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THE BITTER TRUTH

Over a thousand years ago a great Jew, Rabbi Saadia Gaon, ^{said that the main} analyzed the reasons for the defections from Judaism in his day. And the main reason he presented is remarkably appropriate and startlingly applicable to our own condition in the year 1959 or 5720. ^{is that} Men by nature, he said, try to avoid that which is burdensome and unpleasant, and they therefore seek to escape from the truth; for so do people say --- in his day and in ^{speaking of} ours as well --- "the bitter truth." People therefore reject the truth of Judaism by practicing the universal and pleasant art of self-deception. (Introd. Emunot ve-Deot)

As we listen to those wise words spoken a millenium ago we are struck by the fact that not much has changed in human nature these past ten centuries. We too, ^{suck} if we are honest in the Cheshbon ha-nefesh, the critical self-examination that Rosh Hashanah requires of us, have sought to avoid the harsh truths of life, the truths that Judaism confronts us with, by indulging in this pleasurable self-deception. We have not told ^{tell} ourselves the truth. We have preferred to deceive ourselves and invent pretty excuses for shrugging off the burden of truth. And if we are serious and in earnest about Rosh Hashanah and about our presence in the synagogue this day then we ought to acknowledge that we are involved in this great moral difficulty. For it is as a challenge to this propensity for apologizing and "kidding ourselves along" that Rosh Hashanah and Shofar come as an abrupt and irritating challenge: Uru yeshenim mi-shenat'chem, wake up from your pleasant, self-imposed slumbers and dreams, eleh ha-shokechim et ha-emet be-havlei ha-zeman those who prefer to disregard the truth, unpleasant though it be, in favor of the trivialities of the hour.

For do not people constantly make up little excuses for themselves and prefer to fool themselves instead of facing up to the bitter truth and doing something about it? I very much desire acceptance in a certain social group, but they will not have me. So they are not good enough for me, or they are not in my class. I am in the company of educated people and cannot partake of their intellectual discourse. Do I admit my shortcomings and resolve to read and acquire some culture? No. Instead I counter with: You can't butter bread with books, or how can music help you make a living? I have failed in my job. Is it ever my fault? No. The boss has a grudge against me, or else they are prejudiced against Jews. A man or a woman has not had the patience and wisdom to develop a wholesome companionship with wife or husband. Is it ever his fault, or her fault? No. There is instead the little game of deceiving one's self: he or she ^{de}just doesn't understand me. How did Solomon put it: The lazy man saith, there is a lion outside, I shall be slain in the streets. And so the lazy one has sacrificed the bitter truth for sweet convenience -- but he never steps out of the house. How tragic this inclination for apologizing for ourselves to ourselves. How terribly misleading this willingness to accept our feeble excuses instead of facing up to the truth. It is akin to the old, senile sea captain who brought his ship to grief because he navigated it by the stars painted on his cabin ceiling.

There is one passage in the Siddur that is of extreme importance to every one of us here today, but we usually miss it because it occurs so early in the service. Le-olam yehei adam yerei shamayim ba-seter uva-galuy, a man ought always be G-d-fearing, whether in public or in private...ve-dover emet bi-levavo, and speak the truth in his heart. How awkward -- speak the truth in his heart! Should we not rather have been instructed to speak the truth to our neighbors, to our friends, to beware of deceiving others? Yet our tradition tells us: dover emet bi-levavo. First things first. You cannot be honest to your neighbor until you are honest with yourself. And therefore above all and before all: stop fooling yourself, face up to the truth in your own life first.

the man who knows full well how dangerous it is to sink in excess, but fools only himself by declaring that the statistics relating to his case have not been verified

For undoubtedly there is much more lying to oneself ~~than~~ in the depths of the heart than there is to others. When we lie to another person we shall probably be found out sooner or later and someone will stand up to challenge us, and so the falsehood will be wiped out. But when we deceive ourselves, there is no one to detect the self-lie, no one to challenge and irritate us for veering from the truth. And ~~de~~self-deception is also more dangerous than lying to others. The incompetent employee will always find employers who hold grudges against him. The ignorant man will always find cause to ~~dis~~parage culture. The misunderstood husband or wife will continue to refuse to face the facts and remain misunderstood. No wonder our Rabbis said that chotamo shel ha-kadosh barukh hu emet, that the seal of G-d is truth. When an artisan fashions an article it is incomplete until he seals it, until he puts on the finishing touches. A man who fools himself, who refuses to look at the truth, is an incomplete man. He is only half-done -- who knows, perhaps undone!

There is a remarkable Midrash that our Rabbis quote in the name of R. Levi (end Tanchuma, Mishpatim) that sounds quaint, and yet is full of spiritual dynamite. What, he asks, do Mazikin, devils, look like? Now you may smile knowingly and say "but we don't believe in that in this day and age." And yet our Rabbis were somewhat sophisticated too, and if you listen closely to their answer and try to understand it you discover an incisive psychology, couched in symbolic language, that says something to each and every one of us here today. So then, what do devils look like, how can you identify the source and nature of all that is evil and destructive in human life? Listen: Purma bi'fneihem kegon chamorim shel tochanim, they have bandages or blindfolds over their eyes, like those worn by mules going round the treadmill, u'ke'she'ha-avonot gormim, ha-purma nigleh ve-ha-dam nishtateh., and when one's sins accumulate and reach the breaking point, the blindfold is ripped off, and man is stunned into madness.

You see, my friends, our Rabbis were not speaking of ghosts or disembodied spirits. The mazik, the devil, is -- man himself, when he chooses to blind himself to reality, to deceive himself, to avert his gaze from the truth! We place a blindfold about ~~our~~ eyes, we give every available excuse, no matter how infantile, for not following the way of truth, of Torah, of G-d, and go about life in merry disregard of utter reality. Like the mules of the treadmill whose master places the Purma on their eyes to keep them from realizing and objecting to going around in circles, so we prefer not to acknowledge that we sometimes spend our whole lives doing just that -- going around in circles. The purma keeps us from the truth and the truth from us -- and so we day-dream about "progress" and "advancement" when the "bitter truth" is that we have just been pacing the treadmill. When we have done enough wrong to our fellow-man and enough damage to Torah and the divine tradition, when avonot gormin, our punishment is not physical pain or even the fires of hell -- it is the ripping off of the purma when G-d finally forces us to face the truth, to see real reality, how we have deceived ourselves throughout the years. And when we are forced into that encounter with the hard, real facts -- ha-adam nishtateh, it can be a maddenning experience.

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Just look at how the Mazikin within us place Purmas over our eyes. We Americans had for so long become accustomed to technical superiority in the world, that we blinded ourselves to the unpleasant thought that others might learn to beat us at our own game. So we closed our eyes to the bitter truth of Russian frantic attempts at scientific leadership, we preferred the pleasant blindfold of higher budgets for household gadgets and entertainment, we kept on going in circles by diluting our children's education and making athletics and extra-curricular activities more important than true scholarship. And what has happened now that our sins of omission have accumulated and ha-purma nigleh, the mask was ripped off and we are forced to face the truth, the facts? Why, ha-adam nishtateh, America almost went mad when it was first hit with the realization that we have been beaten in every phase of the newest and boldest technology! What a result of continuous self-deception and evasion.

Or take the Mazikin with which our city, especially our neighborhood, has been plagued recently: juvenile delinquents. Today we know there is no one cause for this blight; there are many factors. But most important is the purma of parents of these young thugs. Next time an incident occurs and a youngster is arrested for a major crime, read of the reaction of his heart-broken parents: "but so-and-so is a wonderful boy, he never gets into trouble." As if delinquency just happens out of thin air! Parents blind themselves to their children's lives, they do not want to see the bitter truth of their kind of friends, their hours spent in plotting, their truancy from school, and so they tread the treadmill until the murder or rape occurs, ve-hapurma nigleh, and then there is no escaping the brutal facts: ha-adam nishtateh, parents can be driven insane by this, their own deception. I am sure that when you walk through the streets of our neighborhood at eleven at night and notice little tots of three and four years walking the streets, that their parents are not consciously raising criminals. They have no doubt found little excuses, little evasions and apologies. Yet the result is: nishtateh, a society gone wild.

And how much different is it, my friends, when you deal with our own deceptions with regard to our children. O, no juvenile delinquency here, but the most respectable, law-abiding children in the country -- the civil law, that is. But just look at the pitiful state of Jewish education in mid-Manhattan. It is a situation which is nothing less than disgraceful. I regret to have to say it: most parents have placed purmas over their eyes, giving every inane excuse for depriving their children of a decent Jewish education. Have you heard a parent say: "Hebrew school? -- but I don't want my boy to be a Rabbi." As if we should therefore refuse to have him learn to brush his teeth because we don't want to make a dentist of him! And so we delay and procrastinate, we blind ourselves to the bitter truth that merely learning the rote of saying a haftorah for Bar Mitzvah is NOT a full Jewish education, and our children never progress spiritually, they go around in circles -- and when they grow up and if -- Heaven forbid -- they reject all that is holy to us or even intermarry -- ha-adam nishtateh, parents are driven to desperation, forgetting that their own evasions and self-deceptions are at the root of this.

If there is anything that can account neatly for all that is wrong with the way Jews have behaved religiously in our society, it is the propensity for acquiring purmas. We fear the truth, imagine it to be more bitter and difficult than it really is, and so begin deceiving ourselves. Kashruth imposes difficulty on the housewife, inconvenience on the husband who may travel. Hence, we grasp the purma: it is unnecessary in a civilization of refrigeration, as if that is all there is to Kshrut. Shabbat imposes restrictions on our freedom to travel and other movement. So we adopt a purma: I relax better by violating Jewish law -- as if Shabbat meant merely relaxation. And what happens then? -- Like the mules of the miller we pace the treadmill, never make a forward step religiously, and yet imagine in our dream worlds behind the blindfold that all is well with us, that we have not shirked any special responsibility. And when the time comes that we grow a bit older and wiser, we discover that our children have grown up in homes devoid of Jewish romance and loveliness, bereft of the sweet memories we have of our parents' homes, and there is a great, maddening emptiness in our homes and our lives and our children's lives.

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, We who wear the purma flippantly dismisses Kashrut and Shabbat in an age of missiles and satellites and rockets. He who is dover emet balevavo recognized the desperate need for kindness and love, for ethics and righteousness, for Shabbat and Tzedakah, for Torah and Tefillah. And only when you see where you are going can you get anyplace.

Rosh devarsha emet, They first words are truth. This means that the last letters

of the first three words of the Bible, Bereshit bara elokim, aleph-mem-tev, spell "Emet", truth. At this, the Bereshit of a New Year, the beginning of what we pray and hope will be a year of happiness and blessing, we must dedicate ourselves anew to G-d's first requirement of His creatures: truth, truth to others but above all truth to ourselves. May this be a year of clear sight and far vision, a year ~~in~~ in which we shall be able to escape from that cynical circle of habit, that sterile treadmill of routine, and go head to the beckoning road of Jewish creativity and happiness and peace.

These are the thoughts that must race thru our minds on this day of 1st when we are challenged by G-d & the J. Trad. to greater achievement. We must resolve to be brutally honest w. ourselves now so we will not have to suffer later. We have pointed out some of the sins of our generation in the course of this talk. Yet it would not be fair to conclude w/o some mention of the great progress we have made. Thank Heaven, the 600,000 are coming; not because (inside a yr) but because we American Jew, particularly the youngest ones, have learnt J. out of 12th 11th 10th: Examples: Day Schools - New Trad. Synag. - Hebrew - Adult Ed - Jewish Habit. not crisis appeal - love of Israel. Some of these are difficult. But we have learnt that it is better to face the bitter truth than to suffer consequences of sweet lie - Thank G-d!

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