

THE SEARCH FOR GOODNESS

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In the second chapter of Pirkei Avot, "The Ethics of the Fathers," which we shall read this afternoon, two great sages of Israel each ask a question and give an answer about a matter of transcendent importance to ^{all} ~~each~~ of us. Both the questions and the answers are similar to each other; yet there are slight differences. These differences, I believe, prove significant, and I would like to explore some of their consequences with you.

The first statement is by Rabbi Judah the Prince, the famed redactor of the Mishnah, who is lovingly called "rabbi." "Rabbi" says, ezohi derekh yesharah she-yavor lo ha-adam, "what is the right way that a man ought to choose for himself?" And the gist of his answer is: tiferet -- that which is dignified for the one who does it, and is seemly and becoming in the eyes of his fellow men.

Rabban Yochanan b. Zakkai, several generations earlier, said to his students, ze'u u-re'u ezohi derekh torah she-yidbak bah ha-adam, "go out and see: what is the good way that a man ought to cling to?" And his students brought him several answers. One said ayin torah -- an unbegrudging generosity. Another said chaver tov -- being a good friend. A third answered shakhen tov -- neighborliness. A fourth replied roeh et ha-nolad -- foresight. But the answer that Rabban Yochanan b. Zakkai accepted because it includes all these four qualities is that brought by the fifth student: lev tov -- a good heart.

Both "Rabbi" and Rabban Yochanan b. Zakkai asked how a man ought to live his life. Their answers are not worlds apart. But they are not the same. ^{And} The differences are important. For the difference is that between an abstract and theoretical formulation on one hand, and an intensely personal, real question on the other.

Look at how they formulate the question. "Rabbi" says ezohi derekh yesharah -- what is the right way. Rabban Yochanan b. Zakkai asks ezohi derekh torah -- what is the good way. One emphasizes yesharah, rightness, and the

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other emphasizes to^Yrah, goodness. The question, ezohi derekh yesharah, is almost a Socratic question in a Platonic dialogue. The "right way" is basically a philosophic conception. It requires a critical and objective evaluation. It is something which preoccupies the mind.

Ezohi derekh to^Yrah, however, is a subjective issue which engages the whole personality; it involves the heart and soul as well as the mind. It is an existential challenge on which we stake our whole life, where the risks are not measured in terms of academic sophistication, but in terms of eternity won or eternity lost, meaning in life found or meaning in life discarded. Ezohi derekh yesharah is a question about religion. Ezohi derekh to^Yrah is the actual search of religion itself.

The verbs they use are also consistent with their lines of reasoning. "Rabbi" asks for the right way, she-yavor lo ha-adam, which a man ought to choose. When you are looking for the way that is yesharah -- impersonal, objective and abstract -- then you use the word yavor: an intellectual decision, an academic choice, the result of a cool and calm mental process.

But when you look for the way in life that is to^Yrah -- personal, subjective, of flesh and blood reality -- then you use the word yidbak: to cling, a spiritual cleaving ^{that} ~~which~~ involves the whole personality and life of the individual. Yavor, to choose, means -- even as the element of objectivity is referred to in our current language -- to be "detached." Yidbak, "to cling," however, means to be "attached."

Their answers continue along the same line. "Rabbi" stresses tiferet -- glory or dignity -- while Rabban Yochanan b. Zakkai stressed lev tov -- the good heart which includes the other qualities. Tiferet -- dignity or majesty -- is primarily an aesthetic quality, which is best expressed in decorous quiet and solemn silence. Lev tov, which includes the other attributes of goodness, is something which is tested and refined in the

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strenuous crucible of practical life when a man must grapple with real difficulties and emerge triumphant over them.

The question and answer of "Rabbi" is similar to that of an ivory tower schoolman, pondering the lofty issues of ethics. The question and answer of Rabban Yochanan b. Zakkai are those of a great human being caught up in the rush of life's activities and agonies, intensely searching in the debris of life's convulsive failures for the good way so that fallen man may rise again.

Indeed these two sainted sages of Israel each, in his question and answer, reflects his own life and times. "Rabbi" lived in "normal" times -- if there ever were such. His was an era of peace and relative prosperity. The Talmud speaks of "Rabbi" and his friendship with the Roman Emperor Antoninus, where only a generation or two earlier Jews had suffered horribly the persecutions of the Roman Hadrian. "Rabbi" was a man who combined Torah and material greatness. His was a time of calm and quiet. Rabban Yochanan b. Zakkai, ~~on the other hand~~ however, lived through a time of churban -- the destruction of the Holy Temple. He himself was barely saved by a ruse from the flaming city and the crumbling temple. His was an era of national cataclysm, radical change, uncertain transition. He and his contemporaries were beset by ~~an~~ unprecedented tensions. It was a time when life cries out demanding not calm, philosophic discourse, but ~~needs~~ answers that strike to the core of a man's heart.

And the entire departure of one from the other can be summed up in two very small words that we slurred over in our original quotation. "Rabbi" simply asks and answers; that is all. Rabban Yochanan b. Zakkai asks and answers -- but he introduces his statements with these two words: tze'u u-re'u -- go out and see, go out and search, go out and look.

What he meant to tell his students and us is: in a time of national catastrophe, when the glorious past seems so distant, the present so oppressive, the future so grim, mere questions and answers are insufficient, and mere

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formulations of "the right way" are inadequate. In times of this sort there must be tze'u u-re'u -- a search not for philosophic propositions, but for flesh and blood living models of Jewish behavior. You must not only define the right way; you must see before your eyes a representative of the good way. One can choose the right way; but he can cling to the good way only if he "goes out and sees." That is why our rabbis taught us aseh lekha rav, that a man should always seek a rabbi, a teacher. That is why they instructed us gadol shimushah yoter mi-limudah torah she-bi'khetav, that experiencing the personality of the teacher is greater in value than the information he imparts verbally. That is why the entire Jewish tradition has raised the rank of torah she-be'al peh, the oral law, to that of torah she-bi'khetav, the written law, or even higher. For Scripture is essentially a book; one can learn from it without the presence of a second personality. One can be inspired by it to the point where he "chooses" the "right" way. But the personal experience and depth is lacking. The oral law, in its original sense, cannot be transmitted by a book alone. It requires two personalities meeting each other in dialogue. The student must have a teacher who will transmit to him the great oral tradition of our faith. In that manner he learns not only the values that can be articulated, but those values that can only be experienced. He must see before his eyes, tze'u u-re'u, a living representative of the cumulative tradition of Israel. He must be engaged not only by ideas, but by examples; not only by words, but by ways of life -- so that he will not only choose the right way, but cling and cleave to the good way. And that is why too, in this morning's Sidra, when G-d promises Moses that He will ordain seventy elders into Prophecy so that they will help him lead the children of Israel and thus relieve him of his burden, G-d tells Moses that their initiations into Prophecy will only be in his, Moses', presence. Ve-yityatzvu itekha -- let them stand next to you, Moses, at the moment that I place My Spirit upon them. Let them know that Prophecy is not just a good-

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natured personal hallucination; but that it means following in the footsteps of the greatest of all prophets. To be a prophet in Israel, one must first abide by the dictum of tze'u u-re'u -- emulation of the great Moses.

My dear friends, I need not spell out for you the consequences of this theme relevant for our times. We live in a day that is closer, in nature and spirit, to that of Rabban Yochanan b. Zakkai than that of "Rabbi." Our day is one of radical change and ceaseless tensions. The State of Israel finds itself surrounded by enemies. Judaism, despite the new rays of hope, still faces an uphill struggle. The world is tottering on the brink of disaster. Our people over the world are first shaking off the effects of churban, of unprecedented destruction.

At a time of this sort let us consider our children. It is not sufficient to talk to them about what is right. We must show them how to be good. We must understand that our Jewish schools, especially our day schools, must not be satisfied merely with giving Jewish information, leaving it to each individual student to practice our faith as he sees fit. That is falsifying the mission of a Jewish school. A school must teach the children how to live the good life, and how to cling to it, by presenting to the students teachers who will be worthy of the advice of Rabban Yochanan b. Zakkai: tze'u u-re'u. At home every parent must remember that he is also a teacher to his child. You cannot discuss honesty; you must show it. You cannot indoctrinate love; you must be its example. Piety for a child will only come about when he has the living ~~example~~ *model* of his parents. And no child will develop a love for books and literature and the intellect unless he sees his parents spending their leisure hours in just such activities.

Not only with regard to our children but with regard to ourselves too, we must reemphasize that sacred theme. You are all aware of the historic news of the capture of one of the greatest Nazi monsters who was found by intelligence

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agents and spirited off to the State of Israel. We were all thrilled by this news, as well as agonized by the memories it brought back to our consciousness. Two schools of thinking have developed about the disposition of this case. One is that vengeance be taken and that justice be done. The other, indulged in by American professors of law and English and American editorial writers, is that Israel show mercy for the murderer; that his guilt not be assumed before the trial; that in any case, he be given a life sentence not the death penalty.

My, how easy it is for professors of law and editorial writers who have never known the experience of churban to speak with such calm objectivity about a matter that still strikes terror in every Jewish heart! Perhaps to be consistent with the framework of Anglo-American law, the "right" way that Israel ought now to "choose" is that this criminal be treated like every other criminal. But the only ones who can afford such an attitude are those who during the war did not experience the horror and brutality and merciless cruelty that Israel did; those ^{who} ~~that~~ during the war suffered at the most from a lack of surplus of gasoline or sugar. Those people, however, who experienced the bitter profound depth of destruction, they know that this murderer simply is on a different level of experience from any other; that the category we deal with here is wholly other than the normal categories of jurisprudence. For this man has not killed an individual or individuals; he has destroyed a people -- almost destroyed a people. Normal Anglo-Saxon law is simply inadequate to deal with his case, because his crime is unprecedented in the annals of the human race.

What then shall we do? The answer is: "tze'u u-re'u." And if we seek for an example of a giant in Jewish history, we shall discover that the capture of this monster is not unprecedented, although the enormity of his crime is. Once before in Jewish history was an arch enemy of our people brought to justice before a Jewish leader in a Jewish nation. Agag, King of Amalek, was captured by King Saul. He had been instructed by G-d through the prophet Samuel to

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destroy the king and do justice. But Saul spared Agag -- and therefore lost his own kingdom! When Agag was brought before the prophet Samuel, that highly moral, dedicated individual who had devoted his life to G-d from his earliest youth, we read va-yeshaset Shamuel et Agag lifnei Ha-Shem -- and Samuel put Agag to death before the Lord.

The prime minister of Israel is right when he maintains it is the second case where the arch enemy of Israel has been apprehended, that his trial is on a different order from those normal in any democratic society such as Israel. His trial will not be to determine his guilt; unfortunately that is only too well known. It will be to demonstrate to the world the cruelty to which man can sink, and the passive cruelty which even democratic nations allow themselves when they saw what was occurring and kept their peace. Never mind suggestions made by certain Zionist leaders that jurists of other nations be invited to participate in the tribunal. Those nations which stood aside and kept quiet while Jews were being murdered in the millions have no right to join now in judging the beast responsible for these horrendous crimes. They who stayed aside before, let them stay aside now. We shall follow the example of Samuel. Let not the rest of the world permit itself the luxury of criticizing the Government of Israel at this point.

In our own lives, let each of us strive to search, to cling to the good way. Like Rabban Yochanan b. Zakkai let us practice the life of the good heart. Then, with the help of G-d, our world will become the kind of place more like to that of "Rabbi" -- one of peace, prosperity and normality -- when we, like he, shall be able to seek the right way by choosing a life of tiferet, the dignity that always adheres externally to him who has developed the lev tov, the good heart internally.