

"ON KEEPING IN A DITHER"

It may seem unusual that, in an age of anxiety when people complain of the lack of peace and serenity, a congregation should be urged from the pulpit to keep in a constant dither. Yet, that is our message, for that is how Rashi interpreted the first verse of this morning's Sedra. Our portion opens with the words im be'chukotai telekhu v'et mitzvotai tishmoru, "if you will walk in My statutes, and keep My commandments," then blessing will follow. The word telekhu, which means "you will go" or "you will walk," captured the imagination of our rabbis. Would not "obey" or "follow" have been more appropriate? Therefore they explained, as quoted by Rashi, She'tihyu amelim ba-Torah, "you must toil, or labor, in Torah." The spirit of the Jew must never vegetate. It must always go, grow, advance. The Sidra presents a challenge to moral activism.

In World War II some British scientists were working on an anti-aircraft computing device. They included in it a small vibrating member which kept the whole mechanism in a constant state of minor but rapid vibration. This they called the "dither." The theory was simple enough: if the parts are constantly in slight motion, then the whole device is alert, is on the jump, is ready to respond promptly to the earliest beginnings of forces seeking to move the gun, and preventing any sluggish delay caused by static friction. (See editorial in Science, August 7, 1959.)

So that when the Jewish tradition bids us to be amelim ba-Torah, it is telling us that we need a certain amount of dither in our spiritual and mental mechanisms. It wants us not to become intellectually and religiously sluggish, to make sure that mental static friction does not dominate.

Here indeed is a valuable piece of advice indispensable for success in any field of endeavor. Whether in business or the professions, in intellectual efforts

or social relations, great achievements are possible only when one is always on the alert, in a dither. What an old successful businessman once told his young and ambitious employee is true not only for the world of business but for the life of the spirit as well: in order to succeed you must jump when opportunity knocks; but since you do not know when opportunity is knocking, you must always jump. So, Torah cannot be learned and the life of Torah cannot be established unless one advances every day. Im yom ta'azvenu, yomayim ya'azveka - if you ignore Torah for one day, you will lose two days' worth.

That is why, in Jewish literature, two terms are used to distinguish man from angel. Although on an absolute scale, the angel is a more spiritual and holier creature, nevertheless man is deemed superior, for man is a mehalekh, one who is constantly going, one who has the ability to progress and advance, whereas the angel is regarded as an omed, one who is stationary, and who because of a lack of free will can never go or advance beyond his set position. So that when man is a mehalekh, when he keeps in a dither, he rises higher than the angels; when he fails to advance and grow, he sinks to something less than human.

The founder of psychoanalysis expressed, in this sense, a fundamental Jewish viewpoint when he maintained that civilization is advanced by those who express its discontents, by those who are restless and dissatisfied and strive for new conquests and insights. At the same time, he pointed out that the desire for relief of tension, when driven to an extreme, can be unhealthy - for the ultimate release of all human tensions is death. Mehalekh stands for life and civilization, omed for their cessation.

Of course, this does not mean that one ought to multiply the trivial tensions and daily problems that plague us and disturb our peace. Anxieties over supporting your family and paying your bills, worries over market conditions and meeting payrolls, vague fears of ill health and the specter of dread disease, tenseness over unhappy homes and wayward children -- these are not the "dither" that the Torah recommends. These can shake a person to the core of his soul without making him grow at all; they distract his mind with fruitless agitation. But when someone complains to me because of the demands made upon his time and energy by charitable organizations, by working for a synagogue or yeshiva, for U.J.A. or a hospital, by books to be read and lectures to be attended -- ¹when I confess that I am without compassion, and I smile inwardly and say to myself, biz hundert und tzvantzig yahr. For such problems keep one alive; in fact, they make life worth living. This is what we were created for - to be a mehalekh. Only by being "on the go" will we "get places!"

This Jewish outlook is in direct contrast to that of the ancient Greek philosophers. For instance, Plato envisioned two worlds. One is the ordinary world in which we live and which he called "the world of becoming." This is the world of activity, of change. He regarded this "world of becoming" as unreal, as only an inferior shadow of the higher, nobler, more permanent "world of being," where there is no change and no movement. He regarded the ideal omed as greater than the changing mehalekh. Our tradition, to the contrary, regarded the dynamic "world of becoming" as infinitely superior to the static "world of being."

For example: in the fourth chapter of Pirkei Abot, we read a remarkable paradox. Yafah sha'ah achat bi'teshuvah u-maasim tovim ba-clam ha-zeh mi-kol chaye ha-clam ha-ba, "better is one hour of repentance and good deeds in

this world than the whole life of the world to come"; and yet, ve'yafah sha'ah achat shel korat ruach ba-olam ha-ba mi-kol chaye ha-olam ha-zeh, "better is one hour of blissfulness of spirit in the world to come than the whole life of this world." What does this mean? Is this world better, or ^{is} the other world better? The author of Midrash Shmuel explains that the prefix ^xmi in the word mi-kol in the first half of the passage is comparative, it means "better one hour of good deeds in this world than the whole life of the world to come." But in the second half of the passage, the prefix mi is not comparative but derivative, it means not "than" but "from." Thus: one hour of good deeds in this world is better than the whole life of the world to come, but one hour of joy in the world to come derives from this world!

Here indeed is a genuine Jewish doctrine! An hour of spiritual progress, of keeping in a dither, in this world, is more precious than the whole future existence of the soul! And all the joys of the world to come derive from this human quality of mehalekh, from this capacity of man to constantly advance the cause of right, of justice, of nobility of soul in this our active world of becoming.

This is an authentic insight into the Jewish soul. Growth, change, development, progress - but in the right direction! That is why Jewish law is called Halakhah, which means "going," it is the way of the mehalekh. Of course, becoming and change can mean change in either one of two directions: up or down, good or bad. Our concept of mehalekh is, as our Sidra puts it, im be'chukotai telekhu - to go in the ways of G-d, ⁺to progress upward, towards G-d, towards the fulfillment of the ideals of Torah. Halakhah means the right way for man, the Mehalekh.

This activist, dynamic conception of life and man's purpose in the universe bear close resemblance to the original American pioneer ethic: always new

development, new frontiers, new horizons. If America today often seems to stagnate and ~~vegetate~~^{stagnate}, if the covered wagon and those who toiled to open the West have now been replaced, as models of American citizenship, by those who sit glued to their seats while they gaze at the T.V. sets, it becomes a duty of the American Jew, who is loyal both to his Americanism and to his Jewishness, to challenge all of America to return to its old dreams in new form. We must again become the leaders of the world in working and toiling towards a better life for all people throughout the world: she'tihu amelim ba-Torah, to toil and labor on behalf of the universal visions of the Bible and the Prophets of Israel.

Listen to how one perceptive writer recognized this trait of the collective character of our people: "Israel... is to be found at the very heart of the world's structure, stimulating it, exasperating it, moving it... Like an activating ferment injected into the mass, it gives the world no peace, it bars slumber, it teaches the world to be discontented and restless as long as the world has no G-d." These words come from the pen of the most illustrious Catholic theologian of our day, Jacques Maritain (A Christian Looks at the Jewish Problem, 1939, Page 29.)

This afternoon we read the Fifth Chapter of Pirkei Abot. In the Munich manuscript of the Talmud, we discover an ending to this week's chapter not found in our usual printed edition. It reads, R. Abba amar: ashrei mi she'gadel ba-torah va-amalo ba-Torah, v'oseh nachat ruach le'Yotzre. "Rabbi Abba said, happy is he who has grown up in Torah, and whose labor is in Torah, and who provides peace of mind for his Maker."

How noble is the dream of the teachers of the Talmud! It tells us not to desire a passive and stagnating life, day-dreaming of how we will effortlessly

achieve our goals while G-d works and worries for us; rather, it challenges us to toil, labor, and grow in the life of Torah so that we may provide peace of mind for G-d! No wonder Prof. R. Travers Herford has called this "one of the most beautiful passages in the Talmudic literature." G-d cannot have nachas, piece of mind, when man is slothful, spiritually indolent, religiously lazy. The true Jew knows that G-d cannot rest, and hence man ought not rest, as long as some child goes hungry, or some refugee is turned back to the Hell from which he escaped, or some child forced into ignorance, or as long as his own life barely balances on the precipice of hollowness and aimlessness. G-d cannot rest as long as the cry of the wronged is heard any place in the world, as long as injustice prevails. And, therefore, man must toil in Torah, he must be a mehalekh, so that he may create the kind of world which will give peace of mind to our Creator.

May G-d grant that we learn this invaluable lesson of Judaism, that we be free from worries over health and sustenance so that we may toil in Torah for years without end. May we walk in the ways of G-d's statutes and observe His commandments, so that the blessings of the Lord will come upon us and all of mankind, and reach their climax in the words of the Torah in today's Sidra: "and I will walk among you, and will be your G-d, and you shall be My people."