

"NEW SOURCES FOR THE OLD SPIRIT"

Moses, as he is presented to us in today's Sidra, finds himself in a state of utter exasperation. He has reached the last limits of his patience, his wisdom, and his tolerance as he faces the ingratitude and the complaints of his people. He came to this slave people and brought them a great faith; they responded by a demand for fish. He came with the message of the Lord; they asked for melon. He spoke of creative freedom; they wanted cucumbers. He preached righteousness and law; they countered with a demand for onions and garlic. I cannot go on this way, said Moses to the Lord. You are simply asking too much of me. Lo ukhal anokhi levadi la'set et kol ha-am ha-zeh ki kaved mimeni. "I cannot alone, by myself, bear this people, for the burden is too heavy for me." (Numbers XI:14). Moses finds that his strength is spent, his spirit depleted, his patience gone. It is an all too human reaction.

In response, the Lord grants Moses seventy elders who will assist him in his tasks and thus lighten his burden. But if we examine the response of the Almighty with greater scrutiny, we find one puzzle that actually holds the clue to a problem of universal relevance and eternal significance. G-d directs Moses to gather about him seventy of the elders of Israel, and then says: "And I shall take from the spirit that is upon you and I shall place it upon them." (Numbers XI:17).

The famed Bible commentator, Chizkuni, asks a simple but direct question: Why did G-d have to take of the spirit of Moses in order to inspire the elders? Why could not G-d have given of His own spirit and thereby raise the seventy people to the category of prophets and leaders, even as He had originally done with Moses?

The answer of Chizkuni is one which exhibits great psychological insight. G-d, he said, did not want only to accede affirmatively to Moses' request for more executives to run his government. G-d wanted

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to teach Moses a deep and abiding lesson about human nature itself. Moses, G-d meant to say to the prophet, *You* are sorely mistaken about yourself! You think that lo ukhal -- you simply cannot do any more; that ki kaved mimeni -- the burden is too great and you no longer have any resources of the spirit with which to cope with your problems. But you are wrong! And I shall prove to you that not only do you have ruach left for yourself, but you have enough for seventy other people as well! And that is why G-d took from the spirit of Moses to kindle the souls of the seventy elders.

What G-d told Moses then, the Torah tells all of us in every age. Each of us possesses inner resources of which we are only dimly aware. You cannot always tell the true potential of a human being by his present performance alone, just as you cannot tell the depth of a well by the size of its mouth. You must dig, probe, fathom the innermost recesses of personality before you know the true worth of an individual. Then you will discover that just at the moment when a man sighs in resignation and despair, ki kaved mimeni, that he has nothing left within him and that the resources of his spirit are depleted, that indeed he has enough left for a whole crowd!

I think it is most important that this lesson not be lost on the ruling circles of the *Iron Curtain* countries. *The* international performance of our beloved America can sometimes look poor indeed. We sometimes appear slovenly, dull, listless, inert, and inept. Occasionally, fiasco follows upon fiasco. But Heaven *forbid* that the Communist leaders miscalculate the intention, the power, and the potential of our country. May they, for the sake of world peace and survival, never ~~miscalculate~~ ~~and~~ underestimate the United States. For when we are stimulated by high challenges and noble purposes, we can sacrifice and labor and re-discover

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our tremendous inner resources of the old spirit of freedom which originally informed our founding fathers and has since been the mainstay of our country. Just as an individual, in a moment of emergency and crisis, discovers that he has powers latent within his soul and previously unknown to him, so it is with our ⁵nation.

I have heard it said that Orthodoxy in the United States is spent. The tide is supposedly against us, the forces arrayed opposite us are overwhelming, and the contemporary situation is ki kaved mimeni -- simply too complex, too complicated, and too difficult for us to handle. Our resources are few, both spiritual and material. Our dedicated leaders frequently give vent to their feelings of doubt and despair and sigh lo ukhal -- we simply cannot do it.

I disagree. I believe that history will prove that we Jews, at the moment when we appeared weakest, ~~have~~ rallied our greatest strength. Moses pointed out to ^{the children of} Israel their own religious capacities. G-d ^{revealed} pointed to Moses the depth of his own soul and the treasures of his own spirit. ~~And~~ Ezra came to a near-assimilated people and taught them the meaning of their own life and the dignity of their own faith. A Baal Shem Tov came upon a Jewry which had lost the capacity for happiness and for religious fervor. It was within the personality of this one man to be able to uncover for ^{his} ~~its~~ people unknown sources of cheer and holy enthusiasm.

^{for that reason} It is ~~therefore~~ that I am optimistic about the future of Orthodoxy in this country, provided we give ^{of} the best of our toil, talents, and loyalty. Optimism is, after all, the consciousness of hidden reserves. And I am conscious of our concealed resources. We even have treasures that are not so hidden -- consider for a moment all those young people who have graduated this month from Jewish schools, from the most elementary day schools through the post-graduate alumni of Yeshiva University. What G-d did with Moses

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we may some day, with the help of the Lord, be able to say ^{we have done} for ourselves. Perhaps we shall have enough spirit to spare for other countries, from Europe through India, for Persia, and even for the State of Israel.

Of course what is true for collectivities is especially true for individuals. For a long time, in an earlier era, the mistake was made of overtaxing the capacity of a child. In our own contemporary America, we have veered to the other extreme. Under the influence more of psychology books than psychology itself, modern parents usually treat the mind of a child as something delicate and fragile. They act as if the intellect of a growing child were a weak machine that can be destroyed if touched. Only after Sputniks and the goading of Admiral Rickover, has contemporary America begun to understand that the mind of a child is elastic; the more you stretch it, the greater its capacity, and the less you exercise it, the smaller its potential. Of this we Orthodox Jews may be proud: whilst the rest of America was debating the advisability of a second language in early high school years, we already had realized, 35 and 40 years before the Rickover era in American education, that you can safely teach not only a second language, but a second curriculum to a young child in the early years of elementary school. We understood and had a healthy respect for the inner sources of the growing child.

What is a good teacher, after all, if not one who can point out to the student the richness of his own intellect, the variety of his own talents, the depth within that he himself had never suspected? One of the leading lights of Hassidism, the Koretzer Rebbe, once pointed out that the Hebrew word for man, ish, is composed of the letter aleph and the word yesh. Yesh means "there is" and "there exists." The word aleph means "might," strength, as in aluphei Edom. In other words, the word for "man" in Hebrew means something which possesses untold strength. Furthermore,

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the word, aleph, backwards, reads pele -- a miracle! There is a miraculous degree of untapped power in every human being!

And that holds true not only for untried children but, as was the case with Moses, for tired adults. How often we feel, in our human relations, that we have reached the end of our patience. Whether we are dealing with an infuriating spouse, an obstinate child, an irritating partner -- we lead ourselves to believe that ki kaved mimeni, we have no more strength or initiative left. But it is simply not true. Torah tells you to look deeply within yourself and you will discover, as any of us does in a moment of crisis, that we have more strength, more patience, more love, more spirit than we ever dared to hope.

Above all, how often mature people think that they no longer have any capacity left for deeper religious experience or more extensive religious practice. Talk to a mature Jew about better, greater, and deeper observance of the Sabbath, Kashruth, or Family Purity, and what is the answer you receive? I am too old. I am already habituated. You cannot teach an old horse new tricks. Rabbi, I have lived this way for many decades, you cannot change me now. The answer of Torah to this is: Nonsense! You have enough spirit for a hundred others. There are new sources within you for that old spirit.

No wonder that the late Rabbi Kook, of sainted memory, speaks in the introduction to his Commentary on the Prayer Book of ha-tefillah ha-matmedet shel ha-neshamah -- the soul in a state of constant, ceaseless, and eternal prayer. No matter how we appear outwardly, we are inwardly, each of us, deeply spiritual beings. The soul of a man and a woman is always in a state of prayer. When we begin to pray, we do not create a new state of worship; we are merely uncovering our inner selves; we are merely silently parting the curtains over our souls and allowing the prayerful soul to be

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revealed at the surface of our consciousness. Yes, Judaism is optimistic about the hidden spiritual reserves of every Jew and every human being.

This is indeed what King David meant when he said, concerning man, that "Thou hast created him but little lower than the angels." This is our belief. This is our commitment. A human being must be more than "just human."

Indeed, if we are not to remain less than "just human," each of us must strive to be more than "just human."