

"A FLAIR FOR THE UNDRAMATIC"

In a Sidra replete with the stories of Israel's back-sliding, of protest and pettiness, of gossip in high places and unrest in low places, there appears at least one bright spot. It is the story of the first Passover celebrated by the Israelites after their exodus from Egypt.

After this happy and joyous celebration, we read that a number of people approached Moses with a complaint:

וַיֹּאמְרוּ הָאֲנָשִׁים הַהֵמָּה אֵלַי, אֲנַחְנוּ טְמֵאִים לַנֶּפֶשׁ אָדָם, לָמָּה נִגְרַע  
לְבַלְחֵי הַקֶּרִיב אֶת קֶרְבֵּן ה' בְּמוֹעֵדוֹ בַּחוּץ בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל . They

said to Moses, we are impure (ritually defiled) because we had contact with a dead body before the holiday, and one who is in a state of impurity may not partake in the Passover sacrifice; why should we be deprived from offering the sacrifice of the Lord amongst all other children of Israel? Do we not deserve any part in the celebration of the Passover?

Moses did not know what to answer, and he turned to God for guidance. The answer from the Lord was the law of פֶּסַח שֵׁנִי , "the second Passover." In response to the complaint, Moses was commanded to declare for all generations that in the event a person is prevented from participating in the Passover in its usual time because he is distant from Jerusalem, or in a state

of defilement, he may offer a sacrifice and celebrate the Passover one month later.

The Jewish tradition had only praise for these anonymous individuals who presented their petition to Moses. We are told that whereas almost all other portions of the Torah are ascribed to Moses, this particular section concerning "the second Passover" is credited to these petitioners: -- if מגלגלין זכות ע"י זכאי one is inherently worthy, then worthy events occur on his account. The Pesikta taught that מלמד שהיו בני אדם כשרים, צדיקים, וחרדים -- על המצוות these people were decent, righteous, and anxious to perform the commandments properly!

Now the Rabbis are usually sparing in their compliments. Is not, therefore, their praise here somewhat extravagant? Are not these panegyrics somewhat inordinate? Furthermore, the petitioners declared that they were defiled, or impure because of contact with a cadaver. There is no explanation of what caused this incident of defilement. Is there, perhaps, some special significance attached to their defilement that occasioned the Rabbis' encomium?

The Talmud (Sukkah 25) provides us with a clue to this fascinating interlude in the life of our ancestors in the desert.

They tell us that these anonymous individuals had become defiled because of contact with a מֵת מְצוּרָה , with an abandoned corpse. Now the Jewish law and concept of met mitzvah possesses the utmost ethical and spiritual significance. The Law states that the greatest act of human benevolence, the חסד של אמת , is the respectful attention one gives to a corpse which no one claims. When an individual dies without friends or relatives to care for him or her, then the first Israelite to chance upon the corpse is obligated to bury it with reverence and dignity. It is an act of proper generosity for which one can expect no compensation from the beneficiary. Who knows but that this person who apparently had no friends, no family, no acquaintances to care for him, was probably on the fringes of society, a marginal man, perhaps an outlaw and a derelict. Yet Judaism regards every human being as created in the Image of God; this individual, therefore, no matter what his status or achievements, is deserving of the full benefit of our kindness, concern, and attention.

Hence, the heroism and the praiseworthiness of those who petitioned for a second Passover lay in this: look at the alternatives with which they were faced -- either to celebrate the Passover or to care for the met mitzvah. That particular Passover was the first anniversary of their freedom. It would be a highly festive occasion

in which all the folk of Israel, according to their many families, would joyously celebrate the most historical Seder ever: the first one since Egypt. It would be an occasion filled with drama and excitement, with crowds and with joy. All this, however, would have to be relinquished if they attended to the abandoned corpse upon which they chanced. Caring for the met mitzvah meant that they would have to spend their time uninterestingly, even morbidly. Out of dedication to duty they would have to give their attention to something that is dull, depressing, even deadly.

Now, everyone likes a party. Yet these people chose the path that was more difficult: the care for the met mitzvah. They were willing to forego the joys of being with their families on this great Passover Seder, willing to give up the company of wife and children, of family and neighbors, of joy and celebration, in order to pursue what was their clear moral obligation. They had a flair for the undramatic! They practiced, centuries earlier, the principle that Solomon later proclaimed:

וְעוֹד אֵלֶּיךָ מִבֵּית אֵלֶּיךָ מִבֵּית מֵוָה . It is  
בֵּית מֵוָה מִבֵּית אֵלֶּיךָ מִבֵּית מֵוָה . It is  
better to go to the house of mourning than to go to the house  
of merry-making.

This readiness to forego the ceremonial and the pleasureable for the dutiful and the unexciting is even more meritorious

according to one opinion in the Talmud which identifies this met mitzvah as the corpse of -- Joseph ! They were the bearers of the coffin of that great Jew who, centuries earlier, had been sold down the river to become second only to Pharoah, and who, before his death, had made his bretheren swear that when the Lord would take them out of Egypt and back to the Holy Land they would bear his remains with them.

One can easily imagine that Joseph was then an unpopular figure. The interpretations of history vary in every age. Joseph was no doubt a faded hero: he was the man who brought the Israelites to Egypt, and they were now marching away from Egypt. Joseph represented the Egyptian phase of Jewish history which they were now trying to reverse and to negate. Probably Joseph had about him the tarnished halo of the "shtadlan" the aristocratic Jew of great influence in the court of the Gentiles, who would plead in behalf of his benighted bretheren -- a kind of Jewish "Uncle Tom." But this new generation was one of democratic self-determination, one of popular mass activism. So that those who bore his coffin had not only to relinquish the pomp and gaiety of Passover, but they also had to bear the burden of devotion to an unpopular cause -- all because of an ancient promise and a feeling of historic obligation. Indeed, they were נאמנים, ישרים, צדיקים, חסידים, ופושעים -- decent, <sup>e</sup>right<sup>A</sup>eous, and punctillious in their observance of the commandments!

The importance of this principle can hardly be overrated. Its significance is increased by the fact that it is not appreciated nowadays. Only recently I had a conversation with a college youth, a member of the current generation of campus activists. He is a person who participates in the many expressions of ferment in colleges throughout the country, in causes that are noble and idealistic -- usually. I spoke to him about Judaism. His response was "but what is there in Judaism that is exciting?" Note the emphasis -- the exciting, the dramatic. My answer was that there is plenty in Judaism that is exciting and stimulating and meaningful; but not sensational! Judaism is not a matter of riot and teach-ins and sit-ins and protests and demonstrations and marathons of any kind. It is the excitement of a life lived according to noble principles with a historical awareness, and with a willingness to endure and suffer for a great cause. It represents the excitement of representing God every single day of one's life in a world that turns a deaf ear to the Almighty.

Coincidentally, I had a similar conversation some two or three months ago with an Israeli journalist, a young woman who had been heroically active in the underground during the Israeli War of Independence against England. She is a woman of great

nobility of soul who is genuinely searching for meaning in life, and turning in all sincerity to the sources of our sacred tradition. But I noticed that her approach was indeed that of a revolutionary. She was looking for in Judaism something breathtaking, something gripping, something whereby to express her unrest and dissatisfaction. My answer here, too, was that Judaism is revolutionary. It attempts to throw off the yoke of the established order of indifference and meanness and inhumanity and nihilism both within society and the nation -- and within man himself; the entrenched authority of temptation, of egotism, or arrogance. But this revolution requires people who are inspired, not incendiaries. It requires long endurance, not dramatic one-time battles; a willingness to risk living, not only to risk dying. Judaism requires a world-shaking flair for the undramatic.

The great Gaon of Vilna has expanded the concept of met mitzvah to include -- the concept of mitzvah itself! The met mitzvah he tells us, also includes those commandments, those mitzvot, which have become abandoned, neglected, and unattended. Our Rabbis told us that כבוד תלוי במצוה ואפילו ספר תורה לעתיד, even the fate of the very Torah in the Ark is sometimes a matter of sheer luck! So it is with the various observances of Judaism: they are often at the mercy of religious fashion. In some

generations, certain mitzvot are accorded the greatest honor, while others are rejected, unclaimed, abandoned -- true metei mitzvah. A generation later this situation may be reversed: those previously neglected are now accorded all dignities, whereas those that were prominent are now shunted aside to second place. Jewish greatness and spiritual heroism requires us to direct our attention to those commandments which are in the category of met mitzvah, which others reject and neglect.

It is worth mentioning a few Jewish institutions which today would belong in that category of met mitzvah. Take, for instance, the commandment of שֶׁכֶּחַיִּי in the sense of the mitzvah to offer a loan to a person who needs it. In our days the commandment of tzedakah is quite popular. It is the focus of awards and testimonials, of dinners and banquets, and plaques of all kinds. There is a public relations industry built about the commandment to give charity. By comparison, the mitzvah to lend money to someone who needs it is met mitzvah. Somehow it lacks the appeal of making the benefactor feel that surge of self-importance and self-gratulation. When it sometimes becomes my task to approach people to offer a loan to a third person, I receive the answer: "Charity is charity -- but business is business, and a loan is business." Now that is incorrect!



Charity is not "charity" ~~not~~ a matter of love and kindness; for the Jew charity is his spiritual and moral "business," for it is his duty to share with others what he has. And a loan does not fall in the category of "business is business"; it is equally the obligation of a loyal Jew to prevent his neighbor from becoming a ward of charity. It is charity with the added element of preventive social and economic medicine, of decency and dignity. Even government recognizes that today, and that is why in the new "war on poverty" the attempt is made to give impoverished people loans in order to build themselves up, rather than <sup>remaining</sup> perpetual pariahs and second-class citizens.

Even within tzedakah itself there is an abandoned mitzvah: that of <sup>קראו ר' יצחק</sup>, that one should not feel bad that he has to give. When we give we ought to do so joyously, not begrudgingly. Whether we give much or little, it should not be attended by grumbling, complaining that we have to give to so many other causes, and pleading poverty to God. <sup>קראו ר' יצחק</sup>.

Another such met mitzvah in our days is the commandment of <sup>מלאכה חלה</sup>, the exchanging of gifts on Purim. This is a festive holiday in which all sections of our people participate; but we usually neglect the commandment to exchange gifts. Instead, we defer this particular mitzvah to another holiday, Hanukkah, for reasons best left unexplained from this pulpit. How important to reestablish the importance of this mitzvah in its proper time -- Purim!

I can think of so many other neglected and abandoned commandments. For instance, there is a law of *שני גזע*, prohibiting us to wear garments with a mixture of wool and linen; or the mitzvah of *ללא גזע*, the prohibition of shaving with a razor blade, a deed which entails the transgression of five separate commandments in the Torah. So what if we do not understand the reason for these commandments? Do we always understand why we come to the synagogue, why we fast on Yom Kippur, why we hear the shofar on Rosh Hashanah? Yes, we ought to study and understand the significance of the various practices of Judaism; but there is no excuse for transgressing them until we have become all-wise.

An abandoned mitzvah nowadays is *לכבד את הוריו*, the law which commands us to revere our elders by rising in the presence of an aged lady or gentleman. Our children especially ought to learn that; perhaps they would if we would practice it ourselves more often. We always ought rise out of respect for an older person, whether that person is learned or ignorant, fine or ignoble.

One can mention many more such examples. For instance, the birkhat ha-mazon -- the saying of Grace after meals -- has fared rather well. After all banquets and other public dinners of

Orthodox institutions -- at least then -- we recite the "bentchen."  
Yet so few, so pitifully few, remember to wash their hands before  
breaking bread and to recite the blessing al netilat yadayim.  
What a reversal of values for a generation which has all but  
made a fetish of hygiene and cleanliness!

Or take Prayer itself. According to the Halakhah, the morning  
(shaharit) and afternoon (minhah) prayers are equally important.  
Yet there are so many who would never miss shaharit who rarely  
pray the minhah. One would think that busy American Jews, who  
are always looking to "save time," would prefer minhah, but there  
is no accounting for the whim and caprice whereby one mitzvah  
is cherished and another lies unclaimed, a met mitzvah.

Last but certainly not least in this list of abandoned  
mitzvot is the great and sacred Jewish principle of anah'g,  
modesty. Modesty in speech, in manner, and especially in dress  
is terribly important especially now as we are about to go off  
for our vacations to the various resorts where this great Jewish  
principle is observed more in the breach than in the practice.  
I might add, with full sincerity, that the Jewish principle of  
anah'g ought certainly be observed in the synagogue, and most  
especially in Orthodox synagogues where, to our great chagrin,  
there is a tendency to overlook this met mitzvah and sometimes  
to dress in a fashion that, for the House of God, is both poor  
taste and poor Judaism.

Unfortunately, one could extend this list much further.

There are, regrettably many more commandments which are the equivalent of abandoned corpses, and which, according to Jewish law and ethics, urgently require our immediate attention over all other practices and observances.

Blessed are those who are willing to forego the ceremonial and the convenient, the popular and the conventional and the fashionable, in order to redeem the neglected, the remote, the unexciting, and the sometimes incomprehensible mitzvot!

As we look into our own hearts we shall discover more than one such met mitzvah within our own selves. It behooves us to turn to these precepts, each of which is a divine commandment and an integral part of Judaism, even if not practiced widely, or even if ignored by us heretofore.

Then we shall be acting in the sacred traditions of those anonymous heroes of biblical days who petitioned Moses at the occasion of the first Passover, those dedicated men and women who were הוּא אֶלֶּם צַדִּיק, וְחַיִּים רַבִּים  
בְּמִצְוֹת decent human beings, righteous Jews, concerned with the mitzvot.

May Almighty God grant that we receive as well our second chance, our personal הוּא חַיִּים, to enjoy those permissible pleasures which we missed out of our single-minded and sublime dedication to duty.