

"THE KNOWING HEART"

The Torah reading that tradition assigns to this day offers an interesting emphasis that is somehow out of keeping with the nature and the mood of the entire festival which is folksy and attuned to the mass experiences of slavery and redemption. We find a reiteration of the theme of ידע, the knowledge of the Lord. At the very first portion of today's reading we find about six variations of the root י-ד-ע, to know, such as

... ידעתי / ידעתי / ידעתי / ידעתי / ידעתי / ידעתי

Why this stress on such a metaphysical theme on the day of יום כיפור when we speak of the love of God? Isn't such a profound enterprise as the knowledge of God out of line with the commemoration of history and the celebration of political freedom? What does the knowledge of the Lord mean generally, and for us particularly?

Permit me to outline three areas of significance of this great Jewish concept which many if not most Jewish thinkers consider the highest achievement of the religious individual.

The first one is the intellectual one. In this sense, the knowledge of the Lord most certainly is esoteric, it is meant for the gifted few who are willing to devote their time and talent and energy and life to attaining this cherished ideal. This form of the knowledge of the Lord cannot be achieved by someone who spends his daytime in business and evenings in all kinds of leisure, with an occasional reading in order to attain "knowledge of the Lord." It is meant only for those whose dedication is total.

This intellectual form of knowledge itself has several forms. For the man of reason -- the philosopher or theologian -- this means rising to ever higher and deeper and purer levels of knowing God -- His attributes, His properties, His characteristics. As the thinker grows and develops, his conceptual insights becomes so refined, so abstruse, so difficult to convey, that only the deepest minds can follow him.

Another form of the intellectual knowledge of God is that of the mystic or Kabbalist. Here, a man's intellectual resources are combined with another dimension of human personality that most of us not only do not experience but are not even aware of: the spiritual. Both work in tandem to lead a man on to the mystic leap, beyond the merely conceptual, beyond the merely intellectual, to the free realm of the spirit. When the mystic attains this particular form of the knowledge of God, he finds it so very difficult to communicate his experiences, that he can only speak in symbols or suggestions or hints. Or, preferably, in long periods of -- silence.

The third form of intellectual knowledge of the Lord is that of the study of Halakhah and Talmud. The study of Torah means that I am learning the will of God. Ultimately, when I have devoted all my life to such knowledge, I come not only to know God's will, but to know God Himself, as it were. That is why the great halakhists, (such as ר' אברהם) have taught that the "natural" result of a lifetime dedicated to Talmudic study is the attainment of ^{הקדו}, the gift of the Holy Spirit, the kind of religious and spiritual knowledge of God that issues from the intellectual adventure of Talmudic learning.

So much for the first kind of ^{הקדו}, or the knowledge of the Lord. It is, to repeat, esoteric and reserved for the elite, for those few who dedicate their lives to it.

But the second form of the knowledge of the Lord is not quite that elitist. It is not cognitive, but intuitive. A person of great intuitive capacity, of finely honed sensitivity, can come to know God in the second manner. It was the French philosopher Pascal (no friend of ours!) who spoke of "les raisons de couer," the "reasons of the heart." He meant that the heart as well as the mind has its own peculiar "reasons" -- and in this he was anticipated by some eight centuries by the Jewish thinker ^{ר' אברהם}. One can "know God" with a knowing heart as well as a knowing head. Not only with a deep mind, but also with an open heart, can one hear God's footsteps, see His fingerprints, feel His presence in nature and man and life.

Thus, our reading today of ^{שיר השירים}, the Song of Songs, teaches us how to find and "know God" in nature and in human relationships. We read of the poet singing, fairly bursting of joy, that the buds are now visible in the land, the time of the singing birds has arrived, the voice of the turtledoves is heard in our land. And, when lying in bed at night, his heart goes out searching and yearning for Him whom his soul loveth -- for the Rabbis so properly identified the love in this book with religious yearning and spiritual striving for God.

One can know God in the opening of a flower, in the cry of a newborn baby, in an unsolicited word of encouragement, in the memory of a simple but saintly man. Above all, one can know Him in an act of warmth, of personal commitment and love. So, when God says to Moses in today's reading ^{אני אקרא בשם}, "I shall know you by name," it does not mean that God will now discover new facts about Moses; it does mean that He will feel with him, He will give him recognition and affection, He will develop with him a relationship of sympathy and empathy. For these two are ^{הקדו}, knowledge.

In this sense, the esthetic experience can become a channel

for the knowledge of God. A beautiful painting or great music can become a way by which one is aware of the divine Presence. I do not mean the glib way in which artists or critics sometimes refer to a painting or piece of music as divine or godly; that is merely a semantic trick and a verbal overstatement. I mean that a religious personality in the presence of great art can feel that he is being confronted by something or someone transcendent, and that such experiences lead him to a new insight into the Creator.

But one does not need to be a poet in order to take advantage of this second form of חֲסִידוּת. Consider Jewish history and you will know God too. Ezekiel in today's haftorah, at the end of the great vision of the Valley of Dry Bones, says to his people:

וַיֹּאמֶר כִּי אֵלֶי הִשְׁתַּחֲוִי אֶת קִרְיַת אֱלֹהֵיכֶם וְהִשְׁתַּחֲוִי אֶת אֱלֹהֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל.

"And you shall know that I am the Lord when I have opened your graves, and caused you to come out of your graves, O my people." The survival of the Jewish people, the beginning of the redemption of the people of Israel, the new found dignity of the pitiful remnants who straggled out of the grave that was Europe -- the crematoria and the concentration camps and the DP camps, this whole phenomena of which we were witness, should be the experience and stuff for the knowledge of God.

Finally, the third area of $\gamma\alpha\beta$ is not the intellectual, and not only that of emotional and psychological sensitivity. It is possible to attain a level of $\gamma\alpha\beta$ even without great conceptual talents and without the sensitivity and insight of a poet. One can know God through one's moral behavior.

It is no one less than the greatest rationalist of all, Maimonides -- one who raised the knowledge of God to the highest ideal and value of man, and who gave it primarily its cognitive and intellectual interpretation -- who told us about the moral knowledge of God at the very climax of his Guide for the Perplexed.

It is true, says Maimonides, that the knowledge of God is attained by deep thinking, by \int or reason. But the purpose of \int is something which all of us can obtain: a moral way of life. Maimonides quotes the Prophet Jeremiah: \int

life. Maimonides quotes the Prophet Jeremiah:
 פה אמר ה' אל ומהלך חכם בחכמתו, ואלו ומהלך גבור בגבורתו, ואלו ומהלך
 עשיר בצרכו, כי אם כבוד ומהלך המהלך השכל ויצא אורו.

Thus sayeth the Lord: let not the wise man glory in his wisdom, and let not the strong man be proud of his strength, and let not the rich man boast of his riches, for only in this may a man glory: that he understands and knows Me." But what does this knowing of God consist of? Here we must go to the words that immediately follow in the text of the Prophet: *כי ידעתי כי אתה יהוה אחד* "For I am the Lord who doeth love and justice and righteousness in the land."

To "know God" means to know His character and to imitate it -- thus, to be loving and just and righteous, to bring a deeply moral outlook and charitableness and compassion to all human beings. When a person practices this kind of life then his very conduct enables him to be in contact with the Source of all life and morality.

Merely to have theological knowledge and not to translate it into moral precepts; to study Torah but not to practice the commandments -- this is the frustration of the knowledge of the Lord, it is an enforced ignorance which dooms the purpose of all Judaism. But to live the life of *אברהם אבינו*, of love and justice and righteousness, is to rise beyond the commonplace and to be in consonance with the will of God.

So that the emphasis this morning on the knowledge of God can be achieved in one of these three ways: the intellectual -- whether it is the philosophical or the mystical or the halakhic; the intuitive or experiential, the sensitivity of the knowing heart; and the knowledge that comes from deeply moral conduct.

Each man and each woman must approach this knowledge in the manner most in consonance with his or her character and personality and talents and capabilities. But Solomon has already to us:

והנהיגהו, it is best to know Him in all ways, through all the means that are given to us.

Passover, then, reminds us to move forward, each in his own way, ultimately to all ways, until the great prophecy of Isaiah will have been realized. *והנהיגהו*
"And the world will be filled with the knowledge of the Lord like the waters cover the sea."