

"JUDAISM FROM THE INSIDE"

The more significant an event is, the more elaborately and deliberately must we prepare for it. Rabbi Soloveitchik once said that more important than the שו"ת הרב אבות השבת is the שו"ת הרב אבות - the one who prepares before Shabbat in the right measure and spirit. In this sense, it is worth turning our attention to the preparation for Yom Kippur.

The Talmud (Yoma 2b) teaches that the High Priest had to remain within the Temple for seven days before Yom Kippur. Every year he was to set aside this week and remain completely within the Sanctuary, in a chamber known as lishkat parhedrin, there to prepare himself for the holiest day of the year.

As we all know, any room or house which serves as a residence requires that we affix a mezuzah to the doorpost. Nevertheless, for certain reasons, the Temple rooms were exempt from this obligation of a mezuzah. Hence, the lishkat parhedrin did not require a mezuzah. However, R. Judah (Yoma 10b) is of a somewhat different opinion. As one of the Sages, he normally adheres strictly to principle and is unconcerned with popular reactions and public opinion. Yet here he shows a remarkable divergence from this method. He agrees with his colleagues, that no chamber of the many within the Temple required a mezuzah. The lishkat parhedrin, the chamber where the High Priest stayed for seven days, similarly did not require the mezuzah insofar as the law was technically and formally concerned. However, R. Judah maintains that the Rabbis promulgated a special decree requiring only of the lishkat parhedrin that it be adorned with a mezuzah. The reason offered by R. Judah is amazing: שלא יאמרו כהן גדול חבוש בבית האסורים so that the people will not say, "the High Priest is imprisoned in the Sanctuary!" R. Judah feared that when the masses of the people came to Jerusalem for the High Holy Days, and congregated about the Temple, they would notice that after the Priest went in to the Sanctuary until after Yom Kippur, he did not emerge for seven full days. Not observing a mezuzah on the doorpost, and therefore not considering the lishkat parhedrin as his personal residence, they might be led to the fantastic conclusion that as a result of some inner court politics the High Priest was incarcerated in the Sanctuary! Therefore, in order to avoid such a public misinterpretation, let there be a mezuzah affixed on the doorpost of the lishkat parhedrin, so that the people will consider this chamber as the High Priest's residence and not regard him as a prisoner within the Temple walls. This decree, according to R. Judah, was made, as we moderns would be wont to say, to safeguard the "image" of the Priesthood on Yom Kippur.

More remarkable than this rare example of the concern for the opinion of the unlearned masses, is how the Sages conceived of the vast difference between the real facts and the distorted impressions by hoi polloi. Here was the High Priest, the cynosure of all eyes, the focus of the attention of all Israel as they gathered in Jerusalem on the holy days, representing his people Israel before his Creator in Heaven, engaged in spiritual exercises of the highest order, reaching the very zenith of his calling in this marvellous consecration of his whole personality to the great spiritual tasks to which he is summoned on Yom Kippur -- what greater joy, what more poignant ecstasy? Yet, an uninstructed public that cannot emancipate itself from its petty and prosaic prejudices, comes to the bizarre conclusion: כהן גדול חבוש בבית האסורים ! Because they do not observe the High Priest engaged in the normal insignificant details of their own trivial lives -- no going in and no going out, no rushing to work and no coffee breaks, no entertainment and no luxuries -- they therefore assume that the High Priest is locked up within! Were it not for that mezuzah

on the doorpost of his chamber, the public indeed might consider the High Priest a prisoner in the Temple!

How does such a jarring discrepancy in perception come about, that people can consider a man in jail when he is at the heights of spiritual grandeur and freedom? The answer, it would seem, depends on your point of view: whether you view the sanctuary of Judaism as an insider or as an outsider. If you look at the Sanctuary from the point of view of an insider, you gain a totally different view from that of an outsider. If you are an outsider looking in, a spectator, you can never experience that which the insider does: the subtle joys, the daily delights, the sense of freedom and newness and rebirth. Viewed from without, the Priests appear as prisoners, when in fact they are the princes of the Lord! From outside, all one can see is the High Priest incarcerated; whereas the High Priest as the insider experiences the feeling of being -- as the Torah puts it -- לפני ה', "before the Lord" -- a rare opportunity for an ennobling and elevating awareness of God's ineffable Presence. But this an outsider cannot know, any more -- to borrow and modify a parable from the Baal Shem Tov -- than one who looks into a room from the street, beyond sound-proof windows. A wedding party is taking place within, but the outsider does not see the musicians who stand on the side, and he does not hear the music; he sees only people dancing. Inside, the dancers hear the music, and they respond with the joyous rhythm of their whole bodies. But he, the outsider, sees the dancers and thinks them madmen, engaged in meaningless gesticulations, in the weird convulsions of the demented.

This tendency to be an outsider is a fact of life in general today. Social thinkers from psychologists and sociologists to philosophers comment regularly about the phenomenon of "alienation." We have become alienated from our environment, our families, our world, and view all as if we were outsiders. Indeed, we even regard ourselves as outsiders, we are spectators to ourselves. It affects every aspect of thought and activity of contemporary man. We have become statistic-dilettantes who peddle figures but are alien to life's profoundest experiences; who can quote prices and facts and costs and numbers, but who have failed to take the plunge into life's bitter-sweet mysteries.

Indeed, when it comes to religion, this difference between those within the Temple and Torah and those without becomes most pronounced. More than once do I recall from my own youth being introduced to a well-meaning stranger as an Orthodox Jew or Rabbinical student, or a young Orthodox Rabbi. To my infinite annoyance there spreads on the face of the Outsider the look of incredulousness, and he says: "Orthodox -- and you so young?" As if Torah were an affliction brought on by old age, a kind of spiritual geriatrics! How frustrating and often how futile to have to explain to an outsider that to be "frum" is not to be a fossil, and to be religious is not to be a relic. How amusing and yet how tragic to have to explain that we observe Torah not because we are חבושים האסורים בבית, not because parents force us or circumstances coerce us or because of habit of fear or need, but because we love and desire to live a meaningful Jewish life לפני ה', "before the Lord."

No doubt many of us here today have had similar experiences. Someone learns you are an observant Orthodox Jew, and he clucks his tongue in sympathy, feeling genuinely sorry for you, and responds in a half-admiring and half-pitying tone: "You observe the Sabbath, with all its restrictions? You cannot smoke or travel or write?" And we must explain: Sabbath is for us not a day of gloom and restriction; for an Insider it is one of oneg, unadulterated joy, when (without being an ecstatic mystic) an ordinary observant Jew can experience the "additional soul" that comes from a day of pure rest and recreation, when we feel liberated from the tyranny of all the pettiness that surrounds us during

the week. Or someone discovers that you believe in and practice the laws of "family purity." And again the incredulous reaction, the mixture of pity and admiration: "You really practice these ascetic regulations denying your basic drives?" And we have to explain so patiently: No, we are not ascetics. We do not suppress basic drives -- we just restrain them in order to enjoy them the more, in order to be rational humans, not instinct-driven biological mechanisms. We observe Kashrut and we expect no awards and want no sympathy for it. It simply is part of our life "before the Lord," the practical program of Jewish holiness and differentness. And the very fact of the observance of Kashrut away from home, with all the minor inconveniences it entails, that by itself gives us the feeling of being at home everywhere!

So, the Outsider beholds our deep identification with the State of Israel and sneers, "ethnic tribalism." Our response is-- were you an Insider you would appreciate a dream over 2000 years old, you would feel the pain of hopelessness and helplessness and loneliness that still aches from Holocaust days!

The outsider beholds a synagogue and sees only size and number rather than content and quality, the conventional rather than the moral, the fashionable rather than that which is truly dignified, opinions rather than ideas. He can see only the membership and budget and activities and aesthetics. But he lacks that which the insider knows in the depths of his being: the heights of joy, the touch of mystery and grandeur, the whisper of the echo of the sound of the voice of God. No, we are not walled in in the sanctuaries; we are welling up with hope, with courage.

The differences in perception between the outsider and the insider come into sharp focus when we turn to the problem of change, especially change of Halakhah. Many of our own people often wonder whether we can and ought to change certain features of our religious life. The question is a legitimate one, depending upon the significance of that which we wish to alter. But most interesting is the attitudinal difference. The outsider's first reaction is: let us reshape, change, move things about. Like an uninspired and insensitive amateur interior decorator visiting a historic shrine, he wishes to impose his own superficial taste on that which weighs heavy with historic associations and sentimental values. The insider approaches Judaism with reverence and awe. He is overtaken with fear and trepidation before daring to tamper with the sacred. The insider knows full well that what today's fashion declares to be a permanent feature of human thought, will well be gone and forgotten tomorrow or the day after.

The report that yesterday a madman entered the Rijks Museum in Amsterdam and slashed part of Rembrandt's "Night Watch," brings to mind the visit that I paid to that museum with my wife in the beginning of this past Summer. The whole museum seems to be centered about this one magnificent mural, which many regard as the greatest painting by Rembrandt. We stood in front of this gigantic mural, literally overwhelmed, but we noticed that the left side seemed somehow to come to an abrupt end. A guide informed us that the people who commissioned this immortal painting from Rembrandt desired to hang it in their town hall, which they regarded as a place of great significance. They therefore cut off a part of the masterpiece of Rembrandt in order to be able to fit in onto the wall of their structure. So they mutilated what history has come to regard as something of inestimable value in order to decorate a building that has long since passed into well-deserved oblivion! What a shattering distortion of priorities!

The outsider who approaches Judaism ready to play fast and loose with its most sacred institutions, is the kind of person who is overly impressed with



and observances and words and acts of Judaism not mere mechanical motions, but something that is overbrimming with life and meaning and warmth.

What must we do in order to avoid this fallacious and misleading conclusion about Jewish life, to prevent people from thinking that the pious Jew is a prisoner in a jail called Judaism?

First, we must affix the mezuzah on the lishkat parhedrin; that is, we must do all we can to present to those not heretofore exposed to Jewish life, the outsiders, the beauty of Jewish experiences. We must show it as dignified, decorous, and esthetic. We must affix an attractive mezuzah to it.

Secondly, we who are insiders must reassure ourselves. A minority generally tends to adopt a view of itself held by the majority, the outsiders. While occasionally this is a healthy practice and restores perspective, it neutralizes narrow-mindedness, it must never become the standard way of self-definition. It is self-destructive always to view oneself through the eyes of others. I know too many observant Jews who always prefer to see themselves as others see us: from the secularist and Reform to outright assimilationist Jews, from the benevolent anti-Judaists to the vicious anti-Semites. When that happens, we begin to apologize for our beliefs, for our heritage, for our very selves; then we wallow in self-pity about the heavy burden that destiny has fated for us; then we begin to abandon real Judaism for what has been called "symbolic Judaism," with its few ceremonies for special events and an occasional synagogue attendance -- but nothing more. And then we are in deep trouble, for then our inauthenticity shades over into apostasy. So let us remember: no apologies and no self-pity! We are not captives in the sanctuary of Judaism -- we are its custodians. Torah is for us not a burden but a blessing. Judaism is not a jail, and Judaism is not meant for masochists who should be forced to groan, "it is so difficult to be a Jew!" Quite the contrary, Judaism is liberating, it is an emancipation! It is a release from dreariness and vacuousness and profaneness and emptiness, from the endless routine of exercises in insignificance.

Finally, while we are not missionaries, we ought to invite our fellow Jews who look in from without -- to come in. A wine connoisseur does not judge the quality of a sample by the shape of the bottle or the print on the label or the personality of the salesman. So can you not judge Judaism by its esthetics or manners or whether or not you like the Rabbi. There is only one test: taste it! To look is not enough. So does the Psalmist declare: טעמו וראו כי טוב ה' "taste and see that the Lord is good." It is not enough just to see -- one must also "taste." You cannot appreciate Judaism until you taste it and experience it and live "before the Lord." Then it is unnecessary to be stimulated by artificial enticements, by the unnecessary mezuzah, by the superficial prop, by externalia.

ברוך ה' באתם ה' ברכנוכם אבות ה' , blessed are those who come in the name of the Lord, seeking the Lord; we bless you from inside the house of the Lord -- and invite you in!

Here, לפני ה', before the Lord, we will discover that we are not in a prison, but in a palace full of pure spiritual pleasures and exquisite delights and the joy of life.

Taste and see -- and we will discover "that the Lord is good."