

"THE LUNAR PERSPECTIVE"

This week's historic telecast of the moon's surface by the astronauts who orbited it, the telecast which concluded with the recitation of the first words of Genesis, no doubt brought great satisfaction to religious earth-dwellers. Most especially, religious Jews were delighted that the first verses of the Hebrew Bible were chosen for this memorable message transmitted across one quarter of a million miles of the great void.

But for those of us sensitive to history, this was more than just an occasion for understandable pride by religious folk. For the Jewish tradition teaches that Abraham emerged from a family and society who were ovdei kokhavim u-mazalot, pagans and heathen who worshiped the stars and the planets. Modern archeology has not only corroborated this tradition, but has pinpointed more accurately the exact idols worshiped by the pagans of that time and place. We know today that the great metropolitan centers of Ur and Haran, cities well known to us from the biblical narratives about Abraham, were centers of moon worship, a religion which left its imprints even on the names of early biblical personalities. Thus, the similarity of the name of Abraham's father Terah to yerah (month) and yareiah (moon), and that of Laban, Lavan, which is the masculine form of levanah (moon). It is from this background of moon-cult that Abraham emerged to proclaim to the world the message of one God.

What a divine irony, therefore, what a singular historic vindication, that 3500 years later, the first men to approach the vicinity of that celestial body once worshiped as a deity, should call out the words Bereshit bara Elohim et ha-shamayim v'et ha-aretz, one God -- as Abraham taught -- created both heaven and earth, this globe and its natural satellite. Girdling the lifeless carcass of that forlorn heavenly body, like some ancient gladiator with his foot on the neck of his enemy, mankind has thus proclaimed through those three American astronauts the final triumph of monotheism, of Judaism, over paganism, the victory of the religion of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob over that of Terah and Laban.

But the relevance of this latest feat of technology to religious thinking is more than that of just historical association. There is much more to be said, more than can be condensed into the confines of a brief talk. But it is important to mention what is one of the most significant items that emerges from a religious contemplation of this technological triumph, and that is what might be called the "Lunar Perspective" of life on earth.

One editorial writer for a large metropolitan daily mentioned that one of the interesting psychological insights that resulted from the orbiting of the moon was the feeling that earth is just another globe, and that the astronauts viewing the earth from the moon might have had occasion to ask themselves, "is it inhabited?" In other words, seen from another heavenly body, the earth reduces in significance, it is just another small ball whirling

about aimlessly in space. From this perspective, how puny man's ambitions suddenly become, how picayune his loves and his hates, how petty his triumphs and his failures, how trivial his endeavors and his aspirations! All that engages our attention on earth -- the clash of world blocs, the problems of nations, the conflicts between communities and families, individual difficulties and dreams and disappointments -- all this suddenly becomes meaningless when viewed from the Lunar Perspective.

This Lunar Perspective is therefore a good antidote for human superciliousness, when men take themselves altogether too seriously.

And yet, the Lunar Perspective can be very dangerous indeed. For when we view man and society against the larger cosmic backdrop, we are in danger of being overwhelmed into ignoring the infinite preciousness of every human being, the infinite sanctity of the individual personality. When dealing with the vastness of interstellar space, man reduces to insignificance as the earth itself is considered to be but a speck whirling aimlessly in the endless empty oceans of the cosmic abyss, and all of life appears meaningless and insignificant.

It is for this reason that great men throughout history were careful to go beyond drawing religious conclusions from a contemplation of nature. That is why the German philosopher Immanuel Kant, in the conclusion of his The Critique Of Pure Reason, said, "Two things fill the mind with ever new and increasing wonder and awe: the

starry heavens above me and the moral law within me." And of course, Kant was not the first to propound this idea. Centuries before, a Jewish king, David, wrote the Psalms, and he divided the nineteenth Psalm into two parts. The first half begins with: ha-shamayim mesaperim kevod El, "the heavens declare the glory of God," the firmament and the revolutions of the cosmos are the testimony of God's greatness. The second half of that Psalm begins with torat ha-Shem temimah, "the law of the Lord is perfect," it speaks of man's ability to obey the Will of God, of the moral law and the ethical instincts within man. The wise men of both religion and philosophy thus understood that a contemplation of the heavens alone, of the glories of nature, can lead us to an appreciation of the awesomeness of the Creator, but often this phenomenon brings with it an awareness of the nothingness of the creature -- as Maimonides put it, beriah shefelah va-afelah (Hil. Yesodei Hatorah, II), "a dark and dismal creature." Looking at life from the point of view of the heavens alone can make the distance between God and man so great, so infinite, that man's worth vanishes. It is therefore important to add, and to emphasize even more, the moral law, the ability of man to abide by "the Law of the Lord" which is "perfect."

The Lunar Perspective is therefore a healthy one -- but only when taken in moderation.

Indeed, this Lunar Perspective is new only quantitatively,

not qualitatively. It is novel only in degree -- never before have men been able to view their home planet from this distance and in this grand a manner. But it is not new in kind. For whenever men have dealt with large numbers, with great masses, they have tended to overlook and to derogate the individual human being. Single human beings are imperilled by statistics, by which they are often reduced to mere ciphers. Social thinkers from Marx to From to Reisman have commented upon and analysed the deep personalization of man in the mass-producing society. That is why many talented individuals today often refuse to work for large corporations, because they do not want to end up as but a file in someone else's cabinet. That is why students in the mass universities frequently revolt, because they do not want to become merely embodiments of an IBM card who have no relation with professor<sup>or</sup> administration.<sup>^</sup>

In this sense, the problem of Lunar Perspective is taken up, even if only obliquely, in today's Sidra. We read of the historic reunion of Joseph and Jacob. When Jacob's children tell their old father that Joseph is still alive and the ruler of Egypt, his heart remains cold and he does not believe them. But when he sees the wagons -- va-yar et ha-agalot -- which Joseph sent to Canaan with which to bring Jacob and his family down to Egypt, "the spirit of their father Jacob was revived."

What did these wagons have to do with making the happy news

of his son more credible to the old patriarch? Rashi quotes the Rabbis in an answer which, while it violates every rule of chronological sequence, affords us a profound moral and psychological insight. Their answer is based on the fact that the Hebrew word agalah means two things: both "wagon" and "heifer." These wagons, the Sages said, were a symbol of the eglah arufah, the ritual of the beheaded calf, which Joseph and Jacob had been studying just as he left to seek out his brothers some seventeen years earlier. It was Joseph's way of signaling to his father that he still remembered the portion of Torah that they were studying when they last saw each other.

But what is the importance of this observance of eglah arufah which they were studying, even if we are willing to accept the anachronism? This ritual of the beheading of the heifer had to be performed by the elders of a town near which a man was found slain and his murderer was unknown. The elders, in a demonstration of mutual responsibility for all human beings, had to wash their hands after the beheading of the heifer, and declare, "our hands did not spill this blood and our eyes did not see." The Jewish tradition understood this last half of the sentence as a kind of self-indictment: it is true that we did not murder him, but perhaps we are partially guilty because our eyes did not see, because patarnuhu be'li mezonot u-ve'li levayah, we allowed a stranger to come into our community unobserved, unwelcomed, unfed, we allowed him to leave without accompanying him and that is how he met his bitter end on the lonely road at night.

When Jacob heard of the survival of Joseph and his great success, he was not only blissfully happy but also worried. He was concerned not that Joseph had lost his faith in the one God of Abraham, or that he had failed in loyalty to the tradition of the House of Jacob. Jacob knew his son Joseph, he trusted his ability to resist all kinds of temptation. But he was afraid that Joseph might have lost contact with what is one of the greatest teachings of Abraham and Judaism: the value of an individual man, the doctrine that each human being is created in the tzellem Elohim, the Image of God, and therefore every individual is infinitely sacred. Now, thought Jacob, that Joseph is running a whole empire, that he personally manipulates the entire grain market of Egypt and controls all its real estate, that at his will he shifts populations, perhaps he has forgotten what an individual human being is like, perhaps he has lost sight of the fact that individual people are as important as masses of people. In that case, he might believe in God, but he would no longer be a child of Abraham. Therefore, when Joseph sent him the wagon, symbol of the eglah arufah, reminding Jacob symbolically that he still understood the principle of the beheaded heifer--namely, that the community and its elders must always be ready to assume responsibility for every hapless, unknown, anonymous stranger as long as he is human -- "the spirit of their father Jacob was revived."

Few principles are more important for us today. We must



diligently beware of the Lunar Perspective getting us deeper into depersonalization, into the diminution of the human worth. We must not allow the Lunar Perspective to justify a lack of care and compassion and concern for others, to become the apology for turning away any stranger be'li mezonot u-ve'li levayah, without food or care or attention.

Our ancient forbears, it is said, were frightened by the eclipse of the moon. If we are to remain moral and sensitive human beings, we must become frightened by the eclipse by the moon -- the eclipse of all human interests and social concern by over-attention to the great problems of space.

Our country, the United States, is today suffering the agonies of revolution because for three hundred years we were too busy building up our country and did not care about the plight of the black man or the poor man. And so today we are paying with more than one "beheaded heifer" for having closed our eyes to the black man for all these years.

If there is anyone who appreciates the importance of care and concern for individuals in the face of "larger problems," it is Jews. For during the last great war, the leaders of the "free world" were generally too busy and preoccupied with the great problems of the war to pay attention to the fate and the destiny of a few million Jews. The Prime Minister of one great democracy was too concerned with war tactics and manoeuvres to care about the Jewish problem, and his foreign minister cried out in exasperation, "what in the world shall we do with a million Jews?" The Secretary of State of



another democracy protested that he could not waive technicalities of American law in order to save a couple million Jews, because he was involved in a great war against the Nazi war machine. And his President, in the anticipation a generation ago of what appears to be the new policy of the incoming administration, "evenhandedly" maintained that he learned as much about the Jewish problem from one half hour with King Ibn Saud as he did from all the years with the New York Zionists. And so all these big people with their big problems overlooked six million people who marched to their deaths. The Allied world did not spill this blood, but: their eyes did not see! And they are guilty, and no amount of washing of the hands will take away the stain of that blood. It is this week, on the fast of Asarah be'Tevet, that in Israel there is commemorated the deaths of these millions of our fellow Jews, as a kind of mass "Yahrzeit" for all those Jews whose precise date of death -- or murder -- is not known.

As we enter this new period of human history unfolding before us, let us therefore remember that the Lunar Perspective is all to the good if it brings man to his senses when he is over-obsessed with his own importance. But when it threatens to diminish our worth, to encourage us to indifference and apathy to our fellow men, it is good to recall that this Lunar Perspective was obtained only because human beings conceived of this flight, because they paid

for it, because they engineered it. It is good to remember that the Lunar Perspective was taken by -- human beings, for it is they who first gazed at the earth from the moon. And it was a human reaction to this Lunar Perspective that prompted the American astronauts to recite to us, from literally another world, the divine proclamation Bereshit bara Elohim et ha-Shamayim v'et ha-aretz, "In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth" -- a passage which ends, so appropriately, with the words: va-yar Elohim, "and God saw," ki tov, "that it was good" -- and indeed, it can yet be good.