

THE WILDERNESS WITHIN & WITHOUT

In this morning's Sidra, the Torah commands our ancestors to prepare degalm, or flags, for themselves. Each tribe was to have its own ensign, and each cluster of three tribes was to have its own standard. וְכָל־בְּנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל־יִסְּבּוּ־בִּלְוֵת־דִּגְלֵיהֶם־כְּדִגְלֵי־בֵּית־אֲבֹתָם׃

וְכָל־בְּנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל־יִסְּבּוּ־בִּלְוֵת־דִּגְלֵיהֶם־כְּדִגְלֵי־בֵּית־אֲבֹתָם׃ "the children of Israel shall pitch their camps, each man according to his own standard, according to the ensigns of his father's house."

Why are flags so important that they must be mentioned in the Torah? What do they really mean? And would it not have been more appropriate to command the preparation of standards during the years of conquest under Joshua, when such military appurtenances were more pertinent, than in the journey through the desert under Moses?

The answer, I suggest, is that the degalm are symbols of order and discipline, of a purpose and a cause which they represent. They reminded the Israelites not only of their allegiance to each other, but also of their past, their roots in tradition. Rashi quotes the Sages: אֵלֶּיךָ יָשָׁבוּ כְּדִגְלֵיהֶם וְכָל־בְּנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל־יִסְּבּוּ־בִּלְוֵת־דִּגְלֵיהֶם־כְּדִגְלֵי־בֵּית־אֲבֹתָם׃ Their order of march under their flags through the desert was identical with the order of their ancestors, the twelve sons of Jacob, which they followed according to the command of their father, when they bore the coffin

of their Father Jacob from Egypt to Canaan. The march of the tribes through the desert recapitulated the march of the twelve sons of Jacob from Egypt to Canaan. History was being relived, and the Jews who gathered around the flag in the desert were conscious of their roots in this glorious history. The degalim, therefore, represented a mutual commitment to the past, to the forefather, and also to the future -- on to the Promised Land.

And this is necessary more in a midbar than at any other time and place! It is precisely when the outside world is characterized by wildness, by hefker, by anarchy and disorder, by fragmentation and disintegration, when there is a wasteland without -- that we must be sure there is no wilderness within. When everything fixed is falling apart, when all that is nailed down seems to be coming loose, when the forces in society veer so crazily that nothing seems to be firm and stable, when all of civilization seems to be in a state of weightlessness, as if in zero gravity, at a time of this sort, we must strengthen our inner life, reinforce our inner discipline, and offer the counterpressure within us to the forces of corrosion without us. We have got to have standards and ensigns, degalim, to hold back the onrushing desert.

I have always admired the Englishmen of colonial times who used to dress in formal English clothing in the heart of subtropical Africa. They have often become the object of jokes, or

of execration as symbols of imperialism. But I think neither is true. They possessed great insight and understood that if people treasure a certain way of life, they must retain its outer signs and symbols; they must have their own degalim in order to survive as a cultural unit in what is, relatively speaking, a wasteland.

The same principle is operative in much more serious circumstances. I recently read an article by a Hungarian Jewess, by no means religious, who writes of her experiences in the concentration camps. She describes with extraordinary admiration the Orthodox women who managed to hold on, in utter and dangerous secrecy, to a few residual religious observances in the very midst of the snakepit of German brutality. They set up their own inner order and discipline in order to survive the hell of the Nazi wilderness. And this inner discipline and symbolism, this sharing of memories past and dreams for the future, irrational as they were, preserved their sanity in the midst of this mass, sadistic insanity. Their private little degalim stayed and ultimately avoided the triumph of the Nazi midbar.

But this is true not only for historic, dramatic circumstances, but also for the vicissitudes of personal life. There are times that people or families are overwhelmed with suffering and grief, when events conspire to question the very basis of our lives, when anguish and pain are so overwhelming that we

lose our balance, when we barely intuit agonizing questions, totally unprepared to formulate them properly and even to hear an answer when one is forthcoming. At a time of such unspeakable grief and misery, the utter savagery in the wilderness of life threatens to engulf us completely and irrevocably -- unless we have some degalim within, some tradition and faith and hope on which to fall back, and in which to find the beginnings of that which can rebuild our lives. The degalim -- the convictions, the rituals, the discipline of Jewish life -- are that which can let us march through the desert and wasteland of life in safety.

It is a sociological principle that in an unstructured society of high fluidity and mobility, a sub-group can survive only if it possesses a strong inner structure. We need this strength, symbolized by degalim, more in a society that is like a midbar than in one that is stabilized and established.

It is in this sense that I address myself particularly this morning to parents of young children. Now more than ever we must have firm and clear standards, flags, ensigns. In a generation of a midbar, we must give more Jewishness to our children, not less. And if we do not give more -- we are in trouble, and we shall have to face the consequences in a few years hence. Our homes must be more Jewish than the one our parents provided for us, if our children are not to be much less Jewish tomorrow than we are today. The world in which we live is a more foreboding wasteland

than when we were young, and our children therefore need degalim -- standards, rules, guideposts -- more than we ever did. It is a mechanical principle that if a rod is bent, it is placed in a lathe, and twice the pressure is applied in the opposite direction in order to straighten it. Similarly, we need twice the amount of Jewishness that was necessary in our school days.

It certainly is beyond dispute that the outside world today is not the same as it was twenty or even ten years ago. Then, on the college campuses, there was occasional overindulgence in liquor and sometimes some erratic conduct, even by Jewish children, but rarely on a large scale. Today, with the drug craze and immorality, we face conditions that are far more consequential for their future. These afflictions are not only temporary aberrations. They last and last and often are indelible. If in our days some young people were in rebellion, today many are gripped by the spirit of revolution -- and, as someone said, some of our young people are thoroughly revolting. If we give them no degalim, no framework or guide, there is nothing for them to come back to. Every morning's newspaper makes it more urgent that we intensify the Jewishness of our homes. Those parents who try to be too much "with it," will find out that in the end they are "without" it, without anything at all.

I am not asking you to be repressive or to be strict at all times. Strictness or liberality in raising children is a

matter of individual circumstances, of your disposition and the temperament of your children. It is something that has to be decided anew at every single step of life by the use of intelligence and psychological insight. We can only pray that we are doing the right thing; we can never be sure. The degel that I recommend is not a stick with which to beat others into submission. It is a symbol that we, as parents, stand for something, and that it is therefore something about which our children can rally and join us in a clear way to the future.

I am not saying that whoever follows this principle is guaranteed to have good, moral, observant Jewish children. There are no guarantees. Life is so complex today, there are so many variables, that there is no <sup>assurance of success.</sup> ~~guarantee~~. But we must make educated efforts and understand that the probabilities lie in this direction.

So I am asking you, as parents, to serve as examples for your children. And I am not referring only to the number of observances. There is no quantitative criterion involved here. I am asking primarily for regularity and for seriousness. I mean that the Shabbat should be a real Shabbat, that the Kiddush should be a real Kiddush, that there should be havdalah, and the study of Torah, and prayer which should be taken with great earnestness. I am asking that tzedakah be practiced not by signing a check in your office and sending it in, but that it be done in the house

so that children can see it and appreciate it. Only in this manner do you stand a chance to raise your children in a truly Jewish manner. These will determine for your children, who are extremely critical, whether your Jewishness is just a gesture, or it is a degel, a standard.

Permit me to give you two examples of the approach to midbar, one with and one without degalim. Both appeared in recent publications.

The first of these two has just appeared this week in the latest issue of the Reform magazine, the CCAR Journal (April 1969). It contains an article by the Reform Hillel director at Princeton University, which, I believe, is one of the significant documents for the history of American Jewry of our times. Its refreshing honesty and candor is, to say the least, admirable. The writer tells us that since his Sunday School days he was taught that a major claim of Reform is that it serves as a bridge between Jews who are emancipated, intellectual, and sophisticated, and Judaism itself -- a bridge which, purportedly, Orthodoxy cannot provide. The writer tells us that, on the basis of his extensive experience in Indiana and Princeton Universities, he now has serious reasons to doubt these claims. Of the several points he makes, permit me to quote three verbatim:

1. Of those faculty who consider a religious approach to Judaism at all, most will only consider Orthodoxy.



2. Generally, students from Orthodox backgrounds maintain a strong interest in worship ... Reform students lose interest in all community worship ... Whereas a Friday evening service at Princeton Hillel is basically a Reform service, it attracts no more students than does the Orthodox service, sponsored by Yavneh. (Apparently, the writer is comparing the Yavneh Friday service with the Reform Hillel Friday service. If we now add the far better attended Shabbat-morning service of Yavneh, the comparison is even more revealing.)

3. I have witnessed many of our best students and best minds turn to Orthodoxy; I have observed no comparable movement from Orthodoxy to any of the Liberal alternatives.

Thus, Orthodox training has provided firm degalim even for those who have left, giving them something to which they can return, something which symbolizes rootedness in the past and in faith. I do not mean to say that Reform has no standards; that would be patently unfair and unjust. But the degalim of Orthodoxy are *ענינים שיש להם*, they refer back to a long history beginning with, and even before, Jacob. What Orthodoxy teaches its adherents is something that goes beyond words and beyond mere conceptualization: the feeling of being a part of a great historical continuum.

Now consider what happens to a community where such Torah training is absent, where there are no Orthodox synagogues or Day Schools. The American Jewish Committee recently sponsored a study of a community called "Lakeville," the fictitious name for an upper-middle-class community in Illinois. This study, by the



distinguished sociologists Sklare and Greenblum, reveals the state of disintegration of Judaism in this particular and supposedly representative community. What observances are practiced are maintained because of extraneous reasons. For instance, they are child-oriented -- that is why Hanukkah and the Passover Seder are some of the only vestiges of Jewish practice. Also, those observances survive which can be given a secular rather than religious interpretation, such as that of freedom. That is why only Hanukkah and the Passover Seder survive... Furthermore, those observances are chosen for survival which can accommodate themselves to the Christian calendar. That is why only Hanukkah and the Passover Seder remain...

What is lacking in Lakeville is obviously the minimal standards of Jewish education.

But it is interesting that one of the major reasons for the lack of Jewish education is, simply -- money; the resources are lacking. But what an amazing commentary on the wealthiest Jewish community in history that it cannot afford money for Jewish education! ~~Where is it?~~ why is that so?

The answer, I believe, is that there is no money lacking. What is lacking is will. There is simply too much money spent on studying Lakeville and not enough spent on teaching Judaism to Lakeville...

Our community is gripped, in its highest echelons, by a survey-mania, by what might be called a "hyper-sociologitis." If there is a crisis -- study it and survey it, and then forget about it. Never before have so many bright people spent so much money to discover what is so obvious to any dull ten-year-old.

The time is coming when committed Jews will have to ask hard questions, to draw hard lines, and to come to hard and firm conclusions as they confront the real issues forcefully.

Our human relations agencies are simply spending too much money on statistical and sociological surveys.

Our federations are spending too much on non-sectarian work, which means on giving money to non-Jews, and pitifully little on Jewish survival.

Our defense organizations have developed the annoying technique of ferreting out any least little sign of anti-Semitism, blowing it up beyond recognition, then asking and receiving money for surveying it, for surrounding it with dialogues and studies and publications, until they finally achieve the great success of reducing the anti-Semitism from the exaggeration which they helped create in the first place to the proportions that characterized it initially.

Eighteen years ago our community asked Prof. MacIver, a distinguished sociologist, to write a report on the problems of

our community. His major conclusion <sup>was</sup> ~~is~~ that we are guilty of a tremendously wasteful duplication of effort.

What is the result? Since that report was issued, our Jewish human relations agencies have spent 150 million dollars on this kind of work! Imagine how many children could have been sent to Yeshivot and to Yeshiva high schools with this money, how much could have been done for Yavneh and Hillel and scholarships to Israeli schools and the endowing of Jewish studies chairs in universities. I calculate that if \$500 per year could help put a child through a Hebrew high school, then for this money we could have put 75,000 children through four years of Yeshiva high schools,!

Our organizations have rushed into the midbar without degalim, those which tie us to the tradition of Father Jacob and lead us to the Promised Land.

We must make it clear that the best protection against religious anti-Judaism is not dialogues, but Jewish homes. The best technique against assimilation is not surveys, but Jewish education. The best defense against anti-Semitism is not anti-defamation work, but a strong Israel.

I am not arguing against sociological information or anti-defamation work or even certain kinds of dialogues, which at the very least can preoccupy those who participate and keep them out of trouble. But they have limited validity. The great question is one of priorities.

Without Jewish education and mitzvot and the study of Torah and Jerusalem and Zion we are a band of stragglers rushing blindly in the vast desert.

With them we are a disciplined group who can rally 'round our standards, knowing whence we come and where we are going, what we want and how to get it.

It is only with this acknowledgement and conviction that we can proceed to Shavuot and Mattan Torah.

And it is with this awareness and this commitment that we shall roll back the desert about us, the wilderness around us, and plant in it the degalm of our faith and our tradition.

Solomon said: *דגל אהבה*, "His standard (or flag) is a symbol of love."

For us, this degel is a sign of God's love for us and our love for Him.