

IF THERE IS NO FLOUR

I have just returned from the first Interreligious Peace Colloquium dedicated to the food crisis.

Some thirty five people from all over the world attended this four-day conference in Bellagio, in Northern Italy. They represented almost every continent and culture and religion: economists and agronomists, one of them a Nobel Laureate; ambassadors and cabinet ministers and international civil servants; professors and university presidents; cardinals and bishops and Moslem theologians and Buddhist Monks -- and a Rabbi or two...

Did they accomplish anything? Before I accepted the invitation I doubted very much that they could. Now that I have been there, I doubt that they did, although only time will tell. Yet I felt myself guided by the last Mishnah in the second chapter of Avot, עֲלֵךְ הַמַּצָּאָה זָגְמוֹר וְאִי אֵתָהּ בֶּן חוּרִין, מִמֶּנָּה לֹא הִבְטַח, you can never expect to be completely successful, but neither are you free to desist from trying. It certainly is immoral to resign from any effort when the victims themselves are in despair.

Consider the enormity of the terrible crisis. Think of it, and you will not be able to sleep too well -- or even eat too well. Perhaps that is not appropriate for a Shabbat, but הַחַיִּים overrides such considerations.

In 1972, there took place a conjunction of several crises: almost all the world's crops failed simultaneously, a fertilizer shortage developed, and then an oil crisis exacerbated the situation. This proved hardest, as things always do, on the poor countries. In 1974 there again was a poor year. This year, 1975, some 400 million people -- just think of that number! -- are now suffering below minimal nutrition, some of them chronic malnutrition, and millions are dying.

The World Food Conference in Rome of 1974 was a good beginning. Yet it is far from adequate. We still face the threat of world famine. This year, the world's population is four billion. At the present rate, there should be 800 million people starving a famine twenty five years hence, when the projected population is eight billion!

The problem with such staggering misfortune is that it engenders in us a defensive indifference: we unconsciously make a decision to ignore the problem, and deal with lesser and more manageable problems. But that is not a moral or a Jewish approach. The first blessing of the הַמִּין הַמִּין is for food for all peoples, no matter who they are. Hence, the value of this Colloquium and hopefully, a talk such as this.

For a consequence of famine is not only that it is an evil in itself, but it is also a threat to world peace. When I was in college, a professor of Semitics told me that the etymology of the word מַצָּה, war, is from לָחֶם, bread; similarly, the word for struggling or striving, שֶׁנִּי עֲבָרִים נָצִים, is from the word מַצָּה -- because the want of food is always a cause of war!

So it is imperative that something be done. Yet I confess that I emerged from this Conference with a renewed feeling of racial (in the sense of the human race) humility, the sensation of human impotence. We are so powerful and so bright, our technology is so advanced, we have built thinking machines and tremendous skyscrapers and the finger of mankind has probed into the outer reaches of space. Yet, millions of lives are dependent upon mere rainfall!

Millions in the Sahel and Bangladesh die of starvation because, with all our power and all our knowledge, we cannot wrest a few drops of rain out of the parched skies!

Yet, that is only a part of the problem, and surprisingly not the worst of it. Even more than the lack of natural resources and the want of technical competence, famine today is a question of our social structures, our economic system, our political motives, and simple human greed. That is why we now speak of "man-made famine." For example: Brazil is a country which is rich in its resources, and has sufficient arable land to support its entire population, and yet 70% of that country's people are living under sub-standard nutrition!

Thus, the chronic malnutrition of poor countries is not so much dependent upon their total food supply as upon such things as: their distribution of food; the energy crisis and the oil price manipulation; and in the developing countries themselves -- corruption, black-market, profiteering, food adulteration, the oppression of the poor by the privileged classes. Sometimes the countries make the wrong political choices because of opportunism -- as when they ejected the Israelis who were teaching them the principles of agriculture because they thought they would get rich on their Arab friends. Sometimes it is a combination of stupidity and arrogance, as when a country that chronically suffers from famine, such as India, diverts funds from food in order to build an atom bomb.

To the largest extent, food for countries as for individuals, in the Jewish scheme, should not be a question of international charity, but teaching the recipient to grow enough of its own food for its own consumption. Often, the link of agriculture with industry or business leads a country to favor cash or commercial crops, which are used for export, over food needed to avert mass starvation in the country itself. Notice that food and starvation are really part of a larger problem: underdevelopment in whole parts of the world. In the developed countries, where we have 30% of the population of the world, we use 80% of its resources.

How does the Torah look on the question of food and famine? A full answer requires a whole book. But I shall restrict myself to the Sidra of this morning.

Indeed our Sidra does discuss the question of hunger. Thus, we read, "And the people were as murmurers, speaking evil in the ears of the Lord... and they said: who will give us flesh to eat?!... And the anger of the Lord was kindled greatly, and Moses was displeased. And Moses said to the Lord... Whence should I have flesh to give unto all this people? I am not able to bear all this people and myself alone, because it is too heavy for me" (Lev. Ch. 11).

The answer of the Lord to this complaint of Israel and the feeling of Moses that he had reached the end of his tether, was to seek the assistance of seventy elders: "And the Lord said unto Moses, gather unto Me seventy men of the elders of Israel... and I will come down... and I will take of the spirit which is upon thee and will put it upon them, and they shall bear the burden of the people with thee, that thou bear it not thyself alone" (ibid.).

And then, having dedicated this counsel of seventy elders, God told Moses: "And say thou unto the people, sanctify yourselves against tomorrow

and ye shall eat flesh;... therefore the Lord will give you flesh and ye shall eat. Ye shall eat not one day, not two days, nor five days, neither ten days, nor twenty days, but a whole month, until it come out of your nostrils and be loathsome unto you..." And thus the quail came in enormous numbers and the people had more, much more, than they wanted to eat.

The question that always bothered me with this text is, that there seems to be a break in continuity. What does the dedication and founding of the Council of Seventy Elders, which is really the first Sanhedrin, have to do with the demand for food? Could not God act without these individuals? Could He not have solved the problem through the agency of Moses alone? Did God need a whole executive council acting as a committee of the whole in order to distribute the food?...

Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch replies that it was in order to show the Children of Israel that what they needed was not food but **רוח**, spirit, and therefore the seventy elders were inspired by the spirit of Moses.

However, I believe the answer is unsatisfactory. Because if so, if it were only a matter of teaching the superiority of spirit over matter, Moses could have done it himself.

I therefore suggest that, yes, the Children of Israel overstated the case; yes, there is a need for spirit and it is more vital than the need for food. But Moses was just too spiritual, too ethereal, too close to God, too remote, to understand mere hunger. For Moses the demand, "who will give us flesh to eat," was nothing more than a petty vulgarity. A man who himself had fasted forty days and nights at Sinai in order to discourse with God, cannot be expected to sympathize with a man who has not eaten in a week, with a mother of a baby crying for milk. For this you need the elders -- leaders whose lives are kindled with the spirit of Moses but still are at the mercy of their own bodies and appetites and drives.

Yes, God was angry with Israel, and Moses was displeased with them because there was too much concern with food, with filling their bellies. But both Moses and God also knew that people need sympathetic leadership!

Moses's main message to his people was, in the language of our Rabbis in Avot, **אם אין תורה אין קיום**, If there is no Torah there can be no flour; if there is no spirit, of what use is the body? But the elders taught the complementary truth: **אם אין קיום אין תורה**, If there is no flour, there can be no Torah. If a man is in despair and hunger, then he has no human dignity. No food, no faith! No flour, no freedom!

I know, many of you are thinking: Jews often went hungry and suffered poverty, and yet they produced some of their greatest cultural creations. But first you must remember that we are a people with an ancient religious cultural tradition and have therefore been able to operate and become creative even under the most adverse conditions. But second, and more important, it all depends upon the extent of suffering. Differences in degree become differences in kind. Hunger can be borne; starvation cannot. Under-nourishment may be tolerable; famine unto death is most certainly not, and it is, in addition, an indignity to the image of God as well.

And yet I am uneasy with my explanation. Because if it is so, and if sympathetic leadership was needed for the people, why then were the Children of Israel punished? Why was the cry, "Give us flesh," so very wrong?

I would like to say that from the experience I gained at this recent Colloquium, I believe I may now have an answer.

I learned that in North America -- in the U.S. and Canada alone -- one of the symbols of affluence is: meat consumption. As a result of advertisement campaigns and general social stimulation, we have become a primarily beef-eating population. Consequently, over 60% of the U.S. grain output -- most of which could be used to feed hungry humans -- is consumed by cattle and poultry, which in turn are used to feed those who have more than enough to eat already. Without knowing it, our finest steaks and best cuts of meat not only cost money, not only may be injurious to our health, but are acquired at a very high cost indeed -- human misery, and maybe human life.

Now I understand our Sidra. That is why God was angry, why the Children of Israel were punished. They did not cry for bread. They demanded: flesh, meat! They wanted nutritional luxury, and not necessity. On the contrary, they denigrated bread, they were contemptuous of it: "And the Children of Israel also wept on their part and said, Would that we were given flesh to eat!.. Our soul is dried away, there is nothing at all; we have naught save this manna to look to" (Lev. 11:4,6). The manna was the bread which had in it all kinds of taste, and was more than sufficient for their nutritional needs. And so neither God nor Moses could forgive them this deprecation of bread. And hence, they had to start afresh with seventy leaders whose vision was sufficiently dimmed and whose scope was sufficiently limited for them to find some justification for this cantankerous and obstreperous people.

To return to, and to conclude, my brief report of the Colloquium. Did we accomplish anything other than consciousness-raising? Were there any concrete results?

Time alone will tell. Some important suggestions were made, which will require pressure on governments to reorder their priorities. There were recommendations which will require of religious communities to undertake educational campaigns with regard to the dignity of tilling the soil.

But most important of all, I would like all of us to recognize the dimensions of human suffering, and not to be blinded by our own affluence. And, maybe, we will be even a bit more grateful for what we do have, and recite the blessing over our food and especially the *ברכת המזון* with a bit more *כיוונה*, intention.

The Talmud (Ket. 10b) tells us: *בזכות המזבח העולם ניזון*, "by the merit of the altar the world is fed." Only if the "have's" are willing to sacrifice; only if blocs and nations and states and individuals are willing to give up some of their goods on the altar of human compassion and interdependence, can all of mankind survive with dignity and be fed as befits human beings.

In our grace, we praise God *כי הוא א-ל אן ומפרנס לכל*, for He is a God who feeds and supplies all -- whether in the Sahel or in Bangladesh, whether Asia, Africa, or the Middle East, or anywhere. How does He do this? *ומטיב לכל*, because He is good to all -- and the same verb may mean, that *ומטיב לכל*, He teaches us, who have the goods of life, to be *טוב*, good, to all others, especially those who have nothing. It is when we assimilate and adapt the goodness of God that His grace fills the entire world.