

"IN THE DAYS OF SMALLNESS"

There is an impression current in our society that religion is solely a question of emotion. If you feel "inspired," "in the mood," then you believe, you worship, you observe. But if you are not subjectively attuned to religion, if you do not feel a powerful need for it, ^{if} /you are not grasped by it, then it is meaningless and irrelevant for you. Some people go so far as to say that he who does not experience deep emotions and does not feel great stirrings, and yet prays and observes ~~his~~ religious duties is - a hypocrite.

Religion, according to this interpretation, is a subjective experience, a reaction of an autonomous personality, reflecting the moods and needs of man. If you have a feeling for it, then religion is for you; otherwise - keep away from it.

Can traditional Judaism agree with this romanticized notion of religion, so popular today?

To an extent, there are several romantic elements present in classical Judaism, and they are highlighted especially by the movement known as Hasidism. Thus, Judaism knows of, and Hasidism emphasises, the inwardness of Kavvanah, the inspiration of derekut, the joy of simchah shel mitzvah, the outpouring of genuine emotions and ecstasy. It is these that distinguish Hasidism as a unique movement in Judaism. The subjective, human experience of religion is present in all of Judaism but lies at the very heart of Hasidism.

But does this mean that without the emotional outpouring, without the feeling of inspiration, that there is nothing left? - that Torah no longer can place any demands upon a man?

Of course not. We must never confuse Hasidism, which is an authentic religious movement, with this pale and shallow sentimentalism of our age. For the modern temper recognizes religion as "man-made," as issuing from the recesses of the

human psyche alone. But Judaism firmly maintains that Torah comes from God, that it has clear claims upon the human being, that it is objectively valid, independent of human sentiments. Hasidism too recognizes these eternally valid divine claims; ^{only} ~~just~~ it taught that it is better to react to God and respond to His demands with joy, with feeling, with ecstasy. But the total claim of Torah certainly goes beyond the passing moods of temperamental humans.

This problem is a real one for moderns. We live in a mundane, secularized world, in a highly technological society in which it is not easy to find inspiration. Our culture encourages bashfulness, not the natural overflow of emotions; experiments, not experiences; fact^S, not feeling^S. We do not normally feel the urge to pray in utter devotion, to learn Torah for the sake of Heaven, to observe Mitzvot because we love God. If we accept this popular thesis that all religion is a matter of human moods, then, for all practical ^{purposes} ~~practices~~, Torah must vanish from the world. Those who wait for "inspiration" to pray - usually do not pray.

It is this problem to which the Baal Shem Tov, the sainted founder of the Hasidic movement, addressed himself in a comment on this morning's Sidra.

In the description of the revelation of Torah at Sinai we read: 12311

וַיַּעֲמֵד אֱלֹהִים עַל הָרָא וַיִּבְרָא אֶת הַתּוֹרָה וַיִּתֵּן אֶת הַתּוֹרָה לְיִשְׂרָאֵל - "And they stood at the bottom of the mountain."

Our Rabbis of the Talmud (Shabbat 88) commented as follows:

כַּבֵּה עֲלֵיהֶם הָרַבּ כִּי יִצְיֵא וְאִם לֹא יִצְיֵא אֵלֶיךָ מִן הָרַבּ
וְאִם לֹא יִצְיֵא אֵלֶיךָ מִן הָרַבּ

"the Lord lifted up Mount Sinai like a barrel above their heads and said: if you accept the Torah, good and well; if not, I shall lower the mountain on your head, and here shall be your collective graves." God "chose" the people of Israel; they, literally, had no choice.

What do we, as individuals, learn from this? The Baal Shem Tov, quoted by his famous disciple Rabbi Yaakov Yosef, states the following:

אדם צעיר בא לידי חלק אברהם ויצחק ויעקב
אשר נאמר כי יצחק כתיב לו אברהם ויצחק ויעקב

"This teaches us that even when a man does not have an overwhelming desire for Torah or the service of the Lord, nevertheless, he is not free to desist from them; he must imagine as if someone is forcing him to perform these duties against his will - just as God coerced the children of Israel into accepting the Torah at Sinai." And the Baal Shem Tov concludes:

וזהו הדרך הטובה ליהודי - וזהו הדרך הטובה ליהודי - and this is the good way for a Jewish man to follow during the Yemei ha-Katnut, the days of smallness."

There are days - nay, years and decades - when we are small: our capacities sorely limited, our spirit puny, ^{our soul} desiccated, our sensitivity parched, our hearts shrunken and dried up. Society pushes us towards a constant trivialization. We are immersed in petty details, lost in the shallowness of little problems, little people, and a little self. We abjure large visions, we deny depth, we ignore our own large capacity for experiencing lofty emotions, for an awareness of the transcendent, for a sense of the mysterious, for the daring to lift the veil of everyday life and catch a glimpse of the grandeur and majesty that lie just beyond the world of money and machines, shipping and shopping.

And in these Yemei ha-katnut, when we cannot summon up the spirit from the resources within us, in these days too, we must not desist from prayer, from Torah, from Mitzvot. Just as kelal Yisrael accepted the Torah because God chose them and coerced them into it, so we as individuals, in the "days of smallness," must force ourselves to do and observe, to live and obey, according to the word of God: as if we were big, inspired, uplifted.

There is no greater pleasure, says Baal Shem Tov, than "davenning" or studying Torah during the Yemei ha-gadlut, when we feel fully inspired, alert to the

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whisper of divinity all about us. But there is no greater reward, he continues, for practicing the discipline of one's self that results in observing, in studying, in practicing Jewishness during the Yemei ha-katnut! For the only way to arrive at gadlut - greatness - is to live responsibly and and respectfully through the periods of Katnut - smallness. Those who are defeated by triviality and pettiness cannot hope to succeed to greatness and eminence. Only he who can "daven Minchah" in his office, despite a crowded calendar and a mind cluttered with commonplaces, can hope, some day, to experience true gadlut, an exquisite aliyat neshamah - the soaring of the soul and ascension of the spirit, during a Neilah service for other very special occasions. Only a person who studies Torah and attends classes regularly despite an inner inertia will some day experience the unique, full, and breathless joy in perceiving new intellectual horizons and spiritual vistas in Torah itself. For Torah is not primarily a matter of human moods; it is primarily a matter of the divine will. If we respond to that will when we are caught up in the moods of mediocrity, in Yemei ha-Katnut, then it will be His will to grant us loftier, more sublime, and more exalted experiences of gadlut.

The man who prays only when he is moved to do so, who studies only when he is overwhelmed by intellectual curiosity - is like a mother who feeds her child only when she is inspired by his loveliness rather than when the child is hungry, or like the husband who is faithful to his wife only when he feels stirred by a great love for her. It is a sure recipe for remaining forever stranded in the stagnating swamps of smallness; the Yemei ha-Katnut.

Hasidim tell the following story: There was a small hamlet to which travelers from the outside world came only very rarely. One day the townspeople noticed that their watches were not synchronized. Every one showed a different time, so that most likely no one had the right time. As a result, all the townspeople except one put their watches on their shelves and failed to wind them. This

one man said: although I am sure I do not have the right time, nevertheless, I will keep my watch wound. Several months later, a traveler chanced upon the hamlet. The people surrounded him and asked him for news from the outside world, and then - for the right time. He took out his watch and told them. The people ran back to recover their watches and set them properly. But, lo and behold, none of the watches would work, for they had grown rusty - except the watch which this one man had kept winding all along despite the ridicule of his friends.

So it is with prayer, or Torah, or any other religious duty. Unless you keep it "running" constantly it will be of no avail to you in the moments of crisis when you really need it. He who cannot abide them during the "days of smallness," when he knows that his soul is not synchronized with sublimity - that man will fail during the opportunities of the "days of greatness." He will be rusty. His prayer will be puny, his worship an abortion, his study of Torah a frustration.

The Rabbi of Kotzk asked: why, in the Shema, do we read: עַל לֵבָבְךָ, "and these words shall be on your heart?" Why do we say al levavekha, "on your heart" and why not bi-levavekha, "in your heart?" And the Rabbi of Kotzk answers: it is not too often that the heart is open and that the words of God can enter directly into it. Usually the heart is closed, indifferent, and even callous. Yet the Torah demands that if the words of the Lord cannot come right into an open heart, then at least they shall be placed on the closed heart, so that during those moments of greatness and inspiration, when the human heart suddenly opens up, then the words of Torah which had been piled on it will tumble in and fill the heart with the seeds of true greatness and sublimity. The reward for the strenuous efforts made during the long, dreary, dismal, and uninspired Yemei ha-Katnut comes during these rare but precious moments of gadlut.

יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵינוּ יְהוָה אֶחָד
וְהַיְדוּת אֵינֶנּוּ אֶלֶּל וְעִבְדֵּי
לֵבָבְךָ יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵינוּ יְהוָה אֶחָד

"May the words of my mouth be pleasing to Thee, and the meditation of my heart

come before Thee, O Lord my Rock and Redeemer."

Even when, during the "days of smallness," only my lips move and only my mouth speaks, but my heart remains mute and my spirit sunk in a stony silence, even then

וְיִשְׁמַע אֱלֹהִים בְּיָמַי, may my

efforts be pleasing to Thee. So that, when, during the "days of greatness," my heart opens up, then וְיִשְׁמַע אֱלֹהִים בְּיָמַי may the meditations of my heart rise up before Thee in all their pristine glory.

For Thou, O Lord art Tzuri, my Rock who supports me in my weakness and smallness; and also go'ali, my Redeemer who raises me on high and gives wings to my soul during my moments of greatness.