

Bnai Brith Sabbath - - - Vayakheil-Pekudei

JUDAISM AND JEWISHNESS: THEY ARE INSEPARABLE

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1. THE DELETERIOUS AND DISINTEGRATING EFFECT THAT MODERN AMERICAN LIFE HAS HAD UPON BOTH JEWS AND JUDAISM IS BEST DEMONSTRATED BY THE UNFORTUNATE SCHISM THAT HAS BEEN INTRODUCED BY US INTO WHAT WAS ONCE AN ORGANIC, INTEGRAL, UNIFIED AND COMPLETE JEWISH WAY OF LIFE. THAT SCHISM OR BREAK IS THE DUALISM WE HAVE DEVELOPED BETWEEN "JUDAISM" AND "JEWISHNESS". FROM TWO DIFFERENT SOURCES WAS THIS DICHOTOMY ENCOURAGED AND PROPOGATED, AND BOTH TENDED TO CONTRIBUTE TO THE BREAKUP OF ALL JEWISH LIFE AS A RESULT.
2. THE DIVISION OF JEWISH LIFE INTO THE PURELY RELIGIOUS AND DEVOTIONAL ON THE ONE HAND, AND THE RELIGION-LESS, CONTENT-LESS COMPLEX OF FOLKWAYS, MANNERISMS, ASSOCIATIONS, SOCIAL CONTACTS, CUSTOMS, SENTIMENTS AND THE SENSE OF JEWISH SOLIDARITY ON THE OTHER, HAS PROVEN EXTREMELY DAMAGING TO BOTH. AND I BELIEVE IT MOST FITTING TO DISCUSS WITH YOU, BRIEFLY, THIS VERY TOPIC ON THIS, THE LAST FRIDAY NIGHT LATE SERVICE OF THIS YEAR, AND ONE WHICH IS DEDICATED TO BNAI BRITH.
3. THE FIRST HERESY WAS THAT WHICH LIFTED OUT OF JEWISH LIFE A NUMBER OF ABSTRACT RELIGIOUS PRINCIPLES, NAMED THEM JUDAISM, AND DENIED VALIDITY TO ANY OTHER ASPECT OF JEWISH LIFE. HISTORICALLY, THIS BEGAN WITH EARLY REFORM AND IS STILL KEPT UP BY SOME STRAGGLING REMNANTS OF REFORM WHO HAVE NOT PROGRESSED WITH THEIR OWN MOVEMENT. NOWADAYS IT FINDS ITS ORGANIZED EXPRESSION IN THAT BAND OF UNRECONSTRUCTED JEWISH ANTISEMITES KNOWN AS THE AMERICAN COUNCIL FOR JUDAISM. ~~BUT IT IS NOT~~ EARLY REFORM DISCOUNTED ZIONISM AS A PAROCHIAL, NARROW, NATIONALISTIC MOVEMENT WHICH WAS ONLY A RELIC FROM THE TIME THAT JEWS WERE CLANNISH. IT WAS, TO THEM, PART OF THE "JEWISHNESS" THAT THEY TRIED SO HARD TO DISSOCIATE THEMSELVES FROM. WHAT RELATIONSHIP, OTHER THAN A PURELY FORMAL ONE, ~~WAS~~ OR HISTORICAL ONE, DID THEY HAVE WITH ISRAEL. IT WAS ONLY, THEY MAINTAINED, A SENTIMENTAL VESTIGE, A WAY OF TALKING THAT HAD NO LONGER ANY REAL VALIDITY. FOR ONE COULD BE A JEW BY PROFESSING CERTAIN PRINCIPLES AND GOING TO TEMPLE. YIDDISH AND HEBREW WERE SUBJECTED TO THE SAME TREATMENT * THEY WERE LAUGHED OUT OF EXISTENCE. KASHRUTH, NO LONGER REGARDED AS PART OF "JUDAISM", THE RELIGIOUS POLE, WAS NOT, OF COURSE, TENABLE AS PART OF JEWISHNESS * IT WAS ONLY A PECULIARITY OF JEWISH DIET, LIKE THE EXPRESSION "OY" OR "NEBECH", THAT WAS UNIMPORTANT AND SHOULD BE SCRAPPED WITH ALL ELSE THAT WAS MERELY "JEWISHNESS" IN THE ATTEMPT TO BECOME, AS THEY CALLED IT, "UNIVERSAL", BUT WHICH REALLY MEANT QUASI-CHRISTIAN. ALL CUSTOMS THAT WERE PECULIAR TO JEWS, TO JEWISH PEOPLE, ALL THE BEAUTIFUL TRADITIONS WHICH WERE NOT PART OF THE MINIMAL RELIGION THEY PREEMPTED, WAS REGARDED AS A CLANNISH PART OF THE GHETTO AND CONDEMNED AS UNFIT FOR EITHER MODERN GERMAN OR MODERN AMERICAN JEWISH LIFE.
4. I NEED NOT ATTEMPT TO CONVINCE THOSE HERE TONIGHT OF THE TERRIBLE FALLACY INVOLVED IN THIS DISCARDING OF EVERYTHING OTHER THAN THE FEW NOBLE "PROPHETIC" PRINCIPLES THEY EMBRACED. WITHOUT THE SENSE OF SOLIDARITY AMONGST ALL JEWS, WHAT HOPE COULD THERE BE FOR THE SURVIVAL OF EVEN A FEW OF THE GREAT IDEALS THAT GREW FROM THE SOCIETY OF JEWS? G-D MADE US A NATION BEFORE HE GAVE US THE TORAH - TRUE, WITHOUT THE TORAH, WE HAVE NO REAL LIFE AS A NATION. BUT IT IS EQUALLY TRUE THAT THERE IS NO TORAH WITHOUT ISRAEL. THE PEOPLEHOOD OF ISRAEL IS NOT A NARROWMINDED ARCHAISM. IT IS AN ABSOLUTE PREREQUISITE FOR OUR RELIGIOUS BELIEFS. REMEMBER THAT NO OTHER PEOPLE WAS GIVEN THE TORAH. OTHERS HAVE THEIR RELIGIOUS SCRIPTURES, BUT ONLY ONE PEOPLE DEVELOPED THE TORAH, THE BIBLE. IF JEWISHNESS, WITH ALL THE FOLKWAYS AND ASSOCIATIONS AND SENTIMENTS IT IMPLIES, WERE NOT ESSENTIAL AND VITAL FOR JUDAISM, THEN THE TORAH MIGHT AS WELL HAVE BEEN GIVEN TO THE CHINESE OR INDIANS OR GREEKS OR AUSTRALIAN BUSHMEN. COMMUNITY CONSCIOUSNESS, AND THE "JEWISHNESS" THAT THAT IMPLIES, WHEN SEPARATED FROM THE PURELY RELIGIOUS ABSTRACTIONS, LEAVES THOSE RELIGIOUS IDEALS, THAT "JUDAISM", AS A SPIRIT WITHOUT A BODY - A GHOST.
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5. BUT IS "JUDAISM" WITHOUT "JEWISHNESS" IS A GHOST, THEN "JEWISHNESS" WITHOUT "JUDAISM" IS A BODY WITHOUT A SPIRIT - IN OTHER WORDS, A CORPSE. AND DRESS UP A CORPSE HOWEVER YOU WILL, IT REMAINS A COLD, LIFELESS, SPIRITLESS RELIC.

AND IT IS HERE, FRIENDS, THAT MOST AMERICAN JEWS HAVE SINNED. THEY HAVE HELD ONTO THIS "JEWISHNESS" AS A DROWNING MAN GRASPS THE AIR * BUT HAVE OVERLOOKED THE REAL LIFELINE WHICH IS TORAH, OR JUDAISM, THE RELIGION OF ISRAEL. WE HAVE TAKEN THIS PRECIOUS JEWISHNESS AND EMBRACED IT SO TIGHT THAT WE HAVE SQUEEZED THE "NESHAMAH", TORAH, OUT OF IT, AND, HAVING STRANGLED IT, WE REMAIN WITH THE CORPSE * JEWISHNESS WITHOUT JUDAISM.

WHAT ARE SOME OF THE EXPRESSIONS OF THIS BEHEADED JEWISHNESS? IN ITS ORGANIZED FORMS, YOU FIND MOVEMENTS SUCH AS THE YIDDISHIST GROUP. IT MAY BE TRUE THAT YIDDISH IS ONLY A JARGON OF PRIMARILY HEBREW AND MIDDLE GERMAN PLUS A DOZEN OTHER INFLUENCES. IT MAY BE TRUE THAT ITS LITERATURE IS NOT AS EXTENSIVE AS THAT OF ENGLISH OR HEBREW. BUT IS GENUINELY, THOROUGHLY AND BEAUTIFULLY EXPRESSIVE OF THE INNER JEW. IT SHOULD BE STUDIED AND SPOKEN AND ADVANCED. BUT WHEN IT IS TAKEN PER SE, AS THE SUMMUM BONUM OF JEWISH LIFE, WHEN THE TOTALITY OF JEWISH EXPERIENCE IS NARROWED TO A LANGUAGE SPOKEN FOR ONLY THREE OR FOUR HUNDRED YEARS, AND THAT NOT BY ALL JEWS BY ANY MEANS, THEN THIS "JEWISHNESS" IS NOTHING MORE THAN AN ECCENTRICITY. THE YIDDISHIST WHO DENIES TORAH AND JUDAISM IS LIKE HE WHO ASSERTS THAT THE TOTALITY OF AMERICA LIES IN BROOKLYN SLANG OR ICE CREAM OR KING*SIZE FILTER*TIPTOED CIGARETTES. IT IS MISTAKING THE PART FOR THE WHOLE AND THUS EFFECTIVELY KILLING OFF BOTH THE PARTS AND THE WHOLE.

THE HEBREW MOVEMENT IS NOT FREE FROM THE SAME CRITICISM. IF IT REMAINS A PASSION FOR THE LANGUAGE AS IT IS, WITH NO COMMITMENT FOR ANY HIGHER GOAL OR IDEAL, IF IT IS A ONE*SIDED ESPRESSION OF JEWISHNESS WITHOUT JUDAISM, THEN IT TOO IS NOTHING MORE THAN AN ACADEMIC QUIRK. I WAS NEVER MORE CONVINCED OF THIS FACT THAT WHEN SEVERAL YEARS AGO I MET ONE OF THE MOST CELEBRATED HEBRAISTS IN THE COUNTRY, FAMED WRITER IN "HADOAR", AND AS I LEFT, GAVE ME HIS CALLING CARD: "ANI EVED LE'IVRIS"....IS AWKWARD, LOPSIDED, EVEN IDOLATROUS. TOLD HIM: "ANI EVED LA'SHEM".

I COULD * AS COULD YOU * MENTION DOZENS OTHER SUCH EXAMPLES OF ATTEMPTS TO LIVE FULL JEWISH LIFE IN ONE ASPECT OF JEWISHNESS WITHOUT JUDAISM. * * AS: SECULAR ZIONISM, PHILANTHROPY, ANTI*DEFAMATION, JEWISH SCHOLARSHIP ETC.

BUT, MORE IMPORTANT THAN ISOLATED EXAMPLES, IS THE GENERAL TENDENCY SO MANY OF US HAVE EVOLVED, OF EMBRACING ALMOST ALL FACETS OF JEWISHNESS WHILE NEGLECTING JUDAISM. OF COURSE, THAT RELIGION WITHOUT A G*D, CALLED "RECONSTRUCTIONISM", HAS MADE A PHILOSOPHY OF THIS ATTITUDE WHICH SO MANY AMERICAN JEWS ADOPT WITHOUT THINKING. IT GIVES RELIGIOUS VALUE TO ALL FOLK CUSTOMS AND SENTIMENTS. IT IS ONLY WHEN YOU EMBRACE JEWISHNESS WHOLE EXPELLING JUDAISM THAT YOU CAN, AS DOES THE HIGH*PRIEST OF RECONSTRUCTIONISM, MORDECAI KAPLAN, MAINTAIN THAT IT IS PERFECTLY VALID TO HAVE A KOSHER HOME WHILE EATING TREIFAH OUTSIDE. MANY JEWS MAY DO IT AS MATTER OF CONVENIENCE, WHICH IS BAD ENOUGH, BUT WHEN YOU MAKE A PHILOSOPHY OF IT, THEN YOU HAVE BOWED TO AN IDOL AND REBELLED AGAINST G*D. IT IS IN THIS SPIRIT THAT MANY OF OUR FELLOW*JEWS FIND THE TOTALITY OF THEIR JEWISH EXPERIENCE IN GEFILTE FISH (GASTRONOMICAL JUDAISM), IN A "SHVITZ", IN YIDDISH OR JEWISH JOKES, IN HAVING MOSTLY JEWISH FRIENDS OR IN GOING TO JEWISH HOTELS. IF THIS TREND SHOULD CONTINUE, THEN JEWISHNESSITSELF MUST SOONER OR LATER VANISH, THEN ASSIMILATION IS THE ONLY OUTLOOK, THEN WE SHALL BECOME A CLAN INSTEAD OF A PEOPLE, A DIALECT WITHOUT A LANGUAGE, GLITTER WITHOUT GOLD.

6. I, FOR ONE, CANNOT BRING MYSELF TO BELIEVE THAT THIS WILL BE THE FATE OF AMERICAN JEWRY. I CANNOT BELIEVE IT, BECAUSE I IMPLICITLY HAVE FAITH THAT THE FATE OF TORAH IS NOT OBSCURITY;; BECAUSE I BELIEVE THAT JEWISHNESS ITSELF ULTIMATELY INSPIRES JUDAISM; AND BECAUSE I HAVE A GREAT DEAL OF CONFIDENCE IN THE AMERICAN JEW AND BELIEVE THAT HE WILL SOON WAKE UP TO THE FACT THAT IT IS FUTILE, EERIE AND RIDICULOUS TO GO ABOUT DANCING WITH A PAINTED UP CORPSE.

NO, IN THE HEART OF EVERY ONE OF US IS A DEEP YEARNING, SOMETIMES UNDETECTED, INARTICULATE AND UNACKNOWLEDGED, A YEARNING AND LONGING TO TRANSCEND OURSELVES, TO GO BEYOND OURSELVES. THERE IS DEEP WITHIN US A PROFOUND AWARENESS OF THE MYSTERY OF LIFE, OF ITS UNSPEAKABLE WONDER, OF THE INEFFABLE AND THE HOLY. THERE IS AN ATTRACTION TO THE GLORY THAT HAS PULSATED THROUGH THE ARTERIES OF JEWISH LIFE THROUGHOUT THE CENTURIES; THERE IS AN ATTRACTION FOR THE DIVINE AND THE NOBLE AND THE HOLY; THERE IS A RESTLESSNESS THAT IS NATIVE TO OUR SOULS, A GASPING FOR SPIRITUALITY, AN ANXIETY FOR THE PERMANENT AND THE ETERNAL, AND A QUEST FOR G*D THAT SOMETIMES, EVEN IF RARELY, SUDDENLY ILLUMINATES OUR LIVES LIKE LIGHTNING FLASHING ACROSS HEAVILY OVERCAST SKIES.

7. UNLESS AND UNTIL THESE TWO TENDENCIES, FOR JUDAISM AND FOR JEWISHNESS, ARE REUNITED AND REINTEGRATED INTO ONE INDIVISIBLE TOTALITY, AMERICAN JEWRY MUST SUFFER FROM A SPIRITUAL AND CULTURAL LOPSIDEDNESS, AND POSSESS NEITHER A GENUINE JUDAISM NOR AUTHENTIC JEWISHNESS. IT IS FOR THIS GOAL OF REUNIFICATION OF JUDAISM AND JEWISHNESS, OF RELIGION AND CULTURE, SOUL AND BODY, CENTER AND PERIPHERY, THAT BNAI BRITH AND OTHER SUCH ORGANIZATIONS MUST STRIVE IF THEY ARE TO CONTRIBUTE WORTHILY TO THE PERPETUATION AND SURVIVAL OF JEWISH LIFE. BEZALEL, THE BUILDER OF THE TABERNACLE ABOUT WHOM WE READ IN TOMORROW'S SIDRA, IS AN EXCELLENT MODEL TO EMULATE IN THIS REGARD. ADDING TO THE GLOWING EULOGY OF HIM IN THE TORAH, OUR SAGES MENTION THE SIGNIFICANT ENCOMIUM THAT "BEZALEL YADA LE'TZAREIF OSIOS SHE'BA'HEM NIVR'U SHAMAYIM VA'ARETZ", THAT HE HAD THE GENIUS AND KNACK FOR REUNITING THE LETTERS WITH WHICH G*D CREATED HEAVEN AND EARTH. THAT MUST BE THE FUNCTION OF ALL SOCIAL AND COMMUNAL JEWISH ORGANIZATIONS WHICH REMAIN LOYAL TO JEWRY. WE MUST REUNITE THE HEAVENLY AND EARTHLY ELEMENTS, THE DIVINE INSPIRATION AND THE HUMAN ASPIRATIONS, SOUL AND SENTIMENT, CULTURE AND CUSTOM, THE HEAVENLY IDEALS AND PRINCIPLES OF JUDAISM WITH THE EARTHLY AND CHARMING WAYS OF JEWISHNESS.

UNTIL RECENTLY, BNAI BRITH HAS DEVOTED ITS MONEY, TALENT AND TIME TO SUCH ASPECTS OF JEWISHNESS AS PRESERVING THE SENSE OF JEWISH SOLIDARITY THROUGH SOCIAL ACTIVITY, AND PROTECTING JEWISH INTEGRITY AND LIFE THROUGH ITS ANTI-DEFAMATION WORK. NO ONE CAN, MAY, DOES OR SHOULD UNDERRATE THIS WORK. BUT ** WE MUST BE FRANK ** THERE ALWAYS WAS A FEAR, AN APPREHENSION, IN MY HEART AND IN THE HEARTS OF MANY OTHERS, THAT THIS OVER-ATTENTION TO JEWISHNESS, TO THE ELEMENTS OF EARTH, OF JUST PHYSICAL SURVIVAL, WAS DONE AT THE EXPENSE OF THE HEAVENLY ELEMENTS, OF JUDAISM. AGAIN TO BE PERFECTLY HONEST, THAT FEAR HAS NOT ALTOGETHER DISAPPEARED. I AM SOMETIMES PLAGUED WITH THIS FEELING THAT THIS SECULARIST TENDENCY IS DEEPLY INGRAINED. YET I HAVE SUFFICIENTLY CONVINCED MYSELF OF A CHANGE IN BNAI BRITH'S OUTLOOK TO JOIN YOUR RANKS THIS YEAR AS A MEMBER OF THE SHOLOM LODGE. I AM IMPRESSED NOT SO MUCH BY OUR ACCOMPLISHMENTS AS BY OUR GOALS AND ENTHUSIASM IN THE ADULT EDUCATION VENTURES OF BNAI BRITH. ~~I CANNOT SAY I AM ENTIRELY IN ACCORD WITH THE NATURE AND CONTENT AND SCOPE OF THESE PROGRAMS. BUT THAT DOES NOT MATTER TOO MUCH.~~ AS LONG AS JEWS WILL LEARN, I KNOW THAT THEY WILL THINK. AND IF THEY WILL THINK, THEN I HAVE NO FEARS AS TO THE FUTURE OF JUDAISM * ALL DEPENDING, OF COURSE, ON HOW DEEPLY OR SUPERFICIALLY THEY THINK. BUT IT IS THIS STEP MORE THAN ANYTHING ELSE, THIS FIRST ATTEMPT AT REUNIFYING AND REUNITING BOTH HALVES INTO ONE ORGANIC WHOLE, THAT ~~DOES~~ GIVES ME SATISFACTION, CONFIDENCE AND HOPE * AND, NOW AS A MEMBER, PRIDE IN BNAI BRITH.

8. ~~BEFORE~~ WHEN ADAM WAS FIRST CREATED, OUR BIBLE TELLS US, HE WAS A "GOLEM", BOTH IN THE ORIGINAL HEBREW SENSE MEANING A MUTE FORM, AND IN THE LATER SENSE OF A ROBOT OR DUMMY. ONLY WHEN THE LORD BREATHED HIS OWN BREATH INTO HIM DID HE BECOME A MAN, A HUMAN. JEWISHNESS IS OUR BODY. BUT ALONE IT REMAINS A "GOLEM". LET US ASPIRE TO G*D'S INSPIRATION, LET US INHALE FROM THE CLEAR DRAUGHTS OF THE ATMOSPHERE OF TORAH, AND WE SHALL HAVE PRODUCED A TRUE, LIVING, IMMORTAL ORGANISM ** THE JEWISH WAY OF LIFE, WHICH SURVIVED SO MANY THOUSANDS OF YEARS OF TURBULENT HISTORY AND, WITH OUR HELP, SHALL REMAIN IMPERISHABLE.