

"NEVER AGAIN -- THE J.D.L. AND THE ESTABLISHMENT"

In recent months, the exploits of the Jewish Defense League have filled our front pages and have insinuated themselves into the forefront of Jewish concern. With the passage of time, the official denunciations have become sharper and shriller, but popular support seems to have grown greater for the J.D.L. It is easy to see why many Jews identify with them -- their reactions are instinctively Jewish and they respond to Jewish needs, even though their use of reason and reasonableness is quite another question. Whatever judgment we may have of this organization's overall value -- whether plus or minus, good or bad -- it has performed a service in dramatizing certain fundamental issues in Jewish life.

Permit me to illustrate this by way of a remarkable commentary of the Mechilta on a verse in the Song recorded in today's Sidra. On the words

זֶה ה' אֱלֹהֵי, "This is my God," the Mechilta says:

וְהָיָה כִּי יִרְאֶה אֶת ה' וְיִסְתַּכֵּף וְיִפְּלוּ אֵלָיו, "A mere maid-servant on the shores of the Red Sea was able to see more than Ezekiel and the other prophets." The lowliest of the Israelites who experienced the Exodus had, as it were, a direct vision of God -- "this is my God" -- whereas the Prophets perceived Him in symbols and "riddles."

Why is this so? And what do the Rabbis mean to say by this?

I suggest that they offered a commentary on human nature in general, and also a subtle, implied criticism of the Prophets.

During the normal course of humdrum life, only the highly perceptive and

intelligent exercise foresight and vision and can see the truly great issues, those that are real but not yet apparent. However, the hoi polloi, the ordinary masses, go on unaware of that which is happening quietly and imperceptibly. The people sleep while the Prophet dreams. The people yawn, while the Prophet cries out and demands and protests. But in the extreme moments of history -- whether moments of miraculous redemption or moments of critical danger -- the prophet, so accustomed to visions and the extraordinary, to hyperbole and the supernatural, is sometimes insensitive. He is too high in heaven to see what lies before him on earth. And here the Prophet may sometimes see the issues in startling clarity.

On the Russian Jewry problem, the great Establishment organizations, the leadership of American Jewry, went along largely unmoved. They were busy with other weighty issues -- with Israel, with American Jewry, with world concerns. But ordinary Jews, unaccustomed to other great matters and unencumbered by such responsibilities, responded intuitively: students, young people -- and the Jewish Defense League. The rank and file, exclaiming It's time, this is a time for great action, was ahead of the Establishment leadership. The maid-servants, in an intuitive flash of cognition, saw what the prophets failed to see. Yet, this having been said, it is important to remember that Ezekiel and the other Prophets remain the text books of our faith. We read Ezekiel, we chant Haftorahs from Isaiah, we draw inspiration from Amos. Nothing, except for the words zeh Eli, survives of the visions of the maid-servants from the shores of the Red Sea.

The crisis, gut-reaction of the maid-servant has its place -- but it is

a very limited place, and is only of momentary duration. Woe to the people who make a cult of a maid-servant's wisdom! The perpetuation of hysteria is neither prophetic nor profitable. It is irresponsible.

I have no doubt that the J.D.L., at least its rank and file, are possessed of good intentions -- the noblest ones. But, as George Bernard Shaw taught us, the road to a certain place distinguished by an excess of heat is paved with good intentions.

Moreover, the J.D.L. came too late with too little. They are Johnny-Come-Lately's on the scene of Russian Jewry, and have harvested much of the credit of the hard work done by others. Activism on behalf of Soviet Jewry was pursued by other groups throughout the world before the J.D.L. ever thought of it or ever was heard from. Young people, gathered, together under the banner of the Students' Struggle for Soviet Jewry, have long devoted their best efforts to this cause. From my personal experience with the New York Conference of Soviet Jewry I can tell you that, hampered as we were, we were able to assemble ten thousand people for a Simhat Torah celebration on behalf of Russian Jews and twenty-five to thirty thousand at a rally during Passover, and were able to produce some educational work on the subject. Certainly this is more impressive than the fifty or one hundred people gathered by J.D.L. The pity is that the media give more prominence to loudness than to substance. It is a normal advantage of extremists and a handicap of moderates: violence gets the headlines.

I am generally against violence; but not invariable and absolutely so, neither as a Jew -- who remembers the revolution called the Exodus, the

rebellion we celebrate on Chanukah, and the violent War of Liberation of 1948 -- nor as an American, who is proud of the War of Independence of 1776 and who remembers Thomas Jefferson's dictum that a revolution is good every once in a while in order to reestablish the proper priorities. But I am most certainly against violence when it is unnecessary or senseless or self-defeating.

We cannot afford the dramatics and histrionics of the J.D.L. We cannot allow ourselves the luxury of violence when we are dealing with new] 1950, with three million lives of Russian Jews which hang in the balance. It is simply not true that the extremist tactics of the J.D.L. are the only alternative to shameful silence and ignominious passivity.

I am not overly worried about public 1950, about destroying or distorting the image of the good Jewish citizen who is bookish and civil and gentlemanly and therefore may be attacked and destroyed with impunity.

I am not overly worried -- but I am worried. Why? Because the purpose of activism is clear: to change the policy of the U.S.S.R. with regard to Jews. The U.S.S.R. is sensitive to world public opinion, not to Jewish public opinion. And the J.D.L., with its extremist tactics and antics, jeopardizes support we

may get from public opinion of the rest of the world, especially at a time when world public opinion is generally -- and wrongly -- arrayed against Israel for its insistence on its policies at the present time.

World opinion is the only lever with which we may yet dislodge the Russian policy with regard to Jews. Activism was meant to produce results for Russian Jews by influencing world opinion. It was not meant to provide a satisfying psychological outlet for Jewish frustrations.

This is a time that we must be prophets -- not maid-servants.

But my main question is: why has the J.D.L. captured the imagination of so many good Jews and galvanized so many young people one would normally not expect to join their ranks?

That it has seized upon good issues is one answer. That we live in an age of revolutionary spirit is another. That the young are generally more militant than the older, is yet another answer. Yet I feel that something else is involved, something of the greatest importance to the rest of the community. The J.D.L. will sooner or later decline and vanish. But the lesson must remain and must be learned.

That lesson was taught early in Jewish history, and, it is universally and eternally relevant. Today, as for the past three Sidrot, we read of God hardening the heart of Pharaoh:

אברהם אלהים יסדו יי, Pharaoh was forced by God

to act tough to the Jews. But the question always bothers us, and it was asked long ago in the history of Jewish Bible exegesis: Does not this deny the principle of free will upon which all the Torah is based?

To understand the answer it is good to remember what the Midrash Tanhuma points out: that the first five plagues came upon Pharaoh because his heart was hard; there is no mention of God hardening it. The last five plagues were caused because God hardened Pharaoh's heart. In other words, in the beginning Pharaoh himself decided to be tough and stubborn, whereas later on it was God who forced him into that direction. Maimonides therefore offers the following answer: in the beginning Pharaoh was free to choose one way or the other. But because he consistently chose the way of evil and wickedness, then as an עניש for his חטא, as a punishment for his sin, he lost the quality of חופּ, of free choice.

In non-theological language we might put it this way: A man starts with free choice, with control over events, with initiative. But if he makes the wrong decisions or no decisions at all, time and again, then eventually he must lose control over the course of events, and his choices are made for him by habit and circumstance. Wrong choices made out of free will eventually become wrong choices

made by themselves or by others.

Pharaoh was a ^ל 300, hard hearted -- and the word "heart" in Biblical Hebrew refers not so much to emotions as it does to will and intellect. Pharaoh was stubborn and wrongheaded. After five fatal miscalculations he lost the ability to shape events. He had, by his brutality and stupidity, escalated matters beyond repair, and found himself faced with a full scale revolution.

That this happens as an aspect of human nature is evident to all with experience. Parents know that it can happen with children. It happens in society. Politically, for instance, we recall that Bevin had several options of satisfying relatively minor claims of Jews in Palestine. At one point, had he allowed 100,000 Jewish refugees to come to Palestine, there would never have been a Jewish state. But he was a ^ל 300, and as a result he lost his options and alternatives, and the State was declared despite him.

This happened to our Jewish organizational leadership in our days. It happened, for instance, in recent years when the deterioration of Jewish neighborhoods, the rise in crime and violence, caused the young and the wealthy Jews to flee to the suburbs, whereas the old and poor were left in their old neighborhoods. There they were exposed to terrible dangers of violence, of theft, of murder. The Jewish Establishment paid very little attention to

them. They were ²⁵ 320. Great organizations were busy with problems of integration in the South and with getting Jews into country clubs in the North, with dialogues with Christians and with fighting Federal Aid to private schools. They had no time for poor Jews in old neighborhoods. They offered no response to their own constituencies. That is how a Jewish Defense League first grew up, an organization without discipline or responsibility to the great national Jewish groups, but one which responded to a genuine Jewish need.

And this occurred again with Russian Jewry. With all that we have done -- and it is far more than the J.D.L. can even dream of -- it has been woefully inadequate. In essence, the real Establishment largely ignored the problem of Russian Jewry. The American Conference for Soviet Jewry, the umbrella group for American Jewry dealing with this problem, has an almost non-existent budget, only one professional, and only one paid secretary. It lives by the largesse of the big organizations, who are usually loathe to part with either funds or public relation coups.

The New York Conference for Soviet Jewry is composed of some thirty-four New York groups -- from Hadassah and American Jewish Congress to Jewish Women's Clubs and American Jewish Committee, Bnai Brith and the religious groups, the New York Board of Rabbis and the Jewish War Veterans. It is the organization on behalf

of Russian Jewry in the largest Jewish metropolis in the world. But its chairman last year had to spend most of his time not planning new and effective programs, but knocking, hat in hand, at the Board rooms of the American Jewish Committee and the American Jewish Congress, at Bnai Brith and Hadassah, and countless others, in order to make up a shamefully small budget in order to do what is really their job, our job, so that never again will any tyrant or any people ever be able to threaten the lives of Jews without hearing at least a roar of protest from their brethren.

Time and again, the Establishment was warned: ineffectual action both fails to move the Russian Government and opens the field here at home to extremists. Only last week fifty youngsters picketed a meeting of the President's Club in order to protest the meagerness of their support of the American Conference for Soviet Jewry. But throughout, the response has been frustrating. They have been ~~of 300~~ though, unlike Moses, not ~~1000~~ 300, for their responses are usually quite glib. And so, when responsible groups drag their feet, irresponsible ones raise their heads.

Of course, the Establishment organizations have good intentions -- but so does the Jewish Defense League. And when the prophets are silent, the maid-servants take over leadership.

Of course I am not preaching an anti-Establishment doctrine. We are all of us, more or less, in one measure or another, part of

the so-called Establishment. But I want to improve it -- by speaking to a congregation with influence in high circles. I want to help these organizations get rid of their quality of ^{of} 300, of their sluggishness and their confusion of priorities.

It is not too late -- not yet. We have been embarrassed by extremists, although that is not tragic. But our efforts for Soviet Jewry may be compromised by the excessive zeal of these extremists -- and that is tragic.

So let us of the Jewish community learn this lesson clearly:

Never again must the concerns of ordinary Jews be treated as secondary to the concerns of other groups.

Never again must the genuine needs of the Jewish people become subservient to public relations considerations.

Never again must desperately needed unity in the ranks of the American Jewish community be disturbed and diminished by organizational rivalry.

Never again must we be so preoccupied by business as usual that we miss the boat on the great crises affecting Klal Yisrael.

Now is not the time for the House of Israel to be led by maid-servants. Ephemeral ecstasies are not the stuff of true leadership. The flash-in-the-pan may illuminate momentarily -- but it cannot become the "light unto the nations" for all eternity.

No, not the simple excitement and sloganeering of the maid-servants, not the words "Never Again" whispered threateningly into a telephone, or shouted angrily through a car window as a missile is hurled out -- but the Jewish "Never Again" as proclaimed by the true prophets is what ought to concern us.

Listen to how the same Prophet, Ezekiel, rises above his initial failure, meets his criticism, and how in Chapter 36 he proclaims his "Never Again":

ואמר בן אדם בלבה אל הרי ישראל ואמר הרי ישראל שמעו דבר ה'

"And thou, O son of man, prophesy to the mountains of Israel and say: Mountains of Israel, hear ye the word of the Lord."

כן כה אמר ה' אלוקים אלז צמחתי אלך יד אל עמל חל"ל אשר עבדו חסדיק דמה כעיומת ישראל

"Therefore said the Lord God: I raise My hand in oath that those nations which surround you roundabout and seek to destroy you, they shall forever bear the burden of their own disgrace."

ואמר הרי ישראל... ורבותי עליכם אדם כל בית ישראל כועה

"And you, O mountains of Israel... I will increase your population, I will bring back to you from all corners of the earth the fullness of the House of Israel."

אנישבו הערים ותרבותי אלכם כדמותיכם

"And your cities will be repopulated and your ruins will be rebuilt... and I will resettle you upon your land as in the days of your ancient glory"...

אשר לא יאמר עוד
על ישראל

"Never again will I permit the vilification of the nations to be heard against you."

אשר לא יאמר עוד
על ישראל

"Never again will you have to bear the shame wished upon you by the peoples of the world."

אשר לא יאמר עוד
על ישראל

"Never again will your people Israel be driven from the mountains of Israel."

אשר לא יאמר עוד
על ישראל

"These are the words of the Lord God."

Such are the words of the Lord God -- as spoken not by a maid-servant but by a true prophet of the Lord.

This is Jewish leadership.