

"The Double Standard": Judaism's View of Man "

Of the critical views of Judaism propounded throughout the ages, two are particularly relevant to our Torah reading of this morning and the Perek we shall read later today.

The first criticism accuses Judaism of a dry legalism, too concerned with the picayune and prosaic particulars of everyday life, and not sufficiently attentive to the larger dimensions of spirituality, esthetics, and morality. Thus Christianity accused us of the love of law, and sought to replace it with the law of love. It concentrated on the Church rather than the market place, and emphasized grace rather than Torah with its manifold rules and regulations.

So, too Reform maintains that Halakhah is not truly "religious." In historic Judaism, it averred, there is too much Gemara, and not enough God. It proclaimed, therefore, that it would emphasize prophecy over priesthood, spiritual mission over study of Talmud. In a complete and utter failure to understand the nature of Judaism, it asked: what spiritual value can possibly inhere in such a Mishnah as shor she'nagah et ha-parah, the laws that pertain to an ox which gored a cow? The Halakhah, in other words, was seen as reducing lofty religious concepts to trivial details that did not serve to elevate man.

The second criticism was diametrically opposite. Nowadays especially one usually hears the protests of practical men deeply immersed in the complexities and perplexities of daily existence. For them, the demands of Halakhah are far in excess of what their diminutive capacities permit them. Judaism, they complain, demands a level of integrity that they do not and cannot, they feel, attain in their business life. It sets up a morality that taxes their ability for the constraint of impulses; a self-discipline in food and work and talk (Shabbat, Kashrut,

and Lashon Hara) that overstrains their self-restraint in the name of some abstract principle of sanctity that is far removed from their everyday reality.

These two criticisms can be represented typologically; that is, they are embodied in two types of personality with which we meet in this morning's Sidra. On one side there is Korah, and on the other Dathan and Aviram. Both are united against Moses. Despite the true motivation of their rebellion -- they were malcontents who were power-hungry -- they were not simply riff-raff. The Bible refers to them as keriei mo'ed and anshei shem, people of distinction, and, no doubt, people who had spiritual viewpoints which deserve consideration.

Korah apparently felt that religion should be more elevated than the tiresome and tedious trivialities of the Torah of Moses. From the response of Moses -- u-vikashtem gam kehunah -- we may infer that Korah presented demands for greater spirituality, he wanted more personal involvement in the service of God. Furthermore, he proclaimed ki kol ha-edah kulam kedoshim, that the entire people is holy, and therefore the entire nation should be involved religiously as the servants of God. The Rabbis, in the Oral Tradition, tell us that Korah dressed his entire party in tallit she'kulah tekhelet, in garments

that were completely of the blue color which the Torah of Moses ~~demands~~ ^{requires} only of one thread in the fringes; in other words, he declared that all men can rise to a much higher station than is ~~required~~ ^{demanded} by the details of the law of Moses.

Dathan and Aviram, though they joined the rebellion of Korah, had a completely different point of view. They were practical men, political realists, who preached that the Torah must be relevant to the real needs and concerns of men. And what are the real concerns of men if not power and ambition and the fulfillment of natural appetite? Why, they protested, talk of religion when we are faced with a wilderness and desert? Why speak of ethics when what we need is a land flowing with milk and honey? They did not believe that people are capable of the demands of Moses and his Torah. Thus their repeated slogan: lo naaleh, we shall not rise. Literally, this was their response to the summons of Moses to come and discuss issues. But in a symbolic sense, more profoundly, there is here reflected their whole attitude: real men in real life situations cannot rise as high as Moses demands of them. He is out of touch, far removed, unreal. Just as Korah ^{is} complaining that the Torah is not sufficiently edifying, Dathan and Aviram protested that it was too taxing.

How do we respond to these criticisms? They are each wrong, in that each has grasped only a partial truth. Any view of man which sees him in such a one-sided fashion--either side!--is false.

Judaism maintains a double standard. It considers, at all times, both the real and the ideal, man's needs and his aspirations, his material realities and his spiritual potentialities, his latent loftiness and his patent pettiness. The rebels, however, were wrong because each of the two camps maintained a narrow view and failed to see the whole of man. Thus the punishment for this group of rebels was that the earth

swallowed them and the fire from Heaven destroyed them: they were each, respectively, too high in their estimation of man and too low in their evaluation of him. Moses and Aaron had a far greater understanding. This they reflected in their prayer, at the time of the rebellion against them, when they addressed the Almighty as El Elohei ha-ruhot le'khol basar, God who is the God of the spirits of each man. He is the master not only of the ruah, spirit in the singular, but ruhot, spirits, in the plural. For each man is both possessed by the reality of his situation, and possesses the potentiality to change it, whether for better or for worse. Man is a creature with an almost infinite capacity both for good and for evil. He is neither solely the giant imagined by Korah, nor the dwarf portrayed by Dathan and Aviram.

This idea is implicit in an insight in Pirkei Avot, (Chapter 4) according to an interpretation of Rabbi Barukh Ha-Levi Epsztejn, the renowned author of Torah Temimah. In the Perek, the Mishnah gives us a series of definitions by the renowned Ben Zoma. Ezehu hakham -- he asks -- who is the wise man? He answers: ha-lomed mi-kol adam, one who has the capacity to learn from everyone. Ezehu gibbor, he asks further: who is the strong man? His answer is: Ha-kovesh et yitzro, one who can conquer

his own temptation, who can control his own instincts. The third question is: Ezehu ashir, who is the rich man, and the answer is: ha-sameiah be'helko, one who is happy with what he has. These are the well-known and the beautiful definitions offered to us by the Perek.

However, surprisingly, the Gemara in Kiddushin (49b) gives us completely different answers, and does not even mention the Mishnah in Pirkei Avot, although the latter is earlier, and therefore more authoritative. The Talmud discusses the interesting question of the man who marries a woman conditionally. What is the law, the Gemara asks, if a man marries a woman al menat she'ani hakham, on condition that I am a wise man? What is the definition of hakham so that we may decide whether or not a valid marriage has been contracted? The answer is, that we do not require of him to fulfill the standards of wisdom set by R. Akiva or the other sages of Yavneh, but that it is sufficient that he be kol she'sho'alin oto devar hokhmah be'khol makom v'omrah, one who can conduct himself intelligently in any field of discourse. Note that all that the Gemara requires is that he be bright; no mention is made of Ben Zoma's definition of the wise man as one who retains the capacity to learn

from everyon^e₁. The next case is one who marries a woman al menat she'ani gibbor, on condition that I am a strong man. Here the definition is kol she'haverav mityarin mimenu mipnei gevurato, he must be such that his friends fear him because of his power and influence. Again, there is no mention of the Mishnah's definition of strength interpreted as self-control. Finally, if a man marries a woman al menat she'ani ashir, on condition that I am rich, the marriage is valid if he is one of those kol she'benei iro mekhabdin oto mipnei ashro, whose townfolk respect him because of his wealth -- and not merely one who is satisfied with what he has.

How do we account for these changing definitions? The answer that R. Epsztejn gives is that the Gemara speaks of marriage, which is essentially a kinyan, a contract freely arrived at by two people who must mutually agree upon the proposal. In such a case, we must estimate the daat ha-mekadesh ve'ha-mitkadesh, the understanding that the man and the woman probably had when they came to an agreement. As a contract, we must consider only their interpretation, their definition, their understanding, and their values. The Mishnah however, does not offer us a consensus or the results of a public opinion poll. Rather, it gives us the values of the great Ben Zoma, he who abandoned all worldly ambition because

he loved Torah. It is he who gives us his values, his standards -- and these became the ideal of Judaism. The Gemara's criterion goes by the count of most people; the Mishnah's criterion -- by the people who count most. In Hebrew we differentiate between these two as the matzui and the ratzui, as the real facts and the desired situation, the "is" and the "ought." Both are part of Judaism. The Torah and the tradition of our faith neglects neither the facts nor the ideals, neither the matzui nor the ratzui.

By considering both standards, Judaism, as it were, looks at man with two eyes, not one; thus, it sees him three dimensionally -- in the fullness of his humanity. The Torah beholds in man not a monolithic creature, but one of fantastic variety of character and accomplishment, one who possesses both elements of the divine and the demonic, one who can be disgustingly ordinary and thrillingly extraordinary, the prosaic plodder and the poetic dreamer, one who can sink in to the very bowels of the earth and one who can rise to the sublimest heights in the purest fire. It sees him as one who misunderstands wisdom as cleverness, and one who can appreciate it as the openness of mind; one who misinterprets strength as the muscles of the bully, and one

who recognizes it as the control of instincts; one who misconstrues wealth as nothing but a tool for social status, and one who knows that true riches lie in the heart and in the mind.

Thus, Judaism's double standard is a major contribution to the philosophy of man. By combining the standards of the real and of the ideal, it never allows realism to become an excuse for human degeneracy, and it prevents idealism from losing touch with the realities of man's limitations. This double approach holds out hope and the challenge of moral improvement for those who feel the weight of their smallness; and it teaches those who have accomplished more in life, the virtues of tolerance and understanding for those who have attained less. Judaism comprehends both the Halakhah, with its keen awareness of man's inadequacy, and Aggadah, with its soaring appreciation of man's capacity for transcendence. The Aggadah is based upon David's proclamation that "Thou hast made him ^{him} but little less than that angels"; the Halakhah is based upon David's statement in the same Psalm; "O Lord, what is man the Thou shouldst take notice of him, the son of man that Thou shouldst take account of him?"

This full and comprehensive view of man is the

teaching of Moses, which Korah and Dathan and Aviram tragically failed to understand. Without it, we are doomed to a one-sidedness that will never let us understand either ^h what man ^{is} or what he ought to be. Accepting it, we can remain firm in the knowledge that the Torah of Moses overlooks neither man's lowliness nor his greatness, neither his reality nor his goals.

In the words which our tradition ascribed to the children of Korah as their voice issued forth from the bottomless pit of the earth: Mosheh emet ve'torato emet, Moses was right and his Torah remains eternally true.