

"ON KEEPING OUR MOTIVES PURE"

The fourth book of the Torah which we begin today is known not only as Ba-midbar, "in the desert," but also as Humash Pikudim, "the book of musterings," for <sup>the</sup> several times that Moses is commanded to count the numbers of the Israelites. Thus, in this morning's portion we read of one such census.

It is interesting that we read later, in the portion of Pinhas, of another census that is taken thirty-eight years later. Remarkably, whereas one might have expected the population to grow during the course of almost four decades, the opposite is true. There is a loss in population of almost 2,000 from 603,500 to 601,730. Even more remarkable is the fact that the tribe of Simon alone sustained a loss of over 37,000 which means that the population of the tribe was cut in more than half!

Why did this happen? What accounted for this loss instead of growth in numbers? The answer is that a terrible plague afflicted our ancestors in the desert during this time. We read about it in the portion of Balak. Under the influence of the evil prophet Balaam, the <sup>M</sup>Moabite and Midianite women attracted the Israelite men to the worship of the pagan deity Baal Peor. This cult was distinguished by extreme licentiousness, and a number of unspeakably obscene rites. The Israelites were punished for this shameless immorality by a plague which decimated the population of the people, and especially the guilty tribes such as Simon.

Concerning this plague, one of our most incisive commentators (R. Meir Simḥah, in Meshekh Hōkhmah, end of Balak) asks: there <sup>was</sup> ~~were~~, after all, more than one tragic incident of back-sliding, of moral failure, of perfidy and punishment in the desert, <sup>and</sup> to the incident of Baal Peor we must also add the infamous and scandalous act of disloyalty by Israel -- the worship of the egel ha-zahav,

the Golden Calf. Yet, the method of punishment was different for each of these. The worshippers of Baal Peor were punished ~~by~~ mostly by a plague (the number punished by the shoftim -- judges -- was insignificant compared to those who perished in the magefah -- the plague, the major penalty); the worshippers of the Golden Calf were punished solely by human beings. When Moses saw his people dancing about the calf, he cried out: mi la-Shem elai, "whosoever is unto the Lord, come to me." It was at that time that the tribe of Levi gathered about their leader Moses, who commanded them: hirgu ish et ahiv, "go among the people and wherever you find one who worshipped the abominable calf, slay him."

Why the difference in punishment? <sup>in</sup> Why, if the first incident of the egel ha-zahav, <sup>^</sup> Moses commanded the Levites to slay the sinners, did he not do the same with the crime of Baal Peor? The answer is, that the affair of the Golden Calf occurred before the consecration of the Levites as the tribe which was to minister to God, and the tragedy of Baal Peor occurred after this consecration of the Levites. Therefore, while Levi was yet a tribe amongst other tribes, without any special distinction or office, Moses felt free to call upon them to execute the divine judgment against their sinning brethren. They could not be accused of any selfish motive. Their actions were patently le'shem Shamayim, completely for the sake of God. However, by the time the Jews were in the desert and enticed by the worship of Baal Peor, the tribe of Levi had already been consecrated as ministers of God, they had already received their divine office, and Moses was therefore unwilling to have them execute vengeance upon the people. Moses was reluctant to do so because he thought that the people might suspect that the Levites are not acting purely le'shem Shamayim, for the sake of Heaven, but rather because of cultic rivalry, the jealousy of a vested interest towards any potential competitor. The people of Israel might misinterpret and distort the actions of the Levites and say that they did not strike their brethren for idealistic but selfish reasons, not for the sake of morality, but because they wished to eliminate the competition that a

new religion would bring to them. What Moses wanted to teach his people, therefore, was that wherever possible we must act out of pure motives, le'shem Shamayim. We must act in such a manner that people should have no reason to suspect us, even unjustly, of any selfish motivation, of "politics" in its negative sense. We must keep our motives pure, at all costs.

This principle, this moral teaching, has operated throughout Jewish history. Perhaps this is one of the main reasons why King David was denied the privilege of building the Holy Temple in Jerusalem. You will recall that David wished to build a temple to God, (II Sam.7). But God, through the Prophet Nathan, denied the request and said, "I took thee from the ~~S~~ Shepherd's tent, from following the sheep, that thou shouldst be Prince over My people Israel. I am with thee wherever <sup>thou</sup> ~~thy~~ goest,... v'asiti lekha shem gadol, and I will make thee a great name like the great ones upon the earth... When thy days are fulfilled, and thou shalt <sup>o</sup> sleep with thy fathers, I will establish thy children after thee and confirm his kingdom. He [Solomon] shall build a house for My name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever."

Is this not ~~a~~ strange? If David is so beloved of God, why did He not grant David's wish to build a temple? Why leave it to Solomon? The answer here, too, is one of the purity of motives. Were David ~~to be~~ granted his desire to build a temple, his ideas might be misinterpreted. After all, David's grand historic function was to centralize the monarchy in Israel, to concentrate the government in Jerusalem and weld the nation together as a unit. If he were ~~to be~~ permitted to build a temple, the people might mistake his intention, and consider that for him the building of the temple was merely a part of a grandiose political plan, that it was but another effort to promote his own glory, rather than that of God. That is why God denied him his request, and instead assigned the task of building the temple to ~~Solomon~~ <sup>o</sup> Solomon who would inherit a completely stable government and not need a Temple to further his political ambitions. With Solomon there could be no mistaking his motives. They would be recognized throughout the Land and for

all times as le'shem Shamayim, as pure and not ulterior. Here to<sup>o</sup> our Torah has taught us to keep our motives pure.

It is for this reason, strange as it may seem, that a White Rabbi rises to support the charge of a Black Muslim. Malcolm X, one of the leaders of this extremist Negro group, has recently criticized Pres. Kennedy:

"In his talk with Alabama editors, Kennedy did not urge that Negroes be treated right because it is the right thing to do. Instead, he said that if the Negroes aren't well treated the Muslims would become a threat. He urges a change not because it is right but because the world is watching this country. Kennedy is wrong because his motivation is wrong" (N.Y. Times).

Of course, this an extremist group which in many ways can become quite dangerous; but the argument is right. It is directed not only against our President, but against all or most of us. The first reaction of most of us to the shocking indignities our Negro fellow citizens are subject to in Alabama was not only revulsion at the cruelty of what was happening, but also the nagging thought: what will the Russians say? What will the neutrals think of us? How will this alter our image in the eyes of free Africa? Our motives were mixed. In fact, had they truly been pure, our government and society would have acted much earlier to put an end to the abuses, the humiliations, the bigotry which are the fodder for the fanatics' cannon. We would have corrected this ugly situation before it degenerated as it did.

Of course, it is better to do the right thing for the wrong motives than not to do what is right at all. A worthy act is in itself a desirable thing and, furthermore, our tradition has taught us that mi-tokh she'lo li'shmah ba li'shma, that eventually the wrong motives are replaced by the right ones.

That is why all Jewish philanthropy in America exploits our desire for Kavod, for status and prestige. That is why we are quite happy to welcome to the synagogue one who comes for such reasons as Kaddish, Yizkor, or Yahrzeit instead of le'shem shamayim. But in all these cases, worthy as the act is,

it would be far nobler were it informed by pure and unadulterated intention.

Therefore, even giving to a Yeshiva should proceed from the right motives.

We of The Jewish Center are normally asked about this time of the year to contribute to the support of the Manhattan Day School. I really need not tell anyone in this congregation about Manhattan Day School or Yeshiva Ohr Torah. You have seen living evidence of the excellence of this school in the many young men who have read the Torah from this pulpit. You have witnessed their young people, boys and girls, participating so beautifully in our youth activities, at the Seudah, conducting their own services as well. I do, however, wish to inform you that this year more than ever before the school finds itself in difficult financial straits. Its needs are multiplying, even as its standards of excellence grow higher. We of The Jewish Center have always been counted amongst its main supporters.

Certainly, as time goes on this support should and must increase. Over 400 children learn Torah in this school, one of the very finest of its kind in the entire country - indeed in the world. It is our immediate responsibility to support the school by announcing our pledges, because it is a West Side school and if we do not support it, no one else will.

In line with the theme of this morning's sermon, I wish to point out that I have sometimes heard people say that they have no real obligation to the school because they have neither children nor grandchildren amongst its students. Of course, those of us who have children or grandchildren in the school have a double obligation, for we are the immediate beneficiaries of its splendid achievement<sup>s</sup>. But the fact that a person does not have relatives to benefit from the school immediately is certainly no excuse for not participating fully and completely in its upkeep. On the contrary, it is all the more reason for giving and giving generously to this school. For then, the philanthropy comes from a pure, clean, holy, and wholly selfless motive! It means that you are able to give your support to a Yeshivah because you believe in Torah; because you know that without Torah, Judaism cannot survive; and



that without Judaism it is not worth Jews surviving. When you do things in that manner, your physical act, the contribution itself, benefits the school; but the motive benefits you and you only.

I read in the Israeli press this past year that the Rosh Yeshiva of the famous Yeshiva of Hebron in Jerusalem was entertaining a guest in his study when an old, wizened lady came in and deposited on the desk of the Rabbi a few pennies which she had collected in the streets of Jerusalem on behalf of the school. The Rabbi thanked her profusely and blessed her. After she left, the guest said to the Rabbi, "do you really need such paltry contributions? Can't the Hebron Yeshiva exist without them?" The Rabbi answered, "Yes, certainly <sup>h</sup> Hebron Yeshiva could get along very well without such contributions. The Yeshiva could exist without them; but the world cannot exist without such precious acts of selfless charity!"

Indeed so. If you fail to give as much as you did in the past, or if you fail to give an increased contribution as all of us should, the Manhattan Day School will exist without it. But the question is, will our existence be the same if we fail to do so? Will our own self-respect, our spiritual demeanor, our own religious gestalt be as healthy as it would if we gave generously, openly, and heartfully to this most splendid of all Yeshivot in our area?

When we give, and especially when we give le'shem Shamayim, for the sake of Heaven, with pure motives, we purify ourselves from the dross of our own souls. The appeal today, therefore, is based on this double idea: first - that a most worthy institution crucially needs our assistance; and second, that we ourselves crucially need the purity of intent and motive that goes into giving. And perhaps -- who knows? -- we need the feeling and motive and intent of giving to the school even more than the school needs what we give to it.

This afternoon we shall read in the weekly Perek, Chapter VI: Rabbi Meir says,

Kol ha'osek be'Torah li'shmah, whoever engages in the study of the Torah for its own sake, with pure motives, zokheh li'devarim harbeh, is worthy of many things; and not only that, but <sup>""</sup><sub>^</sub> - and here follows a list of some 25 blessings that accrue to the man who studies Torah le'shem Shamayim, for its own sake, for pure motives.

According to Maimonides, these words, zokheh li'devarim harbeh, "is worthy of many things," is an introduction to all that follows. Other commentators dispute this and maintain that this expression is independent. In keeping with the latter opinion, I believe that what the Perek had in mind was to tell us that if our motives are pure, if they are beyond suspicion, if we learn to act in all our ways le'shem Shamayim, then we not only do good deeds, but we have also accomplished the great task of purifying our motives, and therefore whatever we do becomes doubly meaningful, so that all our good deeds proliferate in importance and in spiritual reward. What is otherwise only a few worthy acts becomes devarim harbeh, many good things; not only good acts but worthy intentions; not only decent living, but noble and pure motives; not only honorable external acts, but a sublime inner life as well. This indeed, is the greatest of all blessings.

May we learn this eternal and immortal teaching and incorporate it into our own lives. May each and every one of us learn to purify our motives and intentions, and thereby be zokheh li'devarim harbeh, deserve all the blessings of God Almighty for years without end.