

BEYOND CYNICISM

This morning I want to share a mood with you -- not analysis, not criticism, only a feeling; more a perception than a conception. Perhaps, more truthfully, I wish to share my confusions with you or, more charitably, my movement from cynicism to something beyond that.

Surely, the contemplation of the Jewish situation in the world today leads to cynicism, dejection, and even disgust. It is hard not to be a cynic.

The history of this period is like something out of the theatre of the absurd. It is what our Rabbis called *עולם הפוך*, a topsy-turvy world, a crazy world. Consider this: Black countries, until recently ravished by Arab slave traders, become the zealous advocates of Yasir Arafat. Nations whose nationals are expelled from Uganda in a most merciless fashion offer a rising ovation for that psychopath, Idi Amin. New countries with little geography and less history, but recently liberated, are enthusiastic anti-Israel, denying to Jews the kind of national liberation movement which made them free. And the International Womens' Conference in Mexico City last June failed to report out a resolution against sexism, but managed easily to vote a resolution against Zionism!

So it is easy to be a cynic, especially as a reaction to the cynicism in the world about us. Indeed, the choicest piece of contemporary cynicism has an ancient history indeed. We read

ואשר תולדות יצחק בן אברהם
אברהם הוליד את יצחק
"These are the generations of Isaac the son of Abraham: Abraham begot Isaac." But if we know that Isaac is the son of Abraham, is it not superfluous to tell us that Abraham was the father of Isaac? Rashi here quotes a well-known but puzzling Midrash: The *ציוני הדור*, the cynics of the generation, spread an obscene rumor that *מאבימלך נתעברה שרה*, that Isaac was not the son of Abraham, but rather the son of Abimelech, into whose harem Sara had briefly been taken. In order to counter this rumor, the Almighty fashioned *הפסל פניו*, the form of Isaac's face, to be identical with that of Abraham's, thus giving the lie to the ugly gossip.

But why would the Rabbis want to repeat this ancient obscene rumor? The answer is, because while it may be obscene, it is not really ancient! It is as modern as today's newspapers. The idea behind the pagans who circulated this choice bit of pornography, was that Isaac may very well by carrying on the faith of Abraham, worshipping the same God and carrying out the same cultic and moral principles, but he was not really the son of Abraham. Isaac -- the Jewish people -- has a thousand fathers, they maintained. Hence, Isaac was not really the heir to Abraham, and could not lay claim to the divine promise to *ברכת הארץ*, the peoplehood of Abraham's descendants, and their rights to Canaan or Palestine. They were willing to grant us a religion but -- not a peoplehood.

That same obscenity has now been repeated in the United Nations, where the struggle against Israel and against Zionism has moved from the realm of politics to that of ideology. The attack now is against us at our most sensitive and crucial level. Listen to the delegates from Syria, Saudi Arabia, and other countries as they maintain, with the unctuous sanctimoniousness of hypocrisy dripping from their lips, that they respect Judaism as a religion, but they deny that Jews are a people with a right to their own land. Not only non-Jews, but the Chancellor of Austria, Mr. Kreisky, this past week delivered him self of a pronunciamento that the Jews do not constitute a people, probably based

upon what has been called "transferred authority," i.e., his assumption that political position confers upon him the right of making statements of historical scholarship.

So that the U.N. vote in the Third Committee that Zionism is a species of racism, is really that old rumor about Abraham and Abimelech and Sarah in modern dress.

The *הַדוּר הַזֶּה* are alive again. The sneer and snort of ancient cynics has been disinterred and resurrected and is abroad in the land.

And what is more cynical than President Sadat, who was accorded all the honors of the United States this past week, who made the statement that in 1950 he wanted to buy a radio from a Jew in a store in Cairo, but the owner refused to sell it to him "on orders of the Zionists in Israel." This story is so ludicrous, that if it were not tragic it would be laughable. It comes right out of the Protocols of the Elders of Zion. In truth, this is a half-truth: The half-lie is Sadat's contention that in 1950, two years after the creation of the State of Israel, the economy of Egypt was in the hands of the Jews. The half-truth is that the merchant probably refused to sell it to him -- and for good reason! Egyptian Jews refused to deal with Egyptian Nazis, and Sadat was one of the leaders of an organization *Misr al-Fatat*, and was editor of that group's paper, the slogan of which was, "Death to the Jews!" Sadat himself was a Nazi, and collaborated with the Germans during the war.

Is this the man who is the great "moderate" whom we are asked to trust? And how wierd is our generation that not only is Sadat not reprimanded, but when Ambassador Toon says in Israel that Sadat embarrassed the American Government by this anti-Semitic remark, he is reprimanded by the State Department -- whose chief is a Jew! And when the Mayor of New York refuses to accord honors to Sadat, it is not Sadat who is excoriated for his anti-Semitism, but Mayor Beame for his "parochialism!"

It is such a situation which leads me to *הַדוּר הַזֶּה* (cynicism), and worse -- almost to despair. In my darker moments, I think that maybe the world has "had it," maybe the new anti-Semitism is only the old anti-Semitism made more "respectable" -- and ready to erupt world-wide in all its old ugliness if the political and economic and social conditions warrant it. Maybe the Holocaust did not teach us anything at all! It obviously did not teach much to the Gentiles. Young Germans tell us to stop reminding them of the Holocaust, that it was only their parents who killed six million Jews, not they. The French resort to legalisms in order to avoid having to imprison the butchers of the Jews of France. But much worse. Let us forget for a moment about Jews. Where was the world when the lonely and isolated Kurds were crushed by Iraq? And where is the compassionate and merciful Christian West when the Maronite Christians in Lebanon are drowning in a sea of Arab Moslems who are out to destroy them?

I also do not think Jews have learned enough from the Holocaust. I find embarrassing resistance even amongst Jews to remembering the Shoah. In The Center, we make some modest efforts to remember the Holocaust martyrs: We stand while reciting the *אב קדמוים* (the prayer for martyrs), and recite a special memorial prayer for them before the Yizkor -- and even here there are some who object to it! Of course, we shall ignore such objections. What bothers me most and is to me a source of great chagrin is that The Jewish Center, together with three other major synagogues of the West Side, have several years ago decided to sponsor a Yom Hashoah celebration -- at least one day a year to memorialize the victims, in response to the constant and correct challenge, "What are the Rabbis doing to remember the victims of the Nazis?"

I am deeply pained to say that the major attendance comes from those who experienced the death camps themselves. Where are all our American Jews? -- especially those who were adults in America, while the slaughter was going on in Europe?

So, maybe the Holocaust had no or little effect on the world. If that is true, it is the stuff of which despair is made. If that is the case, then I must conclude that history is over, that civilization is finished.

Perhaps there is no better expression of such sentiment than the poem which I came across only a short while ago, a poem by one of the greatest lights of contemporary Yiddish and Hebrew literature, a man who passed away only a year or two ago, Aaron Zeitlin, אהרן צייטלין. Permit me to give it to you in the original Yiddish, with my own verbatim translation:

אהרן צייטלין

קדיש אין א טויט-וואגאן

אין א טויט-וואגאן א פארפלאכירטן,
א פארדראטיקטן מיט שטעכיק דראט,
שטעלט זיך אויף א ייד און רעדט צו גאט:
כ'פיר ליכט מיט זיך. דו זעסט? איך צינד זיי אן.
מיר אלע אין וואגאן
וועלן זאגן קדיש
נאך זיך אליין. יתגדל ויתקדש
שמה רבא. — — —

אן געוויין
האבן אלע קדיש אפגעזאגט נאך זיך אליין —
און גאט האט זיך געשטעלט
זאגן קדיש נאך דער וועלט.

KADDISH IN A DEATH-WAGON

In a death-wagon, sealed,
Tied up in barbed wire,
A Jew stands up and speaks to God:
"I am carrying a candle with me. Do You see? I am going to light it.
All of us in this wagon
Are going to say Kaddish
For ourselves. Yitgadal ve-Yitkadash
Shmei Rabbah..."

Without a tear or a sob
All said Kaddish for themselves...
And God stood up
And said Kaddish for the world.

And yet -- and yet I invite you to join me in going beyond cynicism and beyond despair to an attitude based on faith, reaching out for hope, and daring to be optimistic.

I believe that the heady days of 1967 are not standard for the Jewish destiny in this unredeemed world, and we ought not to measure our condition

against those unusual days; that 1973 and 1975 are a continuation of 1948, and together they represent the gradual and halting development and unfolding of Jewish independence and dignity; that the Declaration of Independence in 1948 was the beginning and not the end of the struggle for Jewish survival and statehood and triumph; that what is happening now is part of a much longer process of *ישועת ישראל*, the salvation of Israel, the divinely inspired liberation; that God works surely but often slowly, and that the slowness is part of the sureness; that gradualness is of the essence of the divine design-- as Abudrahm (the great Sephardic medieval sage) put it: even in nature God works gradually and not abruptly, for if He would end the night with a sudden, blazing sun as it is on high noon, people's eyes would burn out and their minds and bodies could not acclimate themselves to daytime, and hence -- in our daily prayers -- we say, *ה' מביא שמש על הארץ וכל בני ארץ ברחמים*, God brings sunshine to the earth and its inhabitants "in compassion," for His compassion expresses itself in the gradualness of His benevolence.

And so, despite our impatience, we must hope and we must be confident that the little pieces of peace will cumulatively overcome the large chunks of disappointment and frustration; that we shall recapitulate what was told to us this morning, of Isaac when he dug the three wells and named them, consecutively, *עקב* (strife), *עש* (hatred), and *שקט* (room, peace). We are now in the first or maybe the second stage of that development -- the level of strife or hatred; but we shall surely arrive at *שקט*, at full peace.

Even more: if we are truly Jews, we not only fully believe that we shall "make it" and emerge safely, but we must reaffirm the Jewish faith that the Jewish destiny is to serve as a light to the nations of the world, to save the world from itself. A distinguished colleague of mine (Rabbi Avigdor Cyperstien) once said that this is the meaning of the very first thing we learn about our father Jacob, in today's Sidra, that in his foetal position *ויד אחיז בברכה*, that his hand was holding on to the heel of Esau: it is the destiny of Jacob and his children to act as a moral restraint on Esau, to hold him back from following the murderous intentions in his pagan breast, to act as a goad and as a prick of conscience to remind him of that aspect of his own character that is more virtuous and more worthy.

וה' מושיעים ביום ה' את ארץ ישראל, והיה לה ה' למלכות.

"And saviours will go up on Mt. Zion to judge Mt. Esau, and the kingdom will be to the Lord."

The salvation of Zion will lead to the restoration of sanity and peace of the world, and the acknowledgement of the Kingdom of God.

And on that day, God will recite not a Kaddish for his world, but a Mi-she'berakh for all mankind.