

"HOW TO DEBATE WITH G-D"

Our Father Abraham, in this morning's Torah reading, indulges in one of the most fascinating, dangerous and popular sports known to mankind; debating with G-d. So unique is this controversy Abraham and G-d, that I think it is one of the most remarkable passages in all the Bible. Listen to the Torah's account of the debate:

(Read English translation, Gemesis 18, 22-33)

This, then, is the great debate between the man whom G-d loved, and the G-d Whom the Lord man worshipped.

Definitely a complete
I say it is fascinating, because the very idea of a creature daring to contend with its Creator, of Man arguing with his Maker, is intriguing. *simult, weak* Here was Abraham, a human being subject to death and disease and the terror of the elements, debating with the Almighty, Eternal, Infinite and All-Powerful G-d -- and I was unable to argue with the Hebrew Teacher who taught me this very portion of the Chumash! *Hebrew Teacher*

I say that it is dangerous, because if a man takes too light-hearted an attitude to this idea of arguing it out with G-d, he may tend to identify himself as a god, confuse himself with the Deity, and become overly proud, confident and irreverent.

And I say that it is a popular undertaking, because since Abraham, men have not stopped debating with G-d.

Moses carried out lengthy debates with G-d, and at one point his rebuttal became so sharp that he said, M'CHEINI NA MI'SIFRECHA, "erase me from Thy Book", if you will not consent to me and save Israel.

Isaiah pictured G-d inviting David to join him in debate -

Jonah engaged G-d in a protracted duel, because he, Jonah, was worried about the safety of Israel, while G-d was concerned about the safety of Nineveh as well.

The Berditchever Rebbe, that wonderful Zaddik of Hassidism, won a unique place in Jewish history almost solely because of his debates with G-d and his intercession for Jewish sinners, and his remarkable way of making them seem like saints.

And we too, we of November 1954, we too debate with G-d. We demand a new home, we insist upon a better automobile, we argue for a fancier neighborhood. We eloquently engage G-d in a debate for health and for prosperity. And if G-d sometimes refuses to submit to our demands, we counter with that stereotyped, hackneyed and empty rebuttal: but I deserve it, G-d, after all, I'm a fellow with a good heart, I've never done anything wrong to anyone.

Of course, we all recognize this as an inferior kind of debate with G-d. When Moses and Jonah and the Berditchever debated, it was not for themselves or their families. It was for all Israel - and with Abraham, it wasn't even for his descendants - it was for wicked Sodom, the very me worst enemies the man could have. We argue with G-d on the assumption that we deserve what we ask for. Moses, however, was the greatest ANAV, the most humble person on earth. And Abraham made sure to make it clear: VE'ANOCHI AFAR VE'EIFER, I am only dust and ashes. So that if there is a kind of modern debate with G-d which deserves our attention, it is not this hayghty, silly and nonsensical kind.

The kind of debate which should be discussed this morning is the religious debates we entertain. And my sermon is inspired by a series of experiences that I have had these past several months, and especially recently.

I have noticed that when a Rabbi comes into a company of people, the discussion will often shift to a discussion of religion. Now, that is a good thing, since it can lead to an exchange of ideas, and is an opportunity for people to learn informally. But - had a lawyer entered and the discussion turned to the latest Supreme Court decision, the people would have asked the lawyer for his opinion and analysis. Had the newcomer been a medical doctor, and the discussion centered upon allergies to penicillin, they would have asked him if there really was anything to it. But when a Rabbi enters, and the discussion is on Religion, it is truly rare that he is asked anything at all. He is TOLD. Many souls too timid to engage the Supreme Court and too humble to speak before the apostle of healing will rise like lions to debate with G-d and tell Him exactly what they think of religion, what is good about it and what should be scrapped. Everyone becomes an expert and everyone is willing to engage G-d in a forensic duel. We so often approach religion with self-assurance and confidence and with the knowledge that we have all the answers; when Religion should be approached with humility and diffidence and with questions, not answers.

Now sometimes - no, most times - these debates with G-d, these criticisms of Judaism, are caused by sincere and good intentions. We really want to know why a synagogue must be built in a certain way. We really want to know what the reason is for so many of its restrictions. And we want to know why six million Jews must die in martyrdom. Why must a young child be slain, and why must good and noble people suffer and be cut off in their youth. We want to know the meaning of suffering. And so, with the finest and noblest of intentions, we begin to debate with G-d.

But still, despite our best intentions, and despite the fact that it is permissible to debate with G-d, just as Abraham did, such debates can be dangerous and put us in a most obnoxious and arrogant light in the eyes of G-d.

For There are two ways of debating with G-d - the right way and the wrong way, the permissible way and the forbidden way. And in the Bible these two ways are typified by two men. Abraham typifies the right and permissible way. And Job - the wrong and forbidden way.

Job, you remember, was a fine and upright man who suddenly was hit by a series of tragedies. He lost his fortune, his children and then his health. He suffered terribly. And as a result he began to debate with G-d, demanding to know why he suffered, and justifying himself in the eyes of G-d and insisting that his suffering was unjust and cruel and wrong. His polemics fill the entire Book of Job.

And our Rabbis tell us (Tanhuma Vayera 5): HU HA'DAVRA SHE'AMAR AVRAHAM, HU HA'DAVAR SHE'AMAR IYOV - both Abraham and Job said the same thing and had the same ideas in mind when they debated with G-d. ELA SHE'IYOV BALAH FAGAH, AVAL AVRAHAM BALAH BE'SHEILAH, but Job's arguments were like swallowing a green and harmful fruit, while Abraham's words were like eating a ripe, sweet and mature fruit. Job said, ACHASS HI, AL KEIN AMARTI TAM VE'RASHA HU MECHALEH, It is all one thing, therefore do I say that G-d destroys the righteous with the wicked. Whilst Abraham said HA'AF TISPEH...Will You, G-d, sweep away the righteous with the wicked, and said in answer CHALILA LECHA, far be it from you!

Here then is the difference: Abraham debates with spiritual maturity, with spiritual ripeness. Job debates with immaturity, is spiritually raw and underdeveloped. One's words are sour, the other's sweet. Abraham's attitude is expressed by fact that he debates while standing before G-d in prayer, and addressing his remarks to G-d, while Job sits in his parlor and complains about G-d to some friends. One argues in the synagogue, one on the golf links. Job says ACHASS HI...it's all the same, there's no difference what your religion is or what you believe in or observe, I, Job, know it all, I conclude therefore that there is no justice in the world. And the other is undogmatic, and does not offer personal opinions, but rather, offers pleading questions: would You, O G-d, do such a thing? I know it couldn't be true. Don't do it G-d, not because I am deserving but CHALILA LECHA,

Abraham's protest is not in behalf of himself, not even his own people, but - his world, his people, his world! Job's complaint is all about himself, his injury, his anguish, his woes, his wrongs.

because it will result in CHILUL HA'SHEM, it will desecrate Your name and drive people from religion. G-d, says an Abraham, I have no answers to give You. I just have questions which I want You to answer - because ANOCHI AFAR VE'EIFER - I'm only human, weak, inadequate.

Here, then, are the two ways of debating with G-d. You can debate like a Job, or like an Abraham. An Abraham will ask his questions and think carefully, he might assume that here are those who dedicate their lives to such problems and ask their guidance. The Abraham type debater will ask his questions at a Sunday Minyan Breakfast discussion. He will offer the challenge - in a polite, humble and intelligent way - at an Adult Course. He will ask and read, challenge and listen, debate and wait for a response.

But a Job-type does nothing of the sort. He tells the Rabbi off, and snubs G-d. He measures religion - the worship of G-d - by his own standards of what is right and what is not right. Sholem Ash is that kind of debater, He had questions, and so did not ask, but assumed he knew the answers. And he arrogantly and blasphemously gave them - until he is no longer accepted by his people as a Jew. And I might inform you of an interesting fact about this blasphemer and traitor to his people. Just this past Rosh Hashanah he was condescendingly permitted into the Tiffereth Tzvi synagogue in Tel Aviv, but he was turned down when he wanted an Aliyah. And this vicious traitor to Judaism then offered 250 pounds (about \$139) for the Aliyah - and was fully rebuffed! A wrong kind of debate leads to successive degradation.

The wrong kind of debater will say ACHASS HI - it's all the same, and then why not marry outside the faith. He will presumptuously assume he knows the meaning of Shabbos and what "work" means, and so, with the smug assurance we have come to expect, tell us that "in those days" one had to rub two stones to make fire, whereas today an electric switch is used, hence permissible. He gives the answers, this debater does - but he doesn't begin to understand what Shabbos means and is. So that there is the right way and the wrong way of debating with G-d. The way of arrogance and dogmatism - and the way of humility and righteousness and sweetness. BALAH FAGAN and BLAH BSHEILAH.

At the end, measured by purely practical results, the Jobs may seem the winners. They get double their fortunes that they asked for, as did Job. But they've really lost for, as our Rabbis said of Job, he got double his fortune in this world and therefore relinquished the other world. He won materially, lost spiritually.

Abraham, the sweet and mature debater, might have lost the debate, Sodom was destroyed and is desolate to this very day. But he won the other world too. He emerged unscathed, a glorious loser. The Biblical passage ends with the words VE'AVRAHAM SHAV LIMKOMO, Abraham returned to his place. Not one chip was there in his spiritual stature. He was as great and as holy as before, though he lost the debate.

When we debate with G-d, as we may, let us do so with mellowness and understanding and maturity - and in the synagogue, LIFNEI HA'SHEM. Let us not do so with sourness and irreverence and smugness and impudence. Better let us lose like Abraham than win like Job.

Let me conclude by telling you one Hassidic tale which illustrates, like nothing else, the kind of debate with G-d we are trying to encourage, one which manifests the great sweetness of the Jewish kind of debate. It is told of R. Elimelech Lizensker that he spoke as follows to G-d: RIBONO SHEL OLAM, I know that when I die and appear before your Divine Tribunal, you will not let me enter Paradise with all those great and holy saints. But you will send me to Gehennom. But G-d, you know how I dislike the R'SHAIM, those who disobey you, I can't stand their company. Therefore, O G-d, take the R'SHAIM the sinners out of Hell and send them to Paradise, so that I may enter Hell in peace.

That is how a noble descendant of Abraham speaks. Let us try to emulate that kind of debating.

cut-Terrif!

Alzar

For J.C. GR (15/11 - Nov. 1958)

- 1- see pencilled rewordings in pp 1 & 2.
- 2- P. 5 - after end 1st parag:

a) as Rabbi, I exposed both types debates w. g-d.
- no doubt - though perhaps less extent - (yemen identified with
som fr - mixed company - business assoc, very lib, very
social gathering - ABR type - good to question,
criticize ... but DOB type - (as one -
tells you why - self aut. quoted (vab stocks) - tells you
that intermarriage irrelevant, undemocratic taboo ...
He also would have been pinning about tax law before
Lampert about the use of cortisone before 1940 - (know
all answers when comes to polyg. Job - 380 v/2 -
reflects on me's maturity)

(b) BEAT gen - sharp crit. society - good!
But when results fruitless talking, debate w g-d
results unimaginative denial - then not mature
but signum of degradation - This is
Job kind crit., leads nowhere. Someologists
who tie up Beat Gen - juvenile delinq.
Not debate but whining - not theological but
suffering soliloquy)

c) we too have water, debate g-d - either our selfish
needs, wants, desires - like Job ... or such legit. issues as
worse war, famine ... trouble Israel ... Jews behind Iron
curtain ... - they are selfish, w/d we debate them in trad.
Pabr - question, not declaim, word & reason, prayer, not
logical question, narrow debate w g-d reflects spiritual maturity -
7/12 v/2