

ECOLOGY & THE BIBLE

Ever since Rachel Carson wrote her Silent Spring some seven years ago, and especially during the last year or two, the problem of man's mishandling of nature has come to the forefront of public consciousness. Once, a small, elite group used to advocate conservation, trying to protect certain specific preserves of nature from plundering by a careless humanity. Today, however, all segments of the public have become interested in ecology -- not only in specific areas of nature, but in the totality of natural forces, based upon the premise that injury to any one significant segment of the natural scene will upset its fine balance of forces and so eventually destroy human life on the face of this planet.

We should not be deterred by the attraction ecology seems to have for many radicals and cultists, who apparently have tired of civil rights and even Mao and the Black Panthers. It is an extremely urgent project and deserves the most serious attention by all of us. The President and Congress have moved forward commendably in trying to legislate on the subject. Yet, that is still inadequate. It is not enough to eliminate known sources of pollution of the air and water. A distinguished scientist, René Dubos (in Psychology Today, March 1970), has reminded us that we still know very little indeed about pollution. Some 70% of the precipitate contaminants in urban air are still unidentified, and 20-30 years from now, those who today are infants, the ages of 1, 2, and 3, will undoubtedly show

varying signs of permanent and chronic malfunction. Modern technological man, apparently, is clever enough to subdue nature -- and stupid enough to wreck it.

There is no doubt that Judaism fully supports the endeavors to restore the balance of nature along with man's respect for it. The Bible teaches us that man was given dominion over Nature: after creating man and woman, "God blessed them and God said unto them: 'be fruitful and multiply and replenish the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the fowl of the air and over every living thing that creepeth upon the earth'" (Gen. 1:28). But to have dominion does not mean to destroy. We are to subdue nature, but we are also responsible for it.

The Halakhah has enshrined this principle in law. The Torah explicitly forbids the wasteful destruction of a fruit tree in a time of seige. The Halakhah extends this prohibition to cover all times, whether of war or of peace. But how about the wanton waste of other natural objects, not fruit trees? Most authorities (Tosafot and Sefer Yereim) hold that the "fruit tree" is but a single instance of any kind of wasteful destruction, all of which is equally forbidden by biblical law and punishable by flogging. Maimonides (who earlier had held to the same opinion, but then changed his mind) decided that only destruction of the fruit tree is punishable according to biblical law. What of other objects? Some commentators believe that Maimonides includes them as rabbinical prohibitions. But one important commenta-

tor (*חייב מיתה*) holds that Maimonides prescribes flogging for the fruit tree, but all other objects, while not punishable, are equally prohibited by biblical law.

What we derive from all this, is that the Halakhah clearly enjoins any brutal, wanton, senseless offense against nature -- and even against human produce. It demands of us a sense of responsibility before all creativity, and a special sense of reverence before God's work.

However, our theme this morning concerns not primarily the balance of nature, but a related problem of equal or greater urgency. I refer to what might be called "moral ecology," the offense against the spiritual tone of our environment. We must be concerned not only by the pollution spewed out from the chimneys of industry that contaminate our air and water, but by the moral rot that is projected on our movie screens, that infiltrates our homes through the television, that degenerates the stage and the newstand. We must begin to pay more attention not only to the air which we breathe, but also to the atmosphere in which we grow and raise our children.

It is interesting that the Torah borrowed terms from the physical world to symbolize moral achievements. The Torah speaks of moral excellence as taharah, which literally means "cleanliness," and moral corruption as tum'ah, which literally means "uncleanliness." In English, too, we speak of "filthy" and "clean" as moral categories. In the Jewish tradition sin is known as zuhamah, dirt, and the great

Prophet Isaiah calls his people to moral excellence and rehabilitation with the words rachatzu, hizakku, which literally means, "wash yourselves, come clean." (Isa. 1:16).

That we are now morally in a state of ecological disaster is self-evident. Pornography has become a big business. Millions of customers are attracted to it every week in this country. We now hear of chains of "supermarkets of erotica." Technology has been placed at the service of degeneracy.

This inundation of society by destructive elements has, paradoxically, been helped along by our own good intentions! As liberal-minded people, we are naturally against censorship. Our bitter historic experience with tyranny and dictatorship has sensitized us against it. Yet we may have overdone it. We have developed a certain fanaticism about censorship. We have absolutized freedom -- and that is dangerous. We have failed to foresee the consequences of our unthinking opposition to any form of control.

Now, I am not in favor of a rigid, hard, Victorian censorship. But I am not for the theory that "everything goes." It is true that it is almost impossible to determine a consistent, objective, criterion for what constitutes salacious, immoral, and obscene material. But I prefer a crazy-quilt pattern of inconsistent regulations, irrational as they may appear, to the politics of exasperation which abandons all effort at control because uniformity cannot be achieved and which therefore permits all society to turn scatological. In a

totally permissive society, everyone and everyone's children are threatened by the forces of moral filth. And in a democracy, we do not grant freedom to some at the expense of others.

What we need therefore is a redressing of the ecological balance of society between freedom and responsibility, between civil rights and the right to maintain one's moral integrity. The alternative to determined action to restore enlightened common-sense control is more environmental insult, a situation where we who do not wish to be overwhelmed by the universality of obscenity, will be forced, against our will and our better judgment, to accept these very values. We are in a situation of true magefah, a plague of obscenity which affects everyone with or without his consent, and it will take decades to undo the effects of this dense, spiritual smog.

What must we do?

First, as we have said, we must remove the forces of pollution. Government must control filth and literature, stage and cinema, no less than the protection of the air and the water from contamination by industry. We must do so without too heavy a hand -- but we must do so. The courts must guard against excessive censorship, but they must accept responsibility for some form of elemental control.

Second, we must make use of our own "purifying" agents in an attempt to redress the balance. Against the plague from without, we must utilize positive forces from within.

The Sidra of this morning tells us of a service in the Temple which symbolized a moral anti-pollutant. We read of the service of the ketoret, the incense, offered in the Sanctuary. Elsewhere in the Torah, we read that the offering of the incense was effective in neutralizing magefah, the plague. I suggest that both terms must be taken morally as well: in a situation of moral plague, we must marshall our inner resources to sweeten the air again.

The Zohar (II, 230a, to Pekudei) offers an answer to a question that has always bothered me. We read (in last week's Sidra) that the incense was offered on a special altar or mizbeiach. But why should the platform on which the incense was offered be called mizbeiach, altar? After all, the word mizbeiach comes from the word zevach, which means a sacrifice, an animal or fowl which was slaughtered -- and on the altar of incense there was no slaughtering. The Zohar answers:

הַכֹּהֵן בָּרַךְ וְהָיָה כְּכֹהֵן מִזְבֵּיחַ אֵלֶּיךָ יְיָ אֱלֹהֵינוּ

because the ketoret binds (as one does an animal for slaughter) and nullifies and destroys various manifestations of evil.

The incense represents the force against corruption. It symbolizes the need for a clean moral environment, for a sweet and pure spiritual atmosphere. It is the Bible's form of drug culture: not pot or acid or speed, but incense to elevate man's conduct, to cleanse the moral milieu, to restore a healthy balance to a spiritually threatened society.

What do I mean by this? What relevance does ketoret have to our days? After all, we do not subscribe to those forms of

"creative liturgy" that some ignorant young Jews, in imitation of their Christian counterparts, are trying to foist upon us as "the service of the future," and which is more influenced by Timothy Leary than by Moses or Maimonides.

However, the Talmud has taught us (Men. 110): 13108

חברים גאוסקויס בתורה דבא תקום מעלה אנן עמיכם פאוסו

מקטירין ומגידין. The Almighty accepts the study of Torah by scholars as if they had offered up ketoret or incense to him.

Torah, then, is the modern equivalent of the incense service. At a time when obscenity flourishes in an atmosphere of permissiveness, Torah demands decency by the means of self-discipline. At a time when pornography has become institutionalized as a new culture, Torah must be accepted not only as law, certainly not merely as literature, not even as religion -- but as a powerful counter-culture. (Who would have thought ten or twenty years ago, that Torah, which in antiquity came as a protest against obscene pagan rites and religious orgies, would today have the same function! Once we considered such themes as irrelevant to modern times -- and today it is unfortunately so very relevant!)

Torah as a culture means that we must create an environ-
ment of Torah, one in which its study is a matter of constancy, not a haphazard attempt to catch a word here and a stray thought there. This indeed is the attempt of Yeshiva University -- from its high schools through the Yeshiva proper, from Stern College through Erna

Michael College and the James Striar School. It is an effort to create not only a form of instruction, but a full environment which will generate countervailing pressures against the pollution and contamination of the larger contemporary environment, and in this sense we are opposed to what is happening around us.

And not only children must turn to Torah as the form of incense to stay the plague of immorality, and not only at the university level. Mature adults must do likewise. To send children to study is futile gesture. If they do not see us, their elders, behaving in the way we train them, then everything we do for them is probably wasted. I therefore cannot fail to express mild disappointment with my congregation. People who are educated, enlightened, and sophisticated, as is the membership of The Jewish Center, are not doing enough for their own Torah education. Our attendance and interest and participation in the minimal adult education we do offer is far from sufficient, far from adequate.

And yet, I admit, that mere study of Torah is insufficient. It must be study in a certain manner.

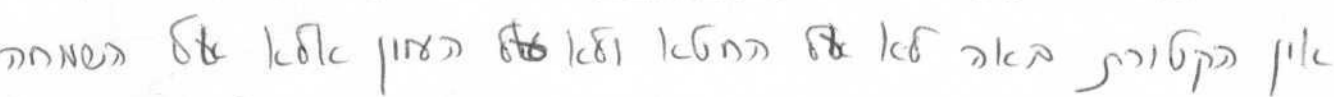
We must face the facts. The new generation, about which so much has been said and written, wants to be "turned on." It seeks not only new ideas, but new experiences. And therefore so many of its numbers take to experimentation with drugs and with sex -- and the two are related. Indeed, I am appalled at the extent to which this rot and corruption that infests society has seeped into our own ranks. I am

shocked at the extent to which it has infected our own group -- although we are much less affected than others. I am distressed at the "experimentation," the experience-searching, the thrill-seeking by respectable, well-to-do, stable, Jewishly-affiliated young people, even over the age of thirty.

What we must do, then, is reveal the experiential dimensions of Judaism. Torah is eternal, but the teaching of Torah varies with each generation. Judaism is unchanging, but the form of its transmission must always change. It is like a delicate musical instrument, which must be revered if it is to survive intact, but which can be plucked to offer new tones and suggest new insights. The cultural and emotional and social forms that appeal to the new generation today are not those that appealed to generations past, not even to American Jewry at The Jewish Center 20 years ago. Then the problem was to show that Orthodoxy is clean and decorous and aesthetic and dignified. We still have not reached the high point of this vision. We certainly must never abandon these ideals and forms. But they are not sufficient. What youth today seeks is feeling and involvement, warmth and experience, ecstasy and heart. If we are fixated at one level, if we fail to appreciate what it is that a generation wants and what we can and must offer -- we may very well be bypassed.

Therefore, it is up to us to prove that the demands of life and dignity are not irreconcilable and that, in fact, they are supplementary to each other. We must put more passion into our prayers,

more conviction into our study. We must not allow aesthetics to anesthetize people. Our "davening" must not be so drily formal that one who comes to the synagogue feels he must put a muffler around his spirit lest it catch a death of a cold.

The same Sages who told us that ketoret symbolizes the study of Torah, taught us that ketoret symbolizes joy and happiness:  (M. Tanchuma). The incense was not meant to cover up sin or make up for the guilt of transgression, but to express joy and ecstasy. We must bring these potential dimensions of Judaism to the fore in our times: Kavanah, life, warmth, heart.

Our moral ecology has been disrupted. The balance of moral forces in society is as threatened as the balance of natural forces in the air and the water about us. An insidious degeneracy endangers us and our families.

Before it is too late, we must betake ourselves to the ketoret of Torah -- and let us do so with passion, with feeling, with simchah.

Then indeed our success will be an occasion for even more simchah, and the society we create will be as pure and as sweet-smelling as if it had been aerated with the ketoret of old itself.