

SLEEPING GODS

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When, as recorded in today's dramatic Haftorah, the prophet Elijah ascended Mount Carmel in what today is the city of Haifa, he faced the hundreds of priests of the Baal and the crowds of the people of Israel, and flung a challenge at the dissident and confused masses to make up their minds and decide where their loyalties lay. "How long halt ye between two opinions?" -- Why are you as indecisive as a small bird hopping from one branch to another, unable to make up its mind on which branch it wishes to perch? "If the Lord be G-d, follow Him; but if the Baal, follow him." You can't have it both ways. You can't escape the necessity for choosing, painful though it be. Indeed, Elijah speaks to all men of all times when he presses us to make a choice between G-d and the Baals of all ages.

Especially interesting in his historic challenge is the piquant description of idolatry when he presents the alternatives from which the choice is to be made. His searing sarcasm contains a nugget of wisdom about idolatry both ancient and modern which is most important for us. "And it came to pass at noon" -- at a time when all a man's actions are open and revealed and he can hide nothing -- "that Elijah mocked them and said 'Cry aloud, for is he not a god? -- either he is musing, or he has gone aside, or he is in a journey' -- and most important -- 'or peradventure he sleepeth, and must be awaked.' " The nature of idolatry, Elijah declares in the measured accents of mockery, is that of sleep. When you most need him, he is most fast asleep. I would add that the difference between a man asleep and the sleeping god is this: A sleeping man looks lifeless but he is alive; a sleeping god looks alive, but is very much dead. The idol appears real enough: it has eyes, ears, nose, hands, but, as King David said, "They have mouths but they speak not, they have eyes but they see not, they have ears but they hear not."

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What Elijah called the sleeping god refers not only to the idolatries of the ancient days or the vulgar variety prevalent in some countries today -- cows and calves, trees and statues -- but whatever it is that, in the mind and heart of man, replaced the Ribono shel Olam as the center of my universe, the source of my values, that in which I have ultimate faith and ultimate confidence and in which I place my ultimate hopes.

With this kind of definition, need we look far for the sleeping gods of the twentieth century? Is not science such a sleeping god? In reality, science is no more than a certain method of ordering knowledge which has proved very effective. Yet, it is worshipped by so many moderns with a passion worthy of fanatics. Those who kneel at the shrine of scientists show all the signs of having established an organized cult competing with other religious systems. Science is regarded as a way of life. Its worshippers place in it the hope for the future -- whatever is wrong, fear not, for science will some day find a solution. The dogma of infallibility is loudly proclaimed; "Science says" is the ultimate stamp of pontifical authority. There is a priesthood of Ph.D.s. All disbelievers are damned to eternal ignorance. It is regarded as the source of salvation for the world. Yet this new, modern idol is a sleeping god. It is impersonal and impervious to man, no matter how loudly he calls upon it. There is no certainty that this god will hear. As a matter of fact, science may yet be our ruination.

Security is another such sleeping god. The modern American, despite all his talk about independence and private enterprise, pursues security with a religious devoutness. He imagines that it is absolute. With all his hospitalization plans and social security and insurance policies, his cup runneth over; he puts his hope and trust in these and in every form of welfare guaranteed by the government. Yet at crucial moments of his

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life he suddenly realizes that real and absolute security outside of G-d is a dangerous illusion. Security is a sleeping god.

Communism, to those who have adopted it either out of their misery or out of intellectual conviction, has also proved to be a sleeping god. As a divinity, those who have worshipped it have discovered that as a source of salvation it is dead. Unfortunately, as a demon it has proved very much alive.

Whether with regard to these or any of our other modern sleeping gods, we must understand that the choice between idolatry and true religion, between sleeping gods and the Living G-d, is not always an easy choice to make. Idolatry will always appear, superficially, more attractive and more appealing; otherwise, everyone would be deeply religious in the true sense. Yet, the attractiveness, the ease, and the happiness promised by idolatry are illusory. It is a delusion.

The nature of this choice, between the appeal of idolatry and the hard bitter truth of religion, reminds me of the words of the famed Hasidic teacher, Rabbi Nachum Tchernobeler, who said, tongue in cheek, "If I had the choice between wealth and poverty, I most certainly would choose for myself poverty. After all, it costs less, it is more easily attained, you need not struggle against competition, and when you have it you need answer no questions or brook any suspicion." That is why he would choose poverty!

So it is with the choice between Torah and Avodah Zarah, between the living G-d and the sleeping gods. Like poverty, the sleeping gods may appear more attractive. But in the end they are overwhelmingly disappointing.

Allow me to bring to your attention another and most painful case of a sleeping god, a god that failed its worshippers no matter how loudly they

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invoked its name. The name of that god is: liberalism -- not the economic and political theory (about which I do not feel competent to speak from the pulpit) but its general intellectual form. When I say this I do not mean to discredit liberal ideas in any field. On the contrary, some of the most cherished doctrines of modern liberalism have been inspired by the Torah and the prophets and prefigured in Jewish law or Halakhah: the dignity of individual man; the defence of the underdog and exploited; the brotherhood of all mankind; freedom from tyranny; and the right of every man to choose for himself. What I mean, rather, is to express a brooding sadness when I find that liberalism has been transformed from a practical philosophy to a religion, from a point of view to a cult which is expected to have the final and absolute answer to all the problems of mankind. I am sad when I observe how liberalism is beginning to suffer from a hardening of the arteries, when its blood coagulates because it reaches too high and falls too low.

I refer specifically to a rash of comments from some of the greatest and most distinguished American liberals concerning Israel, and particularly the Eichmann case. People like Erich Fromm, the great psychologist; Oscar Handlin, the renowned Harvard historian; writers for the liberal journals, such as "The New Republic," etc., and, in a slightly different context, the famous sociologist, David Reisman -- have recently berated Israel on moral and general principles. I would not even mind their opposition to Israel, although in this case I think that Israel is one hundred percent right, because opposition to Israel is not automatically a crime. What is shocking beyond words is when dogmatic liberalism commits an unpardonable crime, putting it in the company of Toynbee, when its prophets and saints begin to compare, at least by implication, Israel's "crime" to that of Germany. What is unforgivable is their readiness to

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forget the overwhelming, massive proportions of the crime against Jewry which leads them to imply that Israel is no less guilty in capturing and trying Eichmann than that monster was in destroying six million Jews.

Remember that Israel violated no more than the technicality of Argentine jurisdiction (and where were the Argentinians?), even if that -- for according to one opinion the U. N. charter does not allow asylum for war criminals. Israel apologized, and its apologies were accepted. Eichmann was not hurt in any way. Plans are made to grant him an open and fair trial; although these liberal critics, without giving Israel the chance to prove itself, have already condemned the trial as a sham. Israel has passed a special law allowing a foreign lawyer to defend Eichmann, and has even agreed to pay part of the expenses. And after all this -- Israel's crime is equated with that of the Nazis!

Two days ago, when we were reading the Megillah, it occurred to me to wonder what these liberals would have said had they lived in the days of King Ahaseurus. No doubt they would have fulminated against Mordecai and, on the basis of the principles of liberalism and democracy, demanded freedom or at least clemency for Haman. Mordecai, they would have pointed out, had no jurisdiction in Shushan. Haman should be tried not by Jewish judges, but by judges drawn from the one hundred and twenty-seven countries which were under the reign of Ahaseurus. Besides, Mordecai was only a Jewish nationalist -- perish the thought! -- and Esther a Zionist lobbyist applying political pressure on Ahaseurus before election time. Furthermore, did not Haman suffer enough when he was forced to lead his arch enemy through the streets announcing: Kakha yei'aseh le'ish asher ha-melekh chafetz bi-yekaro? And what right does Mordecai have to punish Haman and his gang -- they only planned le'hashmid la-harog u-le'abed, to destroy, kill and eradicate every Jew, young and old, in all of the lands of

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Ahaseurus; but they did not actually do it. Finally, the grandstand trial of Haman and his execution were as heinous and as evil as Haman's designs against the Jewish people. And if these liberals had lived then, and if their opinion had prevailed, they would not live now, for their ancestors would have been destroyed hundreds and hundreds of years ago.

Do you see why I regard liberalism as an idolatry, a sleeping god? Look at how a wonderful conception can lead astray! Look at how passionate the liberals are in defending the Eichmanns and Rockwells, and how silent they are when Jewish causes are in the forefront. Where were these same liberals when a boatload of Jewish men, women and children from Morocco was drowned in the raging storms of the Mediterranean because they were fleeing persecution? Why was there no cry of protest then to arouse the world's conscience -- and it may have helped! -- at least equal to the outcry against Israel in the defence of Eichmann? Why that thunderous silence! What has happened to the god called liberalism? Ulai yashen hu ve' yikkatz -- "peradventure he sleepeth and will be awaked?" Or peradventure liberalism sleepeth and is really a dead god.

We Jews loyal to our Judaism must use different standards to judge the justice or injustice of Israel, or any people or person, on this or on any other matter. We must not be moved by generalized sentiment, by technical quibbling, or by inverted self-hatred. We must be guided only by the Halakhah. And I commend to your attention the fact that recently there appeared in Israel an article by one of Israel's most brilliant rabbinic scholars, Rabbi Moshe Zvi Neriah, on the attitude of the Halakhah towards the Eichmann affair. Rabbi Neriah showed that according to Jewish law, Israel was justified by the action it has taken.

If Elijah's choice is pressed on us to decide between Halakhah and doctrinaire liberalism, we must choose Halakhah which, resulting from the

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event of Matan Torah, the Revelation -- an event unique and unparalleled in human history -- is equipped to deal with unique events and to guide us in dealing with them. Liberalism cannot appreciate uniqueness. It must assimilate all new information and classify it into known categories. But the destruction of six million Jews and the crime of the Nazis are unique events. Liberalism, unsuited to deal with unique events, founders on such occasions. If it is accepted as the ultimate authority and the idol, then it must fail, for it has no choice but to describe the crime of genocide as no different in essence than that of abducting the criminal himself. The god of liberalism is not only asleep, it is dead.

But Halakhah, the Jewish way, is very much alive. It deals not only with the usual and well known, but with the singular and unique as well. For its origin is from the Ribbone shel Olam, of whom David said: Behold lo yanum ve'lo yishan Shomer Yisrael -- "the guardian of Israel neither sleeps nor slumbers."

Judaism allows Jews to have no other religion -- only G-d. When any other system -- religious, political, economic, or social -- is raised above Judaism and its transcendent teachings, that is idolatry. Then we are faced with sleeping gods.

Today as ever, Elijah's challenge is before us. We must choose between Torah and paganism. We must choose between the Living G-d and the sleeping gods. We know what our choice will be. U-vacharta ba-chayyim -- "And thou shalt choose life." We shall choose life for its Author has chosen us, and we have chosen its Author, the living G-d of Israel -- who neither sleeps nor slumbers.