

"THE SILENCE OF JACOB"

Silence, it is said, is golden. Our Rabbis taught that it makes for wisdom. Yet, the wisest of all men preach^{ed} that while there is a time for silence, there is also a time to talk up. Et la-chashot v'et le'daber. Just as there is a time for passivity and restrain^t, so is there a time for activity and protest.

This morning we shall speak of the importance of Et le'daber, of speaking out, and of carrying the virtue of silence to an excess.

In the last two portions of our Torah, we read of three occasions when Jacob could have talked up but did not. In each he revealed a remarkable self-control, a fully disciplined spirit. Jacob, the ish tam, stands out as a man who is pure almost to the point of innocence. He has an abiding faith in humanity which ordinary men perhaps do not deserve. So distant is he from evil, that he no longer truly believes that it is a real factor in the life of man and the constitution of society. And the Torah, in recording the silences of Jacob, suggests an indirect criticism of Father Jacob. The Torah reminds us that just as Et la-chashot, so Et le'daber.

One such case occurs in our Sidra, where we read: va-yekanu bo echav, v'aviv shamar et ha-davar - "And his brethren envied him; but his father kept it in mind" - the brothers were jealous, and Jacob merely made a mental note of it (Gen. 37:11). Imagine if instead of merely passively observing the budding hatred and envy that was developing amongst his children, Jacob had actively stepped into the picture and reproached the oldest brothers, saying: you are all older and mature men, how can you keep your self respect while envying a mere teen-ager because of his adolescent day dreams and ambition? But Jacob wanted to spare their feelings, he was himself a sensitive individual, and, Furthermore, ^{he} did not believe that this kind of emotion could last long in

the heart of his beloved children. Had he not been addicted to periods of silence, had he talked up, he might have stopped then and there the envy and animosity which was to develop between the brothers, ^{and which was fated} to result in the Egyptian exile, and to remain a factor throughout history when the Jewish people split ^{up} into two ^{warring} kingdoms, ~~who warred with each other throughout the years.~~

A second case is the silence of Jacob in the episode of the violation and kidnap of Dinah by Shechem. When the reports of this disgraceful act came to Jacob we read: ve'hecherish Yaakov ad bo'am - "And Jacob held his peace until his sons came home" (Gen.34:5). When the sons did come home, they naturally were deeply grieved and ^{con}mined to destroy Schechem, punish his partner in crime, and rescue their sister. Jacob was unhappy over the methods they employed. Yet, ~~who knows, perhaps~~ if Jacob had not kept his peace but had spoken up at once to Shechem and his father and demanded the immediate safe return of his daughter, ^{perhaps} the whole heart-rending episode might never have occurred.

9 The third, and perhaps most interesting, case is that which occurred after the va-yelekh Reuven va-yishkav et Bilhah pilegeshaviv, va-yishma Yisrael death of Rachel. We read in the Torah ~~A~~ (Gen.35:22). The understanding of this verse, according to the Jewish tradition, is that after the death of his beloved Rachel, Jacob made his home with Bilhah, her maid whom she later gave to Jacob as a concubine. Reuven was outraged at the fact that Jacob gave preference to Bilhah, a mere concubine just because she was close to Rachel, over Leah (Reuven's mother) who was a full fledged wife of Jacob. And so Reuven forcibly removed Jacob's permanent quarters from the tent of Bilhah to the tent of Leah - an unwarranted interference by Reuven in his father's personal affairs.

What did Jacob do? Did he say anything? No! Va-yishma Yisrael - "And Israel heard of it." He heard, he noted, he ~~he~~ probably grieved deeply within at the brazenness of his son, and the fallen state of his domestic life.

Was Jacob right in refraining from censuring Reuven? It is interesting that the Pareshah ends after the word va-yishma Yisrael, "and Israel heard of it," but - ^{this} ~~the ending~~ is in the middle of a verse! The new Pareshah continues with the end of that verse, indicating an inner connection between the two recorded incidents. What is the beginning of the new paragraph? - Va-yihu^{ey} bnei Yaakov shnem asar, "Now the sons of Jacob were twelve." ^{why this} ~~Quite a~~ queer arrangement? And what ^{new information} is there ~~that is new and that we do not know from before~~ in the Torah's mention of the twelve sons of Jacob?

I believe that the sin of Reuven is not only his audacious intereference in his father's personal matters, but, what is worse, taking advantage of the defenseless^sness of Bilhah. Bilhah was a mere concubine, not a full wife. Reuven was the eldest of the sons, the heir apparent. He was strong, she was weak. During the time that Rachel, her protector, lived, Reuven would not have dared to do what he now did. For Rachel was the favorite of Jacob and he never would have countenanced any insult or injury either to her or to those close to her. But now that Rachel was gone - the incident of Rachel's death immediately precedes this episode - Reuven immediately began to exploit her new weakness. He asserted himself in total disregard of Bilhah's sensitivities. Yet Jacob did not speak up. "And Israel heard." He probably considered the distress and inner anguish of Reuven. He did not want to hurt him anymore. He believed, no doubt, that this was a singular affair and never would Reuven do such a thing again. And yet the Torah calls out to Jacob: Remember, Jacob, va-yihu^{ey} bnei Yaakov shnem asar - you have twelve sons, not just one. It may be very virtuous of you to suffer in silence and refrain from rebuking your eldest son, but remember that if you let him get away with it, he, as the eldest son, will set the example from others, they will learn from him how to act the role of the bully! And indeed, that is just what happened! Only a short time later when the envious brothers see Joseph approaching, without the protective custody of his loving father, they pounced on him, taking advantage of his weakness. They

had learned their lesson from Reuven very well. They too would now gang up on a defenseless fellow man. If only Jacob had not kept his peace!

So that Jacob, the ish tam, was too good, too kind, too patient, too unwilling to believe the worst, too considerate of the feelings of others. He could not bring himself to believe that his children were anything but ish tam, people of the highest and noblest perfection. No wonder he is so severe with them on his death bed - he was a disappointed father. They were only human, but his expectations had been so great. He erred in projecting his own faithlessness to others. And when the Torah records these silences of Jacob, it reminds us to emulate his saintliness, but not his silences; his nobility of soul, but not his extravagant and unrealistic faith in frail and inadequate man.

It is an old Jewish trait to be over-confident in man's goodness, to ascribe to others the innate decency that you possess yourself. King Saul, finding ^{before} ~~this for~~ himself Agag, the Amalekite King, could not bring himself to believe that ~~this~~ man was a thorough scoundrel and should be put to death according to the word of the prophet. So he turned passive instead of active, and in the process lost his own throne. Queen Esther, apprised of the nefarious plans of Haman, probably considered them the rantings of a mad man. He could not possibly really mean to do what he proclaimed he would! It was only when Mordecai spoke to her in words as strong, ^{and} as cold, ^{and} as cutting as steel that she came to her senses and averted a great tragedy. The democracies of the West similarly did not believe that Hitler meant to do what he announced in his Mein Kampf. They did not believe it, they were silent, and eighteen-^{are} million people killed ~~on the~~ testimony to that silence. This past year we listened with enraptured attention to the Eichmann trial. And in the course we have been plagued by a nagging question: Why did European Jewry not react violently to these plans of destruction? An answer seems to be crystalizing

of a trial

from all the mass of data - that the Jews, because of their own innate character, simply never believed the reports they had been receiving of death camps and crematoria¹⁰. It could not be true. And so they were silent...

One of the major teaches of Hanukkah is that when the crucial moment came, our ancestors finally did learn to speak up and to act. Over two-thousand-one hundred-twenty-six years ago, an old man realized that the time had come to throw off the shackles of the oppressor and to react to the treason of Jewish Hellenists. And so Mattathias struck the traitor to the earth, and the episode of Hanukkah was begun. An end to silence, et le'daber.

The founding of the State of Israel, and active and creative protest against ^{bestiality} the distally of one-half of the world, and the inhuman indifference of the other half, was in the tradition of Hanukkah. When, recently, the Israeli government confirmed its protest against racial violence and bigotry in the Union of South Africa, despite the exposed position of that very important Jewish community in South Africa, it was again following in the great and historic footsteps of the Hanukkah triumph.

But
For just as we are delighted with the activism of the State of Israel with regard to specific problems, so must we not surrender our critical functions with regard to the State itself. The Jewish religion must ever be the conscience of the Jewish state and the Jewish people. For the spokesman^e of Judaism to keep silent at crucial moments, ~~there would be committing~~ a sin against their most precious^{ly} held tenets, and against the very people and State whom they profess to love. It is in this sense, and in this sense only, that we voiced our displeasure at a recent decision of the Prime Minister of Israel. That he is a man of greatness, that he deserves our gratitude, and that he has won an honored place in the history of our people - this no one can, will, or wants to deny. But he is not immune from the judgment of his

peers fears or his tradition.

Whatever Mr. Ben-Gurion's motives, whatever his personal predilections, we were distressed and embarrassed to learn that he would spend his vacation in a Budist monastery in ^{Burma} ~~Burma~~. The original announcement made to the press was later modified: he would, of course, not worship in the monastery, but merely go there as a guest of Premier U Nu and meditate while U Nu would teach him advanced techniques in Yoga.

It makes little difference whether Ben-Gurion's real motive is to learn Yoga, to learn philosophy, to get a good rest, or to negotiate diplomatic problems with the Prime Minister of a friendly country. What does matter is that we have here a dramatic contempt for the entire community of Jewish believers. What does matter more than all else is that because of his fame and popularity he has a profound influence upon a very impressionable young generation in the State of Israel. And when they will see that their hero and idol, who never set foot into a synagogue, allows himself the luxury of a vacation in the monastery of another faith, we fear most profoundly the effects and consequences upon world Jewry and especially Israeli Jewry. We dare not fall into the same trap of Jacob, that of va-yishma Yisrael, "And Israel heard" - and ^{did} ~~did~~ nothing about it. We must remember that va-yihyu bnei Yaakov shnem asar, that here we may have the beginning of a new fashion and a fad for the young generation of the State of Israel, so that while American youngsters do the "twist," Israeli may go Budist.

A true friend is not one who is always ^{camping} ~~coughing~~, critical and captious. But it is equally true that a real friend is not one who ^{apprises you of} ~~would never let you know~~ your own mistakes, who will hide from you things that are apparent to others, but that you may not be aware of. The same holds true for our beloved Israel and its distinguished leaders. Kol ahavah she'ein imah tokhachah enah ahavah • Our Rabbis taught: "That love which does not contain in it a critical

element is not really love."

On Hanukkah we emphasize the education of the children of Israel, from the ~~six~~ saintly silence of Jacob to the ^{even} more saintly activism of Mattathias. In the words of the prophet Isaiah, "For Zion's sake I will not hold my peace, and for Jerusalem's sake I will not keep silent, until her triumph go forth as brightness, and her salvation as a torch that burneth."