tells us, with prophetic revelation, that ve'raakha ve'samah be'libo, when Aaron saw Moses after being informed of the Divine mission, he was happy in his heart. Not only did Aaron demonstrate outwardly satisfaction, but inwardly he experienced simhah, true joy at the greatness that was accorded to his brother. No matter that he was now to be the disciple of Moses, the assistant, secondary to him, yet Aaron succeeded in restraining his quite natural sibling rivalry towards the youngest of his family. He did not begrudge Moses the greatness to which he might legitimately have laid claim.

Now the tables were turned. Moses was called upon to rise to the occasion and not to begrudge to his brother that special historic "nachas" which he, Moses, was denied. Hence, v'attah hakrev, "and thou draw near thy brother Aaron and his sons," it is your opportunity, Moses, to show your greatness, a greatness that transcends



even that of Aaron towards you, and bestow eternal priesthood on all his children, on Nadav va-Avihu, Elazar v'Itamar, benei Aharon. Do not allow your personal disappointments in your own children to stand in the way of family joy and pride; witness and participate in, without any pang of regret, the special pride with which Aaron is now blessed.

It was a psychologically impossible task, but Moses was commanded to do it, and Moses succeeded in this v'attah as well.

No wonder that the priestly vestments, the mark of distinction of the children of Aaron, are regarded by our Sidra as le'khavod u-le'tiferet, the signs of honor and ornament. Indeed -- they were a tiferet, an ornament for the children of Aaron; but they were the sign of kavod, true and sublime honor, for Moses who was able to preside at this investiture without at all begrudging this special joy to his brother Aaron.

The Zohar, then, was right: these three principles, summarized in the three pronouns v'attah, serve to bring man into communion with the Shechinah, they allow man to grow intellectually, religiously, morally. They teach us the comprehensiveness of Torah; that Torah was meant for our good; and that we must erase every taint of selfishness from our hearts and never begrudge another his joys.

May I conclude by exercising some homiletic license. The first verse of our Haftorah begins with the charge of the Almighty

to the prophet Ezekiel: Attah ben adam haged et bet Yisrael, "You, O son of man, tell the house of Israel" to procede with the building of the Temple. Let us re-interpret that: haged et bet Yisrael, tell the House of Israel that if they will remember the attah, the special lessons incorporated in the pronoun "thou" told to their teacher Moses, then they will reach the very limits of humanity, and they will rise to the fullness of the stature of ben adam.