

"THE AGE OF GEMINI"

On this Shavuot, the commemoration of mattan Torah, the covenant at Sinai between God and Israel, I want to speak about two aspects of the Torah covenant, both for their intrinsic value and because they are relevant to the state of Judaism in the State of Israel today.

It is no secret that polarization in Israel on religious questions becomes sharper each day, and that the incipient signs of a Kulturkampf are already with us. The nature of the Jewish religion, and Judaism's conception of the nature of the State, are therefore very much germane not only to this holiday but to these times as well.

My first point is this: the purpose of Torah is neither some kind of arbitrary spiritual exercise, nor the beating of man into submission in order to aggrandize the divine ego. Rather, Torah is the divine instrument for man's spiritual welfare and fulfillment. The Torah is God's formula for man's moral development. The prescriptions may be difficult, they may entail discipline and renunciation, but the purpose of Torah and commandments is the good of mankind. Our Rabbis meant this when they said:

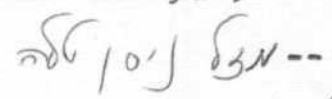
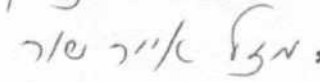
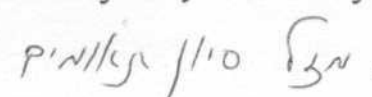
הַתּוֹרָה נִתְּנָה לְעַמּוּלָּה, "Torah was given not for the

ministering angels." Rather, *כי לא נתן להם מלאכים*
"the commandments were given in order to purify and enlighten man's
character." *כי לא נתן להם מלאכים*
"It is because God wanted to endow Israel with extra privilege
that He gave them the Torah and the commandments."

Human concern as the core of Torah is implied as well in
a charming Midrash, in which the Rabbis speak somewhat parabolically
and make use of the signs of the Zodiac. They did not mean to
wish upon us a belief in astrology -- though that would be quite
contemporary! -- but rather they used the mazalot or Zodiac
signs as symbolic representations. Why, ask the Rabbis in Pesikta
Rabbati, was the Torah given during this month of Sivan and
not in other months, such as Nisan or Iyar which precede it?
They answer with a parable:

Once there was a king who had a beautiful daughter whom he
loved very much. When he succeeded in making an appropriate
match for the princess, he called his counsellors together to
discuss with them the proper wedding arrangements. One advisor
said, "Let the princess be seated atop the greatest elephant in
the realm and there, high up in a golden booth, let her be led to
and from the wedding procession." Said the second nobleman:
"The elephant may indeed be tall, but it is essentially an ugly

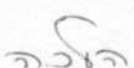

beast. Better than that, let the princess be seated on the handsomest horse in the realm, and on that elegant steed let her be seen by all your subjects." The third counsellor, however, objected to both plans. "Yes," he said, "the elephant is tall and the horse is handsome, but neither of them has hands to clap or feet to dance with, and they have no mouth with which to sing and praise the beauty of the bride. Therefore, it is more fitting that the bride be borne aloft on the shoulders of the guests (somewhat as is done in contemporary Hasidic weddings!) where her own people will be able to sing and dance and clap for the princess."

Similarly, the Torah was not given in Nisan or Iyar, for the symbols of these months are non-human:  -- the Zodiac sign for Nisan is the ram, Aries, and , and the sign for Iyar is the ox, Taurus. The appropriate time for the giving of Torah is neither of these, nor any of the other months of the year, but only that one month in which humans appear: , the sign of Sivan is twins, Gemini. The Torah is not too tall for us, it is not too beautiful and sublime for us. Rather than being beyond us, it was made for us, for humans who can respond to it with song and

praise and devotion and enthusiasm.

For us Jews, the great age is not the Age of Aquarius, but the Age of Gemini. Torah is a celebration of man as a being worthy of divine concern and divine covenanting.

This is something that Torah authorities must always keep in mind and, indeed, have always kept in mind. This is evident to anyone acquainted, for instance, with the great responsa literature on the agunah problem. Halakhic authorities have always responded with enormous consideration and sympathy for those who were disadvantaged by the Law. Today there are other issues of ishut (marriage or divorce law) which are paramount in the public forum in the State of Israel. This congregation is acquainted with these problems from reading the press, and there is no need to detail them. Let me, however, mention but this: it is all too easy to criticize the Israeli rabbinate and lay all blame at its feet. But bear in mind that the Rabbis of Israel are confronted by extraordinary difficulties. Rabbis did not invent the Law, and they cannot abrogate it at will. They have a freedom of interpretation, but the Halakhah is not infinitely plastic. The Law is not a rubber nose that can be pinched and shaped and formed at will. No rabbinate worthy of its name and its tradition can allow itself to be bullied. And the press in Israel is so

hostile to the rabbinate, that one need but pick up any issue of Haaretz and, before opening it, he already feels the vibrations of antagonism and even hatred. The government has arrogated to itself the right to dictate to the rabbinate decisions of law,   . But just as there is a limit to the religious involvement in politics, so is there a limit to the political intrusion into Halakhah. With all honor and tribute, genuinely meant, to two great national heroes, Mrs. Meir and Gen. Dayan, they have yet to prove their credentials as scholars of Halakhah before they may dictate how a religious law shall be decided.

Yet, at the same time, we must concede that it is true that certain insensitive zealots have compounded the problems almost beyond repair -- zealots for whom such unfortunate scandals are balm for their sick hearts, who act as if the identification and exposure of mamzerim constitutes some kind of mitzvah, whereas in truth such vigilante activity goes against the whole ethical spirit of the Sages. Such unconscionable zealots do exert a pressure, and it must be resisted by the proper and authorized interpreters of Torah, given in Sivan, the month of Gemini -- Torah, whose major concern is to enhance the humanity of its communicants. We must intensify the search

for *לח'אב לב*, more lenient and permissive interpretations of the Halakhah, the limits of which have not yet been reached. However, such genuine and sympathetic interpretations cannot be attained and the search cannot be enhanced by this unceasing press campaign and by an attempt at a government diktat to the rabbinate -- and also not by those for whom the Torah was given exclusively to the *מלאכים* and not to man, who have forgotten that Torah is the month of Gemini, of humans.

My second point is that Torah was given to us not only as individuals but as a people. Israel accepted the Torah as an am, as a nation, as a responsible collectivity. They signed, as it were, to the contract called Torah as a corporate individual.

One of the most profound historians of Jewish religion, Yehezkel Kaufman, has written in his epochal Toledot Ha'emunah Hayisraelit, that the great biddush or uniqueness of the Sinai Covenant was not so much its content, for much of that content pre-dated Sinai -- a great deal of it was known, even according to tradition, to Abraham and his descendants, and some of it was the common possession of all civilized humanity. Its major contribution was that this moral and religious law was not

directed by a group of sages or by edict of the king to various individuals, but was revealed by prophecy as a covenant to an entire people; it was an agreement made by God, through prophets, with a nation as such. And Israel is responsible to this Covenant as a nation.

Thus it is that at the end of his days, Moses refers to the Covenant of Torah as having been sealed not only with "those who stand with us here today," but also פל"מ נא ואלה ואלה *for those who are not here this day.*" Individuals can obligate only themselves; when a nation obligates itself, it includes its whole timeless entity -- the dead and the unborn as well as the presently living. Therefore, when Israel covenanted with God at Sinai, it included us in that obligation as well. We are included in the responsibility of the Sinai Covenant by virtue of our being Jews, hence part of a nation.

So we may understand why the reaffirmation of this Covenant took place at specific times in Jewish history. The first covenant was given to Abraham as the founder of the people, and then at Sinai through Moses when, for the first time, Israel itself was covenanted as a nation. There are at least three other mentions of confirmation of this Covenant: immediately before entering Canaan; after the conquest of Canaan in Shechem;

and the confirmation of the Covenant that will take place after the redemption, as mentioned by Jeremiah.

Why are these reaffirmations necessary, since the original Covenant still holds? Are not the laws and principles of the Torah eternal, and if so, why is it necessary to again swear allegiance to the Covenant?

I suggest the following answer: at critical junctures in Jewish history, there hung over our people the threat of its dissolution as a nation, as a separate corporate entity. Were such fragmentation to come about, it would spell the abrogation of the covenant -- for the covenant was made not with individual Jews, but with Israel as a people. So, before entering Canaan, in which the tribes which heretofore had travelled through the desert together would separate to their respective territories, bringing on the threat of decentralization and hence fragmentation, it was necessary to affirm the Covenant as a people. After the conquest of Canaan at Shechem, when some of the tribes were to stay on one side of the Jordan and the others were ready to disburse in their various assigned areas, the threat of tribalization was even greater. Had this tribalization taken place, the Covenant would have been vitiated. Hence, it had to be reconfirmed.

This important lesson must not be forgotten by the secularists of Israel. Secularism is not identical with agnosticism. Rather, it aims at the privatization of religion, it preaches the idea that a man's religion is his own business and neither State nor society can have any interest in it. Indeed, the reason for the sensitivity of Orthodox Jews to the "Who is a Jew?" question is precisely this attempt to separate religion from nationhood. This secularization, appropriate as it might be for other religions, cannot be applied to Judaism, for which it becomes a kind of Christianization of Judaism, a Protestantization of Torah. But this cannot be, for Judaism is the religion of the Covenant, and the Covenant was made with Israel as a people, not as a collection of diverse persons.

Hence, we may understand why the prophet Jeremiah (Chap. 31) speaks of a new covenant (berit hadashah) in the days to come. It is the same Torah to which we will reobligate ourselves --

עֲבָדָה לַיהוָה; but what will be reemphasized is the nationhood of Israel as one of the covenanting parties: אֲנִי אֶהְיֶה לָהֶם לֵאלֹהִים, "I shall be for them for a God, and they shall be for Me a nation." It is almost as if the prophet were speaking of and to our own days. Israel is not just an ethnic continuation of an ancient civilization,

but God's people, the Am Hashem! Today, the threat of fragmentation is not that of tribalization, but that of secularization -- and it is just as real.

So that we learn two lessons on Shavuot, this commemoration of mattan Torah. The first is that the revelation of Torah on this month of Sivan represents the human element, the Age of Gemini, the twins. The second is, that the Torah was given to Israel as a nation.

P'nilya 11'0 Sivan. Perhaps, in terms of our discussion, we may say that each Jew has a double or "twin" relation to the Covenant; as an individual who must choose, and as a member of the Jewish people which is chosen. Each Jew is an autonomous person who volunteers his service, and is also a member of the people who covenanted with God and therefore is precommitted and preobligated. We are each of us *P'nilya*, Gemini: an independent individual, and an integral part of the people of Israel.

Woe to him who is a Jew only by birth, only ethnically. He is chosen against his will, pulled and dragged kicking and screaming into the covenanted peoplehood and its sacred history. Such a person is a schizoid Jew, one whose individuality is in

violent conflict with his membership of the Jewish people.

Happy is he who, born a Jew and therefore obligated by the Covenant of over 3,500 years ago, yet turns about and freely chooses to love and to live Torah conscientiously. He is whole, and the *P'Nile* or twins are as one; his selfhood and his Jewishness are united.

Such a man is worthy of Sivan, and he helps to usher in, to a dehumanized and depersonalized world, the renewed Age of Gemini.