

"PUTTING A BAD CONSCIENCE TO GOOD USE"

The story of the Akedah, which we read this morning, is, together with the revelation at Sinai, the central event in Jewish history and religion. One of the most remarkable aspects of this episode is the one word by which Abraham accepts upon himself this historic trial and its mental agonies and spiritual sufferings. God called to him, "Abraham!" and, in magnificent simplicity, the response is forthcoming: Hinneni, "Behold, here am I," or, "I am ready."

One of the commentators, R. Abraham b. Rambam -- the only son of Maimonides -- emphasizes the quality of this response by contrasting it to that of Adam. He writes, mah rav ha-hilluk, "How great the difference," bein maamaro hinneni, u-maamar zikmo Adam va-ira ki erom anokhi va-ahavei, between Abraham who answered the Divine call with the word hinneni, and Adam who, when God called out to him "Where are thou?" answered, "I saw that I was naked and so I hid."

Now this comparison is somewhat disturbing. The answer of Adam, is, after all, the response of a human being pursued by God who demands an explanation for a terrible failure, whereas Abraham's response is to a Divine call not necessarily connected with any human offense. Is this not, then an invidious comparison? Is not Abraham great enough in his own right without seeking to enhance

his reputation at the expense of his grandfather Adam?

The answer I wish to offer is one which, I believe, not only justifies the comment of R. Abraham b. Rambam, but has the widest ramifications both for a proper understanding of the Bible and for our own lives. This answer is that both -- Adam and Abraham -- were, in a sense, being reprimanded!

The story of the Akedah begins with the words va-yehi ahar ha-devarim ha-eleh, "and it came to pass after these things." What things?, asked the Rabbis. In their answer they indicate that the words of the Bible imply some severe introspection. Ahar hirhurei devarim she-hayu sham; the Akedah took place after deep meditation and self-analysis by Abraham. Abraham, according to the Rabbis, was troubled. He had a bad conscience which caused these hirhurei devarim, these introspective sessions. The Akedah was a kind of punishment, it was brought on by Abraham's errors.

What is it that troubled Abraham? There are several interpretations (see Bereshit R. 55). One of them (a Midrash cited in "Kav ha-Yashar") refers to the special celebration arranged by Abraham in honor of the weaning of his son Isaac. The Bible refers to that party as mishteh gadol, a great feast. Our tradition maintains that the greatness of this banquet was due to the guests who attended: gedolim hayu sham, a party which was attended by all the giants of the time. Shem attended, Eber was there, Og was one of the guests -- all the crowned heads of the ancient Near East were

at the great party that Abraham prepared. But this is precisely where the trouble lay: only the gedolim, the great ones, were there; but there was a complete absence of ketanim, small people, ordinary human beings, the poor and the marginal and the unwanted. Certainly Abraham, who was renowned for his hospitality over all else, should have known enough that at his personal simbah he ought to have as major participants also the poor and rejected. Abraham's conscience troubled him; had he not contributed to a subtle transformation and dangerous degradation of the virtue of hakhnasat orhim from hospitality to mere entertainment? For this should be an occasion for the uplifting of down-trodden spirits, not the name-dropping of high and exalted personages.

But whatever occasioned Abraham's troubled conscience, it was responsible for the Akedah episode. So that the divine call to Abraham was a conscience-call. What R. Abraham b. Rambam meant, then, was that both Adam and Abraham responded to the call of a bad conscience -- Adam for the eating of the forbidden fruit, and Abraham for his omissions at the mishteh gadol -- but: that is where the comparison ends. When it comes to the responses of these two individuals: mah rav ha-hilluk, how great the difference!

When Adam sinned and heard God calling him, he said et kolekha shamati ba-gan, "I heard Thy voice in the garden"; in the underbrush of his mind there takes place a rustling of a primitive conscience. Va-ira ki erom anokhi, there is a sudden awareness of his nakedness, of shame and disgrace; and so what does he

do? -- va-ehavei, he withdraws, hides himself, denies that he ever did anything wrong, he runs away and, when confronted by God, blames his wife or the serpent...

How different is Abraham! God calls him and his response is: Hinneni, "Here I am!" I am willing to harness my bad conscience to a good use. I am ready to go through an akedah, to overcome the past by creative achievement in the future, teaching the world the real meaning of faith and the lengths to which one must go in order to uphold it. Rashi tells us of that word hinneni that it implies leshon anavah, leshon zimmun -- it is the language of both meekness and preparedness. Indeed so, it is the language of anavah or meekness because it reveals a bad conscience; and it is the language of zimmun or preparedness, because Abraham is ready to do something about it: he is ready to take the bad conscience and make good use of it.

So the difference between Adam and Abraham is in what to do with a bad conscience: whether to hide or to use it. And mah rav ha-hilluk, what a difference there is between them! A bad conscience irritates the mind and the heart, until that bad conscience is either repressed or converted into something creative and constructive. It is much like the grain of sand that is either expelled by the oyster from under its shell, or transformed into a shiny and precious pearl.

This example of Abraham has been repeated at chosen moments throughout history. The Nobel prizes which were awarded

this past week or two are such an example. Nobel is a man who gave a fortune for awards to those who contribute to the advancement of peace in the world. Why did he do this? -- it was an effort to overcome his bad conscience for having created dynamite and made war more destructive. Many of the greatest Torah scholars in our history were people who brought to their spiritual and intellectual endeavors a special passion that arose from the knowledge of having strayed in their youth.

The same holds true for philanthropy. I knew a man, out of town, who was very generous in his endowments of various communal institutions. As so often happens, others did not begrudge him this mitzvah. They pointed to certain incidents in his past which were not luminous examples of all the great virtues. What should be the Jewish reaction? It should be: marvelous! God bless that man! The greatest communal institutions were built by people who knew how to use a bad conscience and convert it to good use. Hospitals, schools, synagogues, welfare institutions of all kinds, are the products of people who have learned from Abraham to take their hirhurei devarim and use it to say hinneni to the call of God. And who, after all, is there who is so saintly that he never has an occasion for a bad or troubled conscience? On the contrary, any man or woman who honestly feels that he or she has no bad conscience at all, should have a bad conscience for being so insensitive as not to have a bad conscience! Would we rather that a man have no conscience at all, that he be a moral idiot?

Or would we rather that he be like Adam who responds only with the va-ehavei, that he hide himself, that he deny his past, that he evade his responsibility? Certainly the transformation of guilt into philanthropy has a respectable precedent in the hinnenai of Abraham.

The State of Israel was built by Western democracies reacting to a bad conscience of cosmic dimensions: insensitivity to Jewish suffering under Hitler and the turning away of Jewish refugees from the shores of Palestine. But finally the democracies learned, in however small a measure, to put their bad conscience to good use and not to oppose the founding of the State of Israel. Of course, the good use that ultimately resulted can in no wise equal the enormity of the crime which they witnessed in silence; but at least it was better than the kind of reaction of which Adam is the stereotype.

The history of Christianity towards the Jews is a historic disgrace. Any sensitive human being who happens to be Christian ought to go throughout life with a bad conscience because of his religion. So that when the Catholic Ecumenical Council offers a declaration concerning the Jews which puts us in a somewhat better light than has been true in the past, or when Billy Graham and his Evangelists announce, as they did this past week, that they apologize to the Jews -- this is an attempt, which although only partially successful and inadequate, and disregarding for a moment some of the subtle implications of which we must be aware, is at least an attempt to make good use

of a bad conscience.

To some extent, though not completely, even American Jewry support of the State of Israel -- whether the UJA, or the Yeshivot, or other institutions -- is a form of expression of a bad conscience. Many American Jews feel that we were safe during World War II while our fellow Jews suffered. After 1948 there was a State of Israel ready to receive us, yet we have not gone nor have many of us sent our children to settle there. If we feel a troubled conscience, that is a good and healthy sign, for it ought to be troubled! But we have learned how to put that bad conscience to good use -- and that is in our unfailing support of the State of Israel and its great institutions.

All this brings me to a painful point: painful not because it is controversial, but because it should at all be necessary. I refer to the attitude of Jews to certain minorities in this country.

I would like to state at the outset that I prefer to see the problem in its true perspective without any extremist appeal. We Jews, as Jews, are not responsible for the conditions of Negroes in the United States. Our grandfathers were not slaveholders who devised this cruel and inhuman system. When the Negroes were being emancipated in the 1860s, we too were being emancipated in the ghettos of Europe. Indeed, on this very day of October 29th, in 1833 in Austria, we experienced our very first instance of



legal political emancipation.

Nevertheless, we have participated in a growing economy which has to a large extent thrived on the exploitation of minorities, and we have shared deeply held prejudices about them. One need not masochistically excuse bigots like Leroy Jones and embrace other fanatics of the Black Power movement in order to appreciate that all whites suffer, or should suffer, some degree of a bad conscience.

The question is, what shall we do about it? Not to feel any guilt, any troubling of the conscience, is a sign of our own moral failure. We must experience some hirhurei devarim. Yet, to go overboard and dedicate our whole life to civil rights, to make of it an ersatz religion to replace Judaism, to concentrate only on the rights of others while ignoring the preservation of our own community here and overseas -- is to lose perspective and to reveal an inner moral weakness while we try to strengthen ourselves morally in some other direction.

But in between these two extremes there are two ways, one which is right and one which is wrong. The pattern of Adam is to hide and shift the blame -- to Black Power bigots, to the hoodlums who riot in Watts, to Negro anti-Semitism. We conveniently ignore the fact that in whole sections of our country there are whites who hold power and yet we have tolerated it; that hoodlums come in all colors; and that while Negro anti-Semitism is terribly



troubling, we have had some degree of experience with white anti-Semitism -- six million killed in our own times alone! And thus, like Adam, we suppress our bad conscience and we become part of that insidious "backlash" movement.

But the pattern of Abraham is not that at all. The people of Israel do not participate in backlash or frontlash or sidelash. The descendants of Abraham do not lash -- at all! Rather, they attempt to respond constructively and creatively and sympathetically. Within this framework of putting the bad conscience to good use there may be several techniques about which well intentioned people may disagree. But they will not allow side issues to becloud their main goal of finding a clear and moral way out of our **country's** painful racial dilemma.

Whether in our response to Torah, to Tzedakah, or to great national issues like civil rights and peace, we must learn to make constructive use of a troubled conscience.

Adam's reaction justifies the cynical definition of conscience by H. L. Mencken as "an inner voice that warns us that somebody is looking." Abraham's response -- that of readiness to experience God's trials and teach the world how great must be the dedication of the man of faith -- this response cares only for God's call and answers with the hinneni of a creative conscience.

In the "Ethics of the Fathers," before enumerating the ten trials to which Abraham was subject, the Mishnah tells us that there were ten generations from Adam to Noah, and ten again from Noah to

Abraham, during which time the world became successively worse. In other words, it took twenty generations for mankind to learn what to do with a bad conscience. In our own time, with our accelerated pace of living, we cannot afford the luxury of waiting quite that long before learning -- in our lives, as Jews, as Americans, as human beings -- the difference between Adam and Abraham in what to do with a bad conscience.

In the words of R. Abraham b. Rambam, mah rav ha-hilluk -- what a difference between them!