

"THE QUIET AFTER THE STORM"
(Or, "Sit Still for Heaven's Sake")

People often speak of "the quiet before the storm." Today I want to speak about the quiet after the storm. If the quiet before the storm is the quiet of tension, of bristling and nervous anticipation, the quiet after the storm is that of patient waiting, of deep contemplation, of humble wisdom -- the background and provenance of great creativity.

The Biblical description of the giving of Torah is one of theophany -- the appearance of God amidst a great deal of noise and tumult. "There were thunders and lightning and a thick cloud upon the mount, and the voice of a shofar exceedingly loud, and all the people that were in the camp trembled" (Exodus 19:16).

But the Rabbis declare that all this dramatic eruption preceded the giving of the Torah. The actual Revelation took place in an awesome cosmic silence. "Rabbi Yohanan said: when the Holy One gave the Torah, no bird chirped, no winged thing flew, no ox bellowed, the angels did not soar, the seraphim did not say 'Holy, Holy, Holy,' the sea did not quiver, people did not speak; but the whole world kept quiet and was silent, and the voice came forth: 'I am the Lord thy God...'"

Out of a universal stillness, in which even the angels were struck dumb for awe, came that first commandment, "I am the

Lord thy God" -- and that too was not a summons to action, not a *חִוּלָּהּ דְּיָדָא*, but the kind of knowledge that is beyond action and that makes action meaningful.

What the Rabbis meant to teach us was that activity and motion and work and performance are all important, but only as a preface and introduction to true creativity. Greatness itself is born out of the womb of stillness. The Torah was given when the world was silent. The word of God comes forth when the words of man come to an end.

This teaching -- that after all activity must come passivity -- is an acknowledgement that God gave man the commission to be His co-creator; but that ultimately He is the Creator and the Lord, and nothing we do can prosper with^(o)ut Him.

After all is said and done, we must silently wait -- for God. It is the silence that is a symbol and a token of faith.

Let us freely admit that there is something faintly un-American about this doctrine. We Americans are pragmatists, doers, proud of our "know-how." It is an unofficial dogma of Americanism that action is redemptive, that if in doubt -- do something. This is true more so now than ever before; even professors and faculties have turned activists, impatient with the slow and silent processes of the mind. This is the special quality that Americans have always brought to their affairs, from education of children

to diplomacy to social problems: do something -- and do it hard and intensely. If American parents see a young child just staring into space -- they become panicky, unable to appreciate that giving free rein to the imagination is healthy and a part of growing up. And our Presidents have in recent years turned from commercial to pragmatic metaphors. No longer do they speak of "Deals" (such as the New Deal and the Fair Deal), but of Crusades and Frontiers and Great Societies which feature Wars on Poverty.

When activity in structured pattern is unavailable, we tend to collapse. Thus, modern society is afflicted by the "Sunday Syndrome" -- in which millions are distracted to madness because there is one day in which there is "nothing to do."

Those of us who are compulsive workers know, theoretically, that sometimes it is important to relax physically and simply to think. Yet when we finally find the precious moments to do just that -- we find it an almost impossible task! In a spasm of guilt -- because we are not active, because we are not "doing something" -- we pace back and forth, we take notes, we dictate memos, and in a final act of desperation we take to the telephone, that mechanized narcotic for the compulsive activist, whose Torah is the noise and not the silence, the storm and not the quiet.

This actionism has affected our health and the health practices of our compatriots. A wise physician has said the following:

One paradox is that though the United States is the best place in the world in which to have a serious illness ... it is one of the worst countries in the world in which to have a non-serious illness.

Because as actionists, who feel more comfortable doing something and having something done to us, we impose our life-saving drugs and techniques, intended for serious ailments, on minor, even trivial illnesses -- illnesses that are self-limited and that, except for occasional symptomatic relief, do better without interference from the physician. (It is generally recognized that America is the most over-medicated, most over-operated, and most over-inoculated country in the world. It is also the most anxiety-ridden country with regard to health.)

... medicine as it is ... the surgeon is the top man. He is the one you practically enjoy paying because he is "doing something" to you, if not for you. He is doing things you can feel and see and talk about, and this is something that our activist culture can readily appreciate ... The patient generally is too impatient to give nature a chance.

Today, people are not happy about paying the wise doctor who recommends that you do nothing because you have a self-limited disease. They think he has not really earned a fee because they haven't seen him do anything; they have just heard him say a few words.

The patient wants the physician to be active on an heroic scale and the physician does not disdain this role.

(Interview of Herbert Ratner, M.D.
by Donald McDonald, originally
published in 1962, reprinted in
The Center Magazine, May 1969)

So this actionism affects our work habits, our leisure patterns, our health practices, and our whole outlook upon life. It is probably responsible in part for the exaggerated American emphasis on youthfulness, the entire "youth cult" -- the first fruits of which we are harvesting today. For if action is the criterion of well-being, then younger people are more active, and they should be more honored.

This bias even affects the judgments we make of people, sometimes almost ridiculously inappropriate. Thus, some people consider the highest encomium that can be paid to a Rabbi the compliment that "he is dynamic!" -- as if the wisdom of the Torah is confined to go-getters, as if the Jewish tradition is enhanced by the whirl of ceaseless activity rather than by quiet understanding, patient learning, and subdued wisdom.

Of course, I do not mean to suggest a doctrine of total passivity, which is known in the history of religion as "quietism." Certainly, Judaism, more than other religions, emphasizes the importance of the religious act, the *mitzvot* .

But while there can be nothing of value achieved without human effort, human effort alone is not everything. Man must act -- but human action and initiative alone is inadequate, and so he must wait for a moment and listen for an echo from above. After all the sacred deeds (the mitzvot), at the pinnacle of reli-

gious experience comes -- sacred silence. We pray and we pray aloud; but the chief prayer, the amidah, is -- a silent prayer. As the great Jewish ethical philosopher R. Bachya put it, the חובות השל (the duties of the limbs) must make way for the חובות הלב (the duties of the heart).

I believe it is worth repeating some Hasidic wisdom that I have mentioned from this pulpit once before. The Bratzlaver Hasidim used to recommend that every person set aside, once a day, a "dead hour." During that hour we should be "dead to the world," unavailable for business or social obligations or family duties or small talk. It must be an hour, or even a half an hour, or even a quarter of an hour -- which we devote to silent introspection, to quite probing, to contemplation in utter stillness. Such a dead hour makes the whole day worth living! Of course, I do not mean to recommend TV watching for half an hour a day or card-playing. That is too "dead" an hour, that is a waste of time. I refer to the silence and privacy in which we confront ourselves and open up to God.

So, to the Americans' frantic cry, "do something, for God's sake," we might well respond, "sit still -- for Heaven's sake!"

Our Rabbis make a fascinating statement in the sixth chapter of Avot: Rabbi Joshua b. Levi said: כבד יור ויורב גל
קוד יוצא מנהר חורב ומכרזל לאומת לאו עת
עבריות מעצבונה של תורה.

"Every day a heavenly voice issues from Mt. Horeb (the other name for Sinai) and proclaims, saying: woe to those people who cause insult to the Torah."

Since that first Shavuot, the Divine Voice still broadcasts on the same heavenly wave-length from Sinai every day.

But then the question is: why do we not hear it? Why are we not moved to teshuvah every day?

The answer, I submit, is that we do not hear it because we are not listening; because we are too "busy"; because we are so involved in doing things, even for Yiddishkeit, in activities and motions, that we have no time and no patience to listen to the

ה' י' .

But if we do not hear that voice all year, that voice that issues from Sinai and vibrates within our souls, let us listen at least during Shavuot, the anniversary of the event at Sinai. If we cannot sharpen our perception and sensitivity, our inner ear, during a "dead hour" every day - - or week -- then at least let us emulate the stillness of Sinai and Revelation on this one Festival.

There is a special beauty to this holiday -- and that is that it has no special observances: no Sukkah, no Lulav, no Seder, no Matzah, no Menorah. We have only two days off-- to think, to contemplate, to wonder, to feel within our very bones

the mystery that surrounds us, to open our hearts up to God, to listen quietly with an inner ear and maybe yet hear: the heavenly voice from Sinai.

As we approach Yizkor, let us appreciate that message ever more. No feverish activity can change the past. No intense motions can show our love and our longing and our residual pain. We just utter a few words -- and in the silent privacy of our own hearts offer a prayer and reunite in stillness with our cherished memories.

This wordless rendezvous with the past, with our roots, with our parents and our loved ones, can only enlarge and refine us -- and teach us the lesson of faith, the silence out of which the Torah was given and in which it must be received.

In the opening words of today's Haftorah: בְּיָמָיו
וְהָיָה לְךָ וְהָיָה לְךָ
וְהָיָה לְךָ וְהָיָה לְךָ וְהָיָה לְךָ
"The Lord is in His Holy Temple: keep silent
before Him all the earth."