

"THE WORLD WE LIVE IN"

The chronicles of our people are studded with the stories of famous friendships.

One of the most interesting of these is that of Rabbi Judah the Prince, commonly called Rabbi or Rebbe, and Antoninus, the Caesar of Imperial Rome. Rabbi and Caesar had a mutual affection for each other, and held each other in great esteem. One of the interesting sidelights of this friendship, which I wish to commend to your attention this morning, concerns a verse we just read from the Torah. After Cain was dejected because the Lord had rejected his offerings, G-d said to him: la-pesach chatat rovetz - "Sin crouches at the door." It is concerning this verse that the Talmud, in Sanhedrin, records the following statement: Amar Rebbe - Rabbi Judah the Prince said, davar zeh limdani Antoninus, ^{thing} this was taught to me by Antoninus - that yetzer ha-ra sholet ba-adam mi-shaat yetziato, ^{la-olam} that the evil temptation rules over man from the moment that he goes out into the world. And proof for this statement is the verse la-pesach chatat rovetz - "Sin crouches at the door." In other words, Antoninus interpreted the word pesach, door, in a biological and almost literal sense - at the doorway into the world, from the moment of birth, the evil propensity of man reigns over him.

What a remarkable statement! Is it not unthinkable that the great Rebbe, the Redactor of the Mishnah, the pillar of Judaism throughout the ages, he who formulated and organized the structure of the whole ^{oral} Law, should have to turn to a Non-Jew, a Roman, for the interpretation of a biblical verse? Is it not almost absurd to learn that this great teacher, known in our literature as "the holy Rabbi," should have to rely upon a politician for the explanation of a simple verse of the Torah?

I believe that we have here something subtle which speaks to all ^e men and has something to say to all ages. Note that Rabbi says merely that Antoninus taught him this explanation!; He does not say that he accepted it. Indeed I believe that he could not accept the interpretation of Caesar. Antoninus, the Emperor of Rome, was sensitive to the moods and temper of his times. He knew the kind

of world in which he lived. And knowing it, he maintained that from the moment you step into this kind of world yetzer ha-ra sholet, the evil temptation rules over you inexorably and invincibly. From the moment the child is born, he doesn't stand a chance of throwing off the shackles of evil. And so, Antoninus Caesar reads his predicament and the woeful predicament of Rome into the Bible, even as years later another Roman Emperor would commit his whole Empire to Christianity and its doctrine of Original Sin, the belief that sin and evil sholet, rule over man.

This is what Antoninus wanted to teach Rabbi -- but not what Rabbi wanted to learn from him! I imagine that Rabbi turned to Caesar and said to him, "No, I cannot agree. If you are willing to stay in the world of Rome, the world of debauchery, degeneracy, of Bacchanalian festivals, of drunken brawls and worship consisting of pagan orgies -- if this is the olam, the kind of world you create and are willing to court, that you are satisfied to bring your children into, then, Antoninus Caesar, you are right: yetzer ha-ra sholet, then evil reigns at the very pesach, the very door that leads into life. But if you are willing to use your imperial might and the influence of your exalted office to create our kind of world, our olam, the world of the Beth Hamidrash which is illuminated by tzenut and shalom bayit, a world where you can experience gaiety of the sort where you drink le'chayyim, to life, and not drink unto death, then the yetzer ha-ra, the evil temptation may exist, but it does not rule. In our kind of world evil is only rovetz - it crouches, like a ^{beast} ~~thief~~ which lies low: it may, ultimately, gain the upper hand and spring upon its prey and devour it. But, if we are careful and circumspect, then we can keep it in a crouching position and not allow it to get the better of us. In our world sin and evil are regarded as rovetz, crouching, and not as sholet, as ruling, as having already established their hegemony over mankind." Antoninus, regarding the world of Rome, sees evil as sholet, ^{as} ~~are~~ regnant. Rabbi, regarding the world of the Jew, interprets the biblical verse literally; sin is only rovetz, crouches at the door to life.

Concerning this matter of the kind of world in which we live, allow me to share with you a puzzling childhood experience which remains very clear in my memory.

About the second or third year after I began the study of Talmud, I remember my teacher mentioning a phrase which aroused by curiosity. Some of you may be acquainted with it. Talmudic discourse revolves about question and answer, problem and solution. A famous question, a popular problem or kashye, is frequently called a velts kashye - literally "a world's question." The problem may be introduced with the words der velt fregt, "the world asks." I remember walking home from school after this particular idiom was first used. And how puzzled I was! "The world asks". ~~asks~~ I noticed the policeman directing traffic at the corner. He is part of the world - yet is he really asking the same question of Maimonides that my teacher was? I noticed the housewife shopping at the butcher store. ⁱⁿ Were they so terribly distressed about the inconsistency ⁱⁿ Rashi? A mechanic was working on a parked automobile. ~~He~~ ^{seem} did not ~~seem~~ overly perplexed by the kashye raised by the Tosafot. My teacher tells me that "the world asks," and here I see a good part of the world that is not the least bit interested in my teachers' questions, problems, or proposed solutions!

It took me a little time to learn that whereas all of mankind comprises one big world, each of us lives in a number of little worlds. And these little worlds are almost self contained; there is ^{the} ~~a~~ world of finance, the world of teaching, the world of homemaking, the world of publishing, and countless other such. Above all, there is, for each of us, the world of a family, the world of a school, the world of our own community, the Jewish world, the religious world. It is very hard to remake the big one world; it is considerably easier to refashion the small world in which each of us moves. If you are a Roman in spirit, then you accept beforehand the ~~desperate~~ ^{desperate} and distressing fact that evil is sholet, all-mighty, and there is nothing you can do about creating your own little world of nobility in the big world that seems so dismally corrupt. And so you accept whatever is presented to you - a world in which Talmud, Maimonides, Rashi, the commentaries make no

difference whatever. But if you are Jewish in spirit, then you realize that even in the best of all little worlds sin is rovetz, it crouches, ever-present; but it by no means is omnipotent, it is not sholet. And so you must build up your little world in which Maimonides is of supremem importance, in which Rashi's world is law, in which a ^{Kashya} ~~question~~ presented by Tosafot is urgent.

Indeed, the world we live in depends upon the world we make for ourselves. Whether evil and suffering in this world will be rovetz or sholet depends upon each of us. For Judaism is not a fatalistic, Stoic religion. It believes in the freedom that G-d grants to man. Judaism, in the worlds of a contemporary theologian, Prof. Abraham Joshua Heschel, does not believe in Original Sin, but it does believe in Original Sinfullness. In the terms we have been using, Judaism believes that sin is rovetz, but not sholet.

And there is a tremendous difference between the interpretation of our biblical verse as given by Antoninus and as given by Rabbi. The young man who tries to excuse his moral deviations and his ethical laxity because of "friends", because this is the way of society, is a spiritual disciple of Antoninus. For were he the spiritual heir of Rabbi, he would know that you can choose^o your friends, and reshape your own society. He would remember that sin is only rovetz, and can be controlled, it is not sholet.

^{trains}

A father ~~claims~~ his son in his business. If he follows in the footsteps of the Roman Caesar he will teach him to be devious, to walk on that thin border line that separates integrity from dishonesty. He will succumb early to the thesis of Caesar, and teach his son that "in Rome, do what the Romans do." ^{But if he is inspired} ~~For this reason~~

~~used~~ by the Jewish spirit, by the teachings of Rabbi, then indeed he will teach his son how to beware of the sin which is rovetz, which crouches at every step; he will teach him to be aware of dishonesty, and how to defend himself. But he will not precondition him to a life of vice and corruption. He will teach him that you can be enthusiastic about business without dishonesty; competitive without being cut-throat; you can pursue profit without practicing plunder.

It is for this reason that I am annoyed at those of my fellow Orthodox Jews who sound so very pessimistic about the opportunities for Orthodoxy in contemporary America. It is their contention that we are the last of a dying breed, because you cannot possibly hope to create a truly Orthodox individual in the kind of society in which we live with its emphasis upon the material, the sensual, and the marketable. I vigorously deny this proposition. I believe with all my heart with all my soul that we can, must, and will shape our own kind of little world within the confines of the big world, a little world in the spirit of Rabbi Judah the Prince, in which danger may well lurk at every footstep, but will not establish an unchallenged tyranny over us.

la-pesach chatat rovetz. In the world Torah asks us to build for ourselves, our families, ~~for~~ our community, sin crouches at the door. We must not be cowards and close that door on civilization and society, isolating ourselves hermetically from the rest of the world. But we must first build for ourselves a better and nobler kind of world, a world of greater chinukh, a world in which parents will teach their children not by word but by example, a world in which the Synagogue will inspire its use by the proper combination of decorousness and warmth. And then, when we have created and fashioned for ourselves this kind of olam, this sort of world, will we be able to step across the threshold of the pesach and go into the larger world, the world of Antoninus Caesar, the world which has deluded itself into thinking that yetzer ha-ra sholet, and ~~there~~ we shall help the world of Rome tame the beast in the breath^S of mankind. Having learnt in our world that evil is only rovetz, we will teach the rest of mankind how to pull evil down from its reigning position as sholet, and reduce it to manageable proportions. For so did the Lord tell Cain, and so do we believe and so must we teach our fellow human beings: v'ata timshal bo - "and though mayest rule over it."