

"DAVKA"

In Psalm 27, which we read during this penitential season, we recite the following verse:

הוֹדוּ יְהוָה צִדְקָתוֹ וְיִתֵּן יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵינוּ מִנְחָתוֹ לְדָוִד
הוֹדוּ יְהוָה צִדְקָתוֹ וְיִתֵּן יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵינוּ מִנְחָתוֹ לְדָוִד

"Teach me, O Lord, Thy way and lead me in the path of righteousness because of my enemies' sake."

Because of my enemies? Does that make sense? I prefer the translation of Dr. Phillip Birnbaum in our prayer books: "despite my enemies." David finds himself surrounded by enemies on all sides. They are out not only to destroy him physically, but worse, to cut him down to size, to reduce him to just another primitive pagan chieftain, to make him just another one of their own, to rob him of his faith, his spiritual uniqueness, his special charm, to dispossess him of his neshamah, of his capacity to compose מְזִמֹּת or Psalms. And so David prays: "Teach me Your way and guide me in the right path
הוֹדוּ יְהוָה צִדְקָתוֹ וְיִתֵּן יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵינוּ מִנְחָתוֹ לְדָוִד -- despite my enemies."

Perhaps it is best to characterize this attitude with an Aramaic word that has gone over into Yiddish: דַּבְּקָה, davka. In the Talmud, that word means: necessarily, exactly. But it also takes on, especially in the Yiddish, a larger and more poignant meaning that is really untranslatable: despite, the acceptance of a challenge, the exercise of stubbornness and persistence against all odds.

Davka is for me a symbol of one of the most precious, unique, and irreplaceable Jewish traits, and the Jews characteristic mode in confronting the world: the ability to prevail against almost certain

defeat, to resolve to survive despite political persecution and cultural pressure for assimilation, to determine to triumph even if it means flying in the face of facts and defying reason. וְיִרְדּוּ בְּכֹחַ--
davka when my enemies want me to surrender my faith, my uniqueness, my commitment -- davka then, teach me to be a better Jew!

What is it that gives the Jew the power of davka? Wherefrom this success in attempting the impossible? What alchemy is needed to concoct this historic Jewish mixture of courage and defiance and persistence that we have called davka?

The first thing that occasions davka is -- a great love.

Before entering the Holy Land, Moses and the Israelites encamped on the East side of the Jordan. Most of them were there because they had been pushed along by the great historic tide of the Exodus. But some of them came not because of push, but because of the pull and the attraction of the Promised Land. Moses sent twelve men, all dignitaries and princes, to spy out the land. The majority came back with a pessimistic report: Canaan was infested with giants, its cities fortified and impregnable. Joshua and Caleb agreed with the description of the enemy and his fortifications. Yet, they said, davka because of this we can do it! The other ten said: אֲנִי וְכָל בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל, we will not be able to go up and take the land. But Joshua and Caleb said: אֲנִי וְכָל בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל, we certainly shall go up because we can beat them. The difference was this: Joshua and Caleb possessed אֶהְיֶה כְּכֹחַ הָאֶרֶץ, the love of the Land of Israel. And when you love the land, then davka you will get there: וְיִרְדּוּ בְּכֹחַ--

despite all enemies and all conditions.

Individual Jews throughout history have developed this davka attitude as a result of a love of life. Surrounded by malice and evil, by meanness and suffering, they proclaimed: בס ה' אלהים, "God is good to all." Davka!

Beset by woes and poverty, harassed on all sides, the Jew refused to concede defeat. Loving God, he could not believe that God would consciously do us evil. He therefore interpreted every setback as simply a stepping stone to some greater good:

אשר אלהים יעשה לנו
All that God, the Merciful One, does -- is for the good! This is a davka attitude!

The Jew has always known that there is a mean yetzer hara locked up in the human heart; there is a beast within man waiting to spring out. Long before Freud, the Jew knew that most people usually make the wrong choices, that they are controlled by their bases passions. Yet the Jew loved people, and from this love there grew a davka attitude: Davka because I know how mean people can be, I will abide by the teachings of the Sages: אשר אלהים יעשה לנו, always judge a person charitably and assume the best of him. Davka!

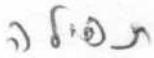

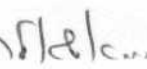
Some will say that such an attitude is irrational. I agree! If we Jews had relied upon rationality and sensible odds, we would have disappeared a long time ago. But we are a davka people. When sophisticated Romans called us crazy for believing in an invisible God, we davka persisted in monotheism. When pagans called us lazy for not working one whole day of the week, we davka made the Shabbat a major

principle of our faith. When Palestine was ravaged and we were under the heel of oppression of both church and state in the Diaspora, we spoke hopefully and confidently of שוב ארץ, the return to Zion -- and experienced and sensible practical men smiled knowingly at our naive Jewish myth, at our childish and irrational day dreaming. But davka -- it worked! Today we vindicate our davka -- defiance and we say ה' בנה לנו ירושלים, God today has rebuilt Jerusalem for us. Davka prevails over reason! Jewish obstinancy vanquishes common sense. And the State of Israel today is the actualization of this davka -- characteristic of Jews. We are here -- בארץ ישראל, despite our enemies. And the character of the Sabra in Israel reflects the accumulation of centuries of davka. For the Sabra is the perfect Davkanik! And we must let the world know, no matter what is said and decided in that building at 42nd Street near the East River, that Jerusalem will remain in Jewish hands. We have returned, and we shall never leave it. Our love of Jerusalem gives us the courage to say davka to the whole world!

There is a second source for davka: a great faith. The classical case is that of Abraham of whom we read this morning. The Akedah was a cruel test for Abraham. He must overcome the love of his only son, he must restrain his moral inhibitions against bloodshed, in order to prove that he is a God-fearing man, to teach the transcendence of God to all generations. Yet, faced with these two great obstacles, emotional and moral, Abraham says: Davka. If this is the will of God, I must believe, and act on this belief, despite all. In the end, God

showed that He does not really want the blood of Isaac; all he wanted was -- the davka of Abraham.

But for us, davka not only issues from faith, but it is also our posture towards faith, our attraction to the faith that we have not yet achieved.

For instance, some Jews simply cannot pray. Their difficulty lies not with reading or translating Hebrew, because that can be done simply enough. But they cannot pray emotionally, spiritually. They feel inhibited. They experience no flutter of the heart; no word of true  forms on their lips. Yet many such people come to the synagogue on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, on holidays, often every Shabbat. Why do they come? Let me offer my explanation: with all the infirmities conspiring to seal their lips, they come davka: if not to turn to God directly, at least to wait in His presence. Because they cannot pray, davka they will come -- and at least they will pray that He teach them to pray! ... , "I will pray to God, I will ask of Him the gift of learning how to pray."

Some of us are in even more difficult spiritual straits. Not only can we not pray, we cannot believe. Not only is the heart frozen, but the head will not concede. Not only are we emotionally unresponsive to prayer, but we are intellectually unsympathetic to the propositions of Judaism. Yet -- davka! -- so many such people are deeply involved in Jewish life, they contribute and worry and help and work. Why? They cannot really say, and the answers they do offer are unconvincing. Let me put it in words for them: if I cannot commit my head and my

heart, then *אני נאמץ לך*, "all my bones cry out," I still confront God. Out of my unbelief, O Lord, I turn to Thee, for though I do not know if I believe, I believe that I may yet believe; that even if head and heart are empty, somehow my deeds show that the juices of faith are still being faithfully excreted in the marrow of my bones. Davka I shall proclaim *אני נאמץ לך*, that ultimately we all believe. Maybe I can't feel, maybe I can't conceptualize, but with all my questions and nagging doubts -- I live Judaism.

Davka is thus a faith beyond faith. It is, to paraphrase a poet, to know that the sun shines even when it is cloudy above; to trust you can love even when you are alone; to believe in God even when He hides His face.

The third source for davka is perhaps the hardest to define. Not only love and faith, but something mysteriously simpler, harder, more fundamental. It is a sheer, naked resolve, a determination, a tenacity and doggedness bordering almost on pride, even madness. Let us call it, "will." Psychologists have often denied its existence as a separate category because they could not understand it. Philosophers, and some more profound psychologists such as Rollo May, have been wiser, and have considered will all the more real because they could not explain it away. And Kabbalists have attributed creation in the very first instance to *אין סוף*, the Supernal Will of the Infinite God.

Perhaps the most telling illustration of sheer will as the

source of davka comes to us from the 16th century " שם יחזקיה ", written by Solomon Ibn Virga who was banished from Spain in 1496. He relates an eye-witness story: a wealthy Jew was deprived of his property and his money and sent into exile during the time of the Inquisition. After many misadventures, he finally arrived with his wife and two children on a little island, at last finding refuge. But then, plague struck suddenly and he lost his last dearest possessions -- his wife and his children. Thereupon, over the disease-ravaged bodies of his family, the Jew lifted up his eyes to heaving, and with bitterness and anger declared:

רבונו העלמים הרבה אתה עושה אליהם צרה!
ועל אונתך ללם כרחם של ילדיו יהודי און (יהודי)
אתה עושה עליהם כל מה שהבאת וזהו!

Master of the world, You have done much to make me abandon my faith. But know well that despite all what the heavenly hosts may do to me, I am a Jew and I shall remain a Jew! And nothing that You brought upon me or are yet to bring upon me will avail to make me lost my Jewishness.

Such is the will of a Jew who says davka -- to God himself!

Emil Fackenheim has translated that davka approach for modern Jews when he wrote that, in our days after the Holocaust, the 614th and most important commandment is simply -- to survive, לגות שררה, despite our enemies -- davka. This is what he calls, "The commanding voice of Auschwitz." He writes, "Jews are forbidden to hand Hitler a posthumous victory. They are commanded to survive as Jews lest the Jewish people perish. They are commanded to remember the victims of Auschwitz lest their memories perish... They are forbidden to despair of the God of Israel lest Judaism perish. A Jew

may not respond to Hitler's attempt to destroy Judaism by himself cooperating in its destruction." By a pure, active will, we must say davka! *more prof-* Davka because of our enemies we shall survive. And davka as Jewish Jews. And davka Israel shall survive. And davka its capital shall be Jerusalem. Davka.

The Davka-theme constitutes, in a way, a major part of the Rosh Hashanah service. A contemporary scholar, who has written important works on the history of Jewish liturgy, tells us that the Malkhuyot section of the Musaf, in which we celebrate the sovereignty of God as King of the universe, was probably added as a separate section some time between the destruction of the Temple and the days of R. Akiva, the time of the Bar Kokhba revolt. More accurately, Dr. Joseph Heineman (see in the Journal of Jewish Studies, 1960; and M'aynot, No. 9, Jerusalem 1958) ^{the origin of} locates the prominence given to Malkhuyot (raising it to the level already achieved by the other two parts, the Zikhronot and Shoferot) in the second generation of Yavneh, or the beginning of the second century C.E. At his very time that Malkhuyot was included as a separate section to the Rosh Hashana prayer, it was decreed that any ordinary blessing must contain reference to God as King of the world, Melekh ha-olam; a blessing which fails to include these words is invalid. Why this emphasis, in both these cases, on the theme of God's sovereignty? Because, he ventures, this was the time of Roman domination of Palestine. The Romans demanded total loyalty to Caesar, and even required Caesar to be worshipped, or at least recognized as a divine person. That is why the Sages of Yavneh

reacted as they did: davka because the all-powerful Romans demanded acknowledgment of their king, we introduced into our major prayers the declaration that the Jew knows no master, no king, other than God. The Lord is melekh -- any other king is but a mortal, ephemeral, a passing illusion. Davka under the heel of Rome, Jews cried out: God is melekh ha-olam, only to him do we ascribe malkhuyot. Davka.

This is what shofar must inspire in us: a resurgence of this magnificent davka spirit.

For it is davka which built a קהילה קדושה (holy society) out of the mud huts of the shtetl.

It is davka which built great yeshivot in this "treifene medina."

It is davka which built Eretz Yisrael on the ruins of post-war Europe.

When Haskallah and Reform told us: יהיה ככל העם, "We shall be like all people", davka said: "No! We are different; we are Jews."

When the world told us to restrict immigration of Jews to Palestine, davka responded: Never; all who come will be welcome.

Shall we forget the Torah's marital restrictions in Israel? Davka no, the holiness of Israel depends upon the purity of the family.

Shall we be liberal and permit intermarriage in a society where it is becoming more common, "in order to hold our children?" Davka not, davka hold the line.

Shall we give up day-schools because they are too expensive? Davka we shall endure less luxury, live more penuriously, but build more yeshivot, more day-schools.

Today we pray to God who is זוכר הברית האבות, who remembers the covenant of old, that in response to our davka, issuing out of our love and faith and our will, He will proclaim: Davka I will bless them, and remember the ancient covenant with those who first thundered the davka of Judaism to a stunned and unbelieving world; and למחרת שנה, despite those who would reduce the Jew to a spiritual non-entity, I will grant them a year of health and peace and fulfillment -- and the courage to continue to respond to the whole world with a rousing davka that will itself bring on the גאולה, the ultimate redemption.