

"ON DOING RIGHT BY YOURSELF"

For ten times during this Yom Kippur day, before reciting the confession or viduy of the al heit, we recite an introductory passage which is as strange as it is beautiful, and as haunting as it is hallowed. Atta yodeia razei olam ve'taalumot sitrei kol hai, atta hofeis kol hadrei vaten u-vohen kelayot va-lev. "Thou knowest the mysteries of the universe and the dark secrets of every living soul. Thou dost search all the inmost chambers of man's conscience." Ein davar ne'elam mi-meka v'ein nistar mi-negged enekha. "Nothing escapes Thee, nothing is hidden from Thy sight." In a word, we stand before God completely exposed; He knows everything that goes on within us. And so we continue: u-ve'khen, "now, therefore," yehi ratzon mi-lefanekha ha-Shem Elokenu, "May it be Thy wil, Lord our God and God of our fathers, she'tislah lanu al kol hatotenu, "to forgive all our sins, to pardon all our iniquities, and to grant atonement for all our transgressions."

What a strange conclusion to draw from these premises! Isn't the cause-and-effect reasoning faulty here? On the contrary, in this post-Freudian age, when we have become sophisticated and understand the lack of innocence and the evil that lurks even in the heart of a baby, at a time of this sort the reasoning should

be reversed: if God indeed knows what goes on in my heart, then in all likelihood He will never forgive me! If God knows the innermost secrets of my heart, the libidinous impulses that storm within it, the fantasies and the lusts, the concupiscence and the covetousness, the grasping and the overreaching, then I am embarrassed to death. What sense does it make to turn to God who knows all this and say to Him: u-ve'khen, "now, therefore," forgive me for all my sins. That u-ve'khen, "now therefore," seems totally out of place.

And yet we rightly feel, intuitively, that there is truth in this prayer. It clutches the core of our consciousness, it reveals to us something of which we are but dimly aware, it strikes a resonant chord in the very depths of our hearts. For it tells me that my real "me," my true self and identity, is not peurile and serpentine, but pure and spiritual; it consists not of lust and coarseness, but of loving kindness; it is not, if we be permitted the expression, the "Id," but the "Yid." The real man certainly possesses elements of the diabolical and the vicious; but his inner self, which he must strive all his life to realize, is the spark of God, indeed an image of God. In "Hamlet," the demented Ophelia says, "Lord, we know what we are, but know not what we may be." What we are -- that is what the psychologists discover when they probe our subconscious, and what we are em-

barrassed by when we stand before God. But what we may be -- that is what religion asserts, what faith believes in, and what God knows as He penetrates to the inmost chambers and the darkest secrets of ourselves. Indeed, what we may be -- is what we really are! That is why we stand before God and say to Him: despite all our sins, despite all our evil deeds and our lustful thoughts, deeds and thoughts which embarrass us, nevertheless You penetrate beneath this sordid veil, and You, O God, can see what the psychologists cannot: that ineffably precious seed of holiness that lies within us. U-ve'khen, "now, therefore," because of this, yehi ratzon mi-lefanekha ha-shem Elokenu, may it be Thy will to forgive us for all our sins. Our real self is such that we are worthy of forgiveness. There is something of inestimable value deep within each human being. We can and ought to be salvaged.

That this idea is fundamental to Torah and to Judaism can be seen in many ways and on many different levels. It affects even business law in Judaism. Indeed, it is worth pondering with a great deal of concentration one such law of the Torah which contains within it an invaluable spiritual gem.

In the Fifth Book of Moses we read the laws concerning rich and poor. Amongst others we are told the following: If you lend a poor man money, which is a supreme virtue, you are, of course, permitted to take from him a mashkon or pledge, a form of security for your loan. You may take his cloak, even if this

is the only garment he possesses. But the Torah adds that if this cloak is all he has, and the nights are cold, and he will shiver and suffer if this garment is taken from him, then hashev tashiv, you shall return his pledge to him, u-lekha tihyeh tzedakah, and it will be accounted to you as tzedakah. Normally, we take this to mean that it will be considered a virtue if you give him the pledge.

Now this is a rather difficult passage. Surely this verse could not mean that it will be accounted for you as "charity," for the word tzedakah does not mean charity; it derives from tzeddek, which means "justice," unlike the English word "charity" which derives from the Greek charitas, love. For the Jew, contributing to the poor is not a function of love and volition, but rather of the knowledge that it is no more than right that I do so, because my possessions do not belong to me absolutely in the first place. So then, the verse u-lekha tihyeh tzedakah cannot refer to charity as such. Does it then refer to justice, to tzeddek? No, that could not be, because the Halakhah regards the lender as actually having ownership rights in the pledge. It belongs to the lender, and by law he need not return it to the borrower. What, then does this verse mean, that if you restore the pledge to the poor man it will be considered for you as tzedakah?

Maimonides, at the end of his Guide for the Perplexed, offers this answer: the Torah tells the lender -- even though by

law you are not required to return this pledge, nevertheless, if you do so, it will be considered as having done right by yourself! By going beyond the letter of the law, you will be performing towards yourself an act of tzeddek, justifying your real self, the nefesh ha-maskellet, the rational soul, the spiritual gestalt, which you possess. The act of tzedakah, or the act of doing right, tzeddek, will be lekha, for yourself!

No, your real self, your true and genuine identity, is not the greedy moneylender who must have his pound of flesh. That is a falsification and a distortion of your real self. Your true identity is one of compassion and kindness, one that is worthy of forgiveness by God, and one by which you must do right at all times.

That is what we must discover in ourselves this Yom Kippur day: not our professions or careers, not our petty likes or dislikes, but the real self that lies within us striving for expression; not what we are, but what we may be. The Torah looks at us and, underneath the sarcasm or the indifference, the cynicism or the frivolousness, the shrewdness or sometimes even the meanness, sees a nefesh ha-maskellet: a superbly sacred and priceless self. In Judaism, we are absolutely forbidden to represent God in the form of any symbols: statues or crosses or pictures. There is only one symbol of God, and that is -- man, who is considered by the Torah as the tzellem Elokim, the image of God.

What is it that sustains a Rabbi, that gives him the courage to follow his calling even in a society so materialistic, so crass, so crude that he knows that no one can fully escape it? Wherefrom the confidence that somehow, some day, by some means he can succeed in evoking from his people a greater and deeper response to the call of Torah? It is because on this holy day when I look at you I do not see the people whom you think I see. I do not see merely stockbrokers and real estate men, diamond dealers and manufacturers, lawyers and physicians, housewives and students and teachers. I see before me a congregation of real selves, identities that far transcend mere vocations. I look at you and see the noble image of a father or mother, a grandparent or great-grandparent, straining for expression. I see before me true men and women, genuine human beings, authentic Jews possessed of heart and neshamah. I see divine images stirring within; I see in each and every one of you what Maimonides called a nefesh ha-maskellet. And it is to this that I appeal when I plead with you for greater loyalty to Judaism, for greater dedication to the Jewish cause, for greater sacrifice in staying the increasing attrition of assimilation. My plea reduces to that one phrase: u-lekha tihyeh tzedakah. Do right by yourself, your real self. When you keep that real self in mind, then you will find it impossible to do anything wrong, anything that can soil the divine image. Remain conscious of that inner nefesh ha-maskellet, and every wrong deed will be felt as an act of disgusting ugliness --

perhaps best expressed in the untranslatable Yiddish, "es past nisht."

This is the essence of the plea of the pulpit to the congregation: Why better observance of Kashruth, why not defile yourself with tarfut outside the home as well as within it? -- because "es past nisht!" Why be generous and responsive and charitable without acting as if you begrudge your gift, but giving, instead, generously? -- because u-lekha tihyeh tzeddakah, because you thereby not only give tzeddakah to another, but do tzeddek to your own self. Why do we turn to younger people and plead with them to cherish the chastity which Judaism recommends, and not to be caught up in conformity with the current collapse of moral standards? -- because "es past nisht." Why do we ask for a greater measure of reverence for the synagogue itself, to be expressed in proper and modest dress, and in refraining from desecrating the mood and the spell and the atmosphere by distracting conversation? -- because u-lekha tihyeh tzeddakah -- for Heaven's sake, do right by yourself. Why should the Jewish businessman refrain from any questionable act, and the Jewish worker from any deed that is unworthy? -- because "es past nisht." Why do we urge brothers, who have embittered themselves against each other, to reconcile their differences, and remind husband and wife that the commandment "and thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself" applies most directly to each other, that civility and courtesy were meant not



only for society but, even more, for the intimacy of the family -- it is because u-lekha tihyeh tzedakah. No man or woman who respects himself or herself can do less. "Es past nisht!"

Recall the immortal words of R. Akiba about this sacred day: a shrekhem Yisrael, lifnei mi atem me'taharim, "Happy are you, O Israel, knowing before whom you purify yourselves." Perhaps one may also interpret that: "Happy are you, O Israel, when you consider mi atem, who you really, inwardly are; then: me'taharim, you will achieve taharah, purity."

And it is in the context of this relationship that our eyes and hearts turn Heavenward on this sacred and holy day. Just as the Torah commands us to discover and be true to our real selves, so do we turn to God and, in prayer, ask the same thing of Him! Almighty God, we are, all of us, anim, poverty-stricken paupers. We are born defenseless into the world. We have no claims upon anyone. We are weak, limited, inadequate, only too painfully aware of our mortality. But God, in His goodness, gives us each a neshamah -- life, hope, ambition, love. It is, we recognize, only a loan. Some day that neshamah will have to be returned, and life will be done. But before that date of expiration, it sometimes happens that God demands a mashkon of us -- a pledge, some security. The divine Lender chooses what pledge He will: health, wealth, peace of mind, a life-long mate, friends, "naches" from our children. And when He takes that mashkon, part



of our neshamah, all the vitality seeps out of our life, the joy vanishes, the light departs, the spark is gone. We become suddenly aware of our insecurity, haunted by hidden horrors, afraid of the very shadows, of the terror that lurks behind every turn of life's path. God takes back His pledge, and we no longer think that life is worth living, for our faith in life itself is now in doubt. The day is done, we are stripped of all possessions and all comforts, and the cold of night crawls on our flesh. We are filled with all kinds of bitterness and frustration, ridden with anxiety. And so on Yom Kippur we turn to our God and we plead with Him, hashev tahsiv lo et ha-avot, please, Almighty God, return the pledge, the security; give us back, we beg You, our vitality, our cheer, our happiness and our serenity, our joy and our freedom and our hope and our dreams.

But -- by what right do we ask of God to return the pledge to us? How can we demand that He grant us a happy and blessed year, that He redeem us from our inner turmoil and still the tempest in our hearts? The answer is one you will find throughout the prayers of this High Holiday season -- lekha ha-Shem ha-tzedakah ve'lanu boshet ha-panim -- for to Thee, O God, is righteousness, while ours is the shame. Lekha ha-Shem ha-tzedakah -- the exact equivalent of the expression which God uses towards us: u-lekha tihyeh tzedakah! Just as God demands of us that we be true to, and do right by, our real selves, so we

now turn to Him and ask of Him that He return the pledge of life and cheer to us for lekha ha-Shem ha-tzedakah, You must do right, tzedakah, by Your Self, Almighty God! For are You not the Av ha-Rahaman, the compassionate Father? Are you not the El Rahum ve' Hanun, the God who is loving and gracious? Do right by Yourself, merciful Father! Don't abandon 3 million Jews behind the Iron Curtain, most of whom probably fear to come into a synagogue -- if there is one -- on this Yom Kippur day! Grant our prayers on this holy day as a measure and reflection of Your true Self!

Ki lekha ha-Shem ha-tzedakah!

There is, then, clear reciprocity between God and man. He commands us: u-lekhah tihyeh tzedakah, discover your real self and do right by yourself. And we implore Him: lekha ha-Shem ha-tzedakah, now, O merciful God, do right by Yourself. It is as if our entire service revolved about this one supreme stipulation: if we will remember who we really are, and do justice to that identity, then God, as it were, will remember who He really is, and do right by that identity.

This thought applies to every aspect of life, and not the least to Yizkor. We recall the cherished souls of parents and grandparents. See O God, who we really are, from what stock we come, the kind of people who determined our true identity. And, knowing just a bit of what You have revealed of Yourself to us, we know that You will, as the Elmalei Rahamim, remember them. For now man and God can meet in the moment of mercy, for that is

only right, tzedakah.

Atta yodeia razei olam ve-taalumot sitrei kol hai --

You know us so well, O God. You penetrate to the deepest mysteries of our souls and uncover the profoundest recesses of our selfhood, and there reveal our divine image and our nefesh ha-maskellet.

And we know about You, that You are our Av Ha-Rahaman, our compassionate and loving and merciful Father. U-ve'khen, now, therefore, yehi ratzon mi-lefanekha ha-Shem Elokenu, may it be Thy will, loving Father, she'tislah lanu al kol hatotenu, that You may forgive us all our sins and pardon all our transgressions, and grant us, our families, all Israel and all mankind, a year of blessing and health, of peace and tranquility, of cheer and joy. Amen.