

"THE VARIETIES OF VULGARITY"

According to tradition, the terrible plague of tzaraat (usually mistranslated as leprosy) is occasioned by one of three sins. Amongst them is that of gassut, to which we shall devote this morning's talk.

Gassut means thickness, heaviness, and therefore crudity or rudeness or obtuseness. In a word, gassut is vulgarity.

It does not require unusual wisdom or perceptiveness to observe that our society suffers from an over-abundance of vulgarity. We need but look about ourselves to notice the obvious lack of refinement and delicacy and sensitivity. Indeed, not only does gassut lead to nega'im, but today vulgarity itself is a veritable plague.

Modern life, for all its sophistication, tends towards vulgarity. Possibly it is a result of our liberal, democratic tradition. Any democratizing movement tends on the one hand to bring culture and the "finer things of life" to the masses of the people, but on the other hand also lowers standards and debases the coin of culture. This is true of language which becomes vulgarized, and of music and art which tend to deteriorate with the increase in mass education. Perhaps the preponderance of vulgarity is the result of instantaneous electronic communication, so that an eruption of vulgarity in any one part of the world, especially America, is

immediately broadcast by satellite to all parts of the world which regard such conduct as the norm of behavior.

But certainly, vulgarity, as the very word indicates, tends towards commonness; it spreads like the plague. Gassut is itself a species of nega'im. It is not because a thing is common or popular that, by itself, makes it vulgar. We are not and should not be snobbish. But vulgarity, as an inadequate conception of the art of living, simply happens to characterize most people; for the art of living is one that is not east to master.

Let us be more analytic. We can, I believe, discern three varieties of gassut of vulgarity.

Lexicographers (see Kohut on the Arukh) tell us that the word gass usually appears in conjunction with one of three words: lev, ruah, and daat, that is, heart, spirit, and knowledge or mind. Using these three compound terms, we can identify three varieties of vulgarity.

Gassut ha-lev is emotional impudence or grossness, or simply: arrogance.

Gassut ha-ruah is the crudity of the spirit, or spiritual insensitivity.

Gassut ha-daat is obtuseness of the mind, or the failure of intellectual discrimination.

The first of these is arrogance, gassut ha-lev, or emotional vulgarity. This species of vulgarity dulls a man's sense of humor and makes him lose all perspective about his place in the world. He cannot distinguish between self-worth and inflated bom-

bast, whereby only he is important and no one else is. The man of gassut ha-lev — vulgarity, is so confident of his own superiority that he considers himself part of the "in crowd," and will be seen with no one else; therefore God brings upon him the plague of tzaraat which requires that he be banished to hutz le'mahaneh, outside the camp. The man who wanted to be only "in" is now "out," literally an outcast... Indeed, God refuses to abide such a man in His own mahaneh, His very world, for the Lord says concerning such a man: ein ani ve'hu yekholin la-dur ba-olam (Sotah 5a), the world is too small for the both of us; he and I cannot co-exist in one world. This makes sense. The arrogant man, the man of emotional vulgarity, suffers from a swollen ego, one which displaces not only fellow human beings from the scene of his existence, but which tends to push God Himself out of the world. His punishment therefore is a just retaliation: God pushes such a man out of His world...

But the bluster of such vulgarity of heart, as we know today, usually is a cover for an inner void, an inner emptiness. The man who suffers from what appears to be an excess of superiority usually is painfully aware of his inferiority of which he is ashamed.

This, I believe, is at the bottom of the insight of the Talmud which tells us that a man of gassut ha-lev, or arrogance, hashuv lifnei Hakadosh Barukh Hu ke'iluv avad avodah zara (Sotah 4b), is considered by the Holy One as if he had worshiped an idol. This is the accepted reading in our text of the Talmud. But a variant, recorded by the disciple of Maimonides, R. Joseph b. Judah Ibn Aknin in his Sefer Hamusar, says that such a person is considered by the

Holy One k'avodah zarah atzmah -- as if he himself were a veritable idol! An idol has all the appearances of life, but is really dead. The man of arrogance and bombast and vanity tries to impress you with his superiority, but such superiority is indeed non-existent. We recall what King David said about the idols: einayim la-hem ve'lo yiru, aznayim lahem ve'lo yishme'u, they have eyes but they do not see, they have ears but they do not hear, they have noses but they do not smell. The man who suffers from the vulgarity of vanity has all the apparent appurtenances of personality, but none of the underlying reality. This kind of vulgarian appears sociable, when he is really gathering gossip with which he will be able to derogate his fellow man and enhance his own ego. He appears to be engaged in friendly conversation, but he is really prattling in a monologue, for he is concerned only with that which aggrandizes his own self. He appears to look at you and to listen to you, but: "they have eyes and see not, ears and hear not" -- his ego blinds him to anything save that which concerns his own welfare. He appears to be polite -- but his "please" is nothing more than servile begging and his "thank you" is an insincere down payment on favors he is yet to request. The vain man is indeed vulgar!

The second variety of vulgarity is gassut ha-ruah, spiritual obtuseness or insensitivity. In a word, it is the failure to appreciate the relations of values, to understand that all values are limited in time and place, that at the right occasion they are

completely qualified and proper, but that at the wrong time and place they are grotesque and absurd. Therefore, the man of spiritual vulgarity suffers from distortion of values.

Indeed, what inspired the theme of this sermon is a particular species of spiritual vulgarity which reappears annually and never fails to irritate me with a special form of abhorrence. I refer to the advertisements which regularly appear in our press every year before Passover, advising us to hurry and make our reservations in the various resort hotels where, we are told, a Passover vacation can be combined with a marvelous night club; where a famous cantor will entertain us at the same time that great bands will give us fun; where double choirs and heated indoor swimming pools all go together. Often I pray that these tasteless and insipid advertisements would remove one line from their text: "Dietary laws observed"...

I admit that because of them I am embarrassed before Gentiles, I am embarrassed before the Almighty, I am embarrassed before my very self.

A higher form of spiritual vulgarity afflicts American Jews, especially Orthodox ones, who misconstrue the very nature of the synagogue, who believe that it is a mark of honor and distinction to act in the synagogue as one acts in his very home, for it indicates that we are "at home" in the precincts of the House of God. Thus, we violate every norm of conduct that the Halakhah demands of us in the synagogue, the standards of reverence for a holy place, mora mikdash, and we excuse our irreverence by "heimishkeit" -- a fabrication and a

distortion of the Halakhah and of all Judaism. It is a species of spiritual vulgarity to subvert the nature of the synagogue by being long on conversation and short on dress in it. Such empty prattle and constant chatter is a vulgarization of the spirit of holiness of a synagogue; and revealing too much of one's self because of fashion, reveals as well a short-sightedness and a lack of spiritual and intellectual integrity which should impel us to leave such fashions outside the synagogue.

A still more subtle form of gassut ha-ruah is the whole American Jewish attitude to the synagogue. American Jews often consider the "temple" the center of all of Judaism. Now, a synagogue certainly is important. But it is never by any means more important than Shabbat or kashruth or family purity or ethical relations, and especially not more than the study of Torah. In Jewish law the academy of study is of greater sanctity than the house of prayer. I have always maintained that religious Jews in Israel have much to learn from American Orthodoxy, for we have undergone certain kinds of experiences of modernity, and Israelis can very well benefit by the lessons we have derived from these experiences. But in one sense we have much to learn from Israeli Jews. For in Israel, once a man is a truly committed religious Jew, he understands much better the value of the study of Torah than we do. In Israeli synagogues, for all their faults, you will find people attending lectures in Talmud and Torah with much greater regularity and greater numbers that you will in America.

(Another subtle form of spiritual vulgarity, of gassut ha-ruah, deserves our attention. This too deals with the exaggeration of values when they are out of place. There is a remarkable statement in the Talmud: siman le'gassut ha-ruah aniyut (Shab. 33a), -- poverty is a symptom of spiritual vulgarity. Did the Rabbis really mean to be so harsh on poor people? What they intended, I submit, is this: the poor man is afflicted not only by being economically deprived, and financially disadvantaged. An even greater tragedy derives from the psychological fact that inwardly he begins to attribute extravagant powers to money. If only I had money, he begins to believe, all my problems would be solved. Money becomes to him not something to attain in order to relieve certain of his difficulties, but it grows in his imagination into a veritable savior. This distortion of the value of money is a symptom of the disease of poverty, and it reveals itself in this spiritual vulgarity. The same is true not only for money but for social status or any other value.)

The third variety of vulgarity is the intellectual form, gassut ha-daat, the failure to discriminate between ideas, things, and people; the inability to comprehend conceptual subtleties.

As you know, on Saturday nights and on holiday nights, we add a paragraph in our Amidah prayer in which we speak of the separation or havdalah between the sacred and the profane, between week day and Sabbath or holiday. This particular passage is included in the fourth blessing, that in which we ask God for the gift of

knowledge and intelligence. Why so? Because, the Talmud answers, im ein daat havdalah minayin -- without knowledge, there can be no havdalah, no discrimination, no differentiation. The major function of intelligence is analytic: to distinguish between various ideas. The failure to make such distinctions is, therefore, a form of gassut ha-daat, a thickness of the mind, an obtuseness of intellect, or conceptual vulgarity.

The most distressing recent example of such gassut ha-daat comes to us from the exalted chambers of the United Nations. I refer to the protest in the press in the UN against a recent parade by the State of Israel through old Jerusalem in celebration of Israel's 20th anniversary as a state.

Now, one may legitimately question if this is the best way for Israel to celebrate its Independence Day. I confess that I have serious doubts as to whether it is in the spirit of Jewish history and Israeli tradition to celebrate such a great event exclusively by a military parade and showing off tanks and jet airplanes. I suspect that there is more that can be done which conforms better to the spirit of Israel and World Jewry.

Moreover, objective editorialists have a right to criticize Israel on the grounds that such a parade may have jeopardized the peace, although I totally disagree and feel that nothing of the sort is true.

However, has the UN the right to criticize Israel and "deplore" this parade? And has Mr. U Thant the moral right to be as

active as he was in objecting to the parade? Where was Mr. U Thant when Nasser massed his troops on the Sinai desert just about one year ago? Why did we hear no protest from the Secretary General of the UN when Nasser ordered UN troops to be pulled out of Sharm el Sheikh? Why was he silent when Jordanian artillery rained fire and death on Jerusalem? Why is he and the entire UN silent when the El Fatah terrorists infiltrate into Israel to kill men, women, and children? Can the UN not distinguish between ^{terrorism and} a peaceful parade, which will be held -- indeed, was held -- without the Damascus-type incendiary rhetoric and terrorism aimed at killing indiscriminately?

Clearly, this is a case of gassut ha-daat, of vile intellectual vulgarity. And, of course, it is at its worst not a failure of intellect as much as a willful intellectual obfuscation that issues from what at bottom is gassut ha-ruah, spiritual vulgarity. For the UN has become a convention of people who speak in moral categories and intend only political issues. Perhaps it ought to be primarily a place of political confrontation; but it is vulgar to clothe political stratagems in moral terms.

Vulgarity -- whether emotional, spiritual, or intellectual -- is indeed a plague which infects young and old, in places high and low, in circles Jewish and non-Jewish. In this sense of its widespread character, gassut is really vulgar: it is common, it is ordinary.

No wonder that every morning, almost immediately upon arising, we ask God to let us be popular and respected and acclaimed

by all those whom we meet: u-tenenu ha-yom u-ve'khol yom le'hen
u-leshessed u-le'rahamim be'einekha u-ve'einei kol ro'einu, give us
this day and every day the charm and grace and favor in Thy eyes
and in the eyes of all those who behold us. In a word, we want to
be accepted by the masses.

But this involves a danger. If we are going to appeal to
kol ro'einu, to all those whom we meet, if we are going to pander
to the taste and judgment of the lowest common -- the most common! --
denominator, then we indeed may very well become the victims of
vulgarity!

Therefore, we immediately continue our prayers: may it be
Thy will, O Lord my God and God of my fathers, she'tatzilenu ha-yom
u-ve'khol yom me'azei panim u-me'azut panim...u-mi-pega ra..., that
You save this day and every day from impudent people and from im-
pudence within ourselves... from any evil and disconcerting confron-
tation, whether with Jew or non-Jew. In a word, spare us, O Lord,
from the bitter encounter with vulgarity -- in any form and manner,
in any variety or of any people.

For the plague of vulgarity, in all its varieties, is the
most pernicious of all.

And the only way of avoiding it is to remember that while
there is nothing wrong in wanting to be popular and accepted and
acclaimed by all the circles of our acquaintance, it is still more
important to strive for favor ~~for~~ be'einekha rather than ~~for~~ u-ve'einei
kol ro'einu, in the eyes of God more than in the eyes of man.