

NOAH AND JONAH

It is instructive to compare the story of Noah with another Biblical tale, that of Jonah. The two stories have a number of elements in common. The scene of each is set, largely, in water; each of them is a moral drama, one of sin and punishment; the hero of each is a reluctant prophet -- Noah, who builds an ark for himself, but fails to arouse his contemporaries to repentance, and Jonah who would rather flee from God than undertake the mission of preaching to Nineveh; and, in each case, the major sin of the generation is described by the Hebrew word **חמס**, which is usually translated as "violence," and which generally means any outrageous overreaching, and more specifically, robbery. Yet there the comparison ends. For the Jonah story has a happy ending, one of repentance by the king and the people of Nineveh, whereby the city is saved. Whereas the Noah story ends in tragedy -- the cataclysm of the great deluge which destroyed all life save that of Noah and the inhabitants of the ark.

Why this difference? I suggest that the solution turns on the word **חמס**. Note the idiomatic distinction in the two different contexts in which the word appears. In Noah, we read that **וַתִּמָּסָה הָאָרֶץ חָמָס** or **וַתִּמָּסָה הָאָרֶץ חָמָס** -- the entire earth was filled with violence: **חמס** seeped into the soil, it polluted the water, it was present in the very atmosphere, the air that people breathed. It was ubiquitous. It was simply a given, an accepted part of life. Whereas in the Jonah story, we read **וּמִן הַחָמָס אֲשֶׁר בְּכַפֵּיהֶם**, the "violence that was in their hands."

The hand or palm is the symbol of grasping, of taking for oneself. The "violence of the hand" hence is individual, it speaks of the satisfaction of personal wants, the gratification of desires, of natural or material or political appetites. Such **חמס** is culpable, it is wrong -- but it is understandable for it is natural. When man practices this kind of **חמס**, he is like an animal. Few animals die of old age or sickness; most die violently, they are devoured by other animals. No wonder that the king of Nineveh, in his act of repentance, commands that his entire people fast, and that the animals too shall fast during this period of repentance. For the sin that was committed was that his people had become animals, that they had ignored the norms of justice and fairness, and had grasped and devoured for their personal satisfaction. It was a crime, but it was forgivable.

With Noah however, the generation was guilty of something far worse. Their violence filled all the world. It was injustice for its own sake, as a way of life, not for the satisfaction of personal desires. The world was filled with the senseless violence of vandalism, not the violence of the venal, selfish kind. When man indulges this species of **חמס**, he descends to a level lower than that of the animals.

Perhaps this is what the Rabbis really meant when they said that the stealing of the Generation of the Flood was **כְּחֹת פְּחוֹת מֵעֶזֶק כֶּרֶס**, less than a penny's worth. Remarkable: people commit such minor, trivial versions of petty thievery, stealing only half a penny at a time, and for this God ordains that the entire world be destroyed in a swirling flood! Where is the sense of fairness? What the Rabbis meant, I believe, was to indicate that the **חמס** was not for profit, it was not in order to benefit them, but rather it was just for the joy of stealing as such. Violence became its own justification, stealing almost casual. Various psychological explanations are often offered for this kind of violence. Whether they are valid or not, they are irrelevant to this discussion.

For there is no excuse for a crime committed for its own sake, without benefit to the criminal.

Indeed, on Yom Kippur day we confess, amongst others in that long list of sins, to *על חטא שיחטאנו לפניך ב'צר הרע*, for the sin we committed by the Evil Inclination. But are not all sins committed because of the Evil Inclination? No, they are not. Those sins that are committed because of the *על הרע*, because of sensuousness or the desire for profit or self-aggrandizement, are sins and we must confess them and thereby attain forgiveness. But we are doomed if the sins we have committed cannot be justified on the basis of selfishness or graspingness, the sins that are committed without even the excuse of the *על הרע*...

Hence, too, at the climax of the whole year, at the Neilah service on Yom Kippur, in the two major passages of the service, we emphasize *אישק* (a synonym of *חמץ*) and twice we say *למען נהדש אישק ד'ני*, we ask forgiveness and hope that henceforth our hands will desist from violence, from robbery. It is possible to pray for forgiveness for "the violence of the hands." But the other, unselfish, blind, unmotivated meanness, whether *אישק* or *חמץ*, violence for its own sake -- for that there is never any forgiveness. Thus we may answer a question that the Rabbis ask: Why is it that the Torah specifies that the punishment of the Generation of the Flood came because of the *חמץ* (which, as indicated, is narrowly interpreted as robbery), when the people of this generation also committed idolatry and *זיוף צדקות*, immorality? Are not the latter two far more serious crimes than mere robbery? The answer, according to the theory we have been presenting, is that indeed *חמץ* is worse than all, precisely because it was not a response to an inner, personal need. At least immorality has the excuse of a hyperactive libido, and idolatry can be justified as the primitive stirrings of fear and apprehension and awe within the human soul. But the violence that has become second nature, that fills the earth and the world, and in which one has no personal stake -- this can be rectified only by drowning in the flood.

This difference between senseless violence and self-serving violence was illustrated to us amply during our own lifetime, in the history of the second World War. Nazism represented hatred for its own sake, not merely for well-defined reasons. After the war all of us wondered: How could this have happened? How shall we explain this diabolical outburst? And because we had all along accepted that there are rational explanations for history, we sought them here too. We told ourselves that it was revenge for the Treaty of Versailles; that a scapegoat was needed; that there were political reasons or economic explanations.

Most recently, Professor Lucy Dawidowicz, in her book The War against the Jews, has presented a different thesis, and one which is shared by a number of other historians. German anti-Semitism was virulent even when it hurt the German war effort militarily and economically. The destruction of European Jewry robbed the Germans of a work force of tremendous proportions when the Germans needed it most, in the most desperate phase of the war. There was no selfish excuse for the murder of six million Jews. It was simply that *האויז הארץ חמץ*, their entire world was filled with this kind of hatred for its own sake. Raoul Hilberg, one of the most distinguished historians of the Holocaust, has calculated that from the point of view of the economics of the German war effort, the "final solution" cost so much that it reduced to zero all the spoils of war that the Nazis took from their victims!

It is in this sense of hatred without reason that the time is overdue that we got rid of -- and help others get rid of -- the image of the Third World

countries as either political innocents who must be excused on romantic grounds; or symbols of our own guilt for being a wealthy country which we must expiate by catering to their every whim; or as people whose poverty entitles them to uncivilized conduct without suffering the consequences of such conduct -- and while most of the Third World nations are very poor, others are much too rich.

Our own residual naiveté was shattered as irremediably as Humpty Dumpty when, this past week or so, the Third World delegates to the United Nations gave an enthusiastic, rising, standing ovation to that crude, illiterate, national butcher of Uganda, Idi Amin. To have elected this international mugger as head of the Organization of African States was bad enough. Perhaps someone with an incredibly elastic sense of tolerance can find some excuse for it. But for the delegates to give such glowing testimony of their personal respect and affection for this walking obscenity is nothing less than a sign that in our generation too *ומגזא הארץ חגים*, the atmosphere itself, the entire world, is poisoned by hatred and violence.

I am still not recovered from an encounter some two or three years ago in Geneva. It was an international conference, attended by all kinds of people. One young man from Cameroon, a man who was a diplomat and a professor and a Christian theologian, turned to me and said, "You Jews are all racists because of your support of Israel and your theory of the Chosen People." I was aghast at the crudeness and stupidity of his remarks. I asked him publicly, "Have you ever seen a Jew before?" Of course, he had not. Out of respect for my colleagues at the conference, I refrained from pursuing the issue and asking the next question: Do you have any idea where Israel or Palestine is? I am sure that he would not have known, as he knew so very little of anything else.

Ambassador Hayyim Herzog was right when he branded the document that issued recently from the Lima Conference of Third World nations as anti-Semitic. One does not have to have a touch of Jewish paranoia to see in it all the classical signs of the Noah-variety of *סאח*.

Perhaps I may be guilty of a little paranoia -- but paranoiacs sometimes see the truth -- when I detect a link between the young barbarians who taunted Lubavitcher Hasidim attending the funeral of one of their number who was killed this past holiday and called out, "Heil Hitler," and the older barbarians who gave that enthusiastic applause for Idi Amin, whose avowed idol is Adolf Hitler.

And consider how the Third World representatives tried to justify this obscene display. I wondered, when I read the remarks of the ambassador of Dahomey: What does he know about Israel or Zionism, except that his country and neighboring African countries have shown that they are ingrates to Israel, the country which first gave them the best help they ever got? I wonder more: What kind of self-defeating hatred is it that throws Africans into the Arab corner -- when Africans, above all others, were the chief victims for centuries of the Arab slave trade which exploited and pillaged and raped their population?

It is a task not only of American diplomacy and press and government,

but of the public as well, to expose malice and violence and injustice and political vandalism and **חמס** of any kind when it is practiced by rich or by poor, by former colonialists or by former colonies, by advanced or by developing nations, by black or white, or yellow or brown races.

Hence, we must give our unreserved praise and congratulations to the United States Ambassador to the United Nations, Dr. Daniel Moynihan, for his courageous telling of the truth in public about the Third World countries. It is not enough for us to send telegrams and letters to the president or congressmen or senators when we are in opposition to any stand taken by the government. It is equally important that we notify our leadership when we are pleased with a stand that they have taken, such as that so ably articulated by Ambassador Moynihan.

Israel is today threatened from many quarters. Amongst them are the Arabs and the Third World countries. The Arabs represent the Jonah-type of enmity: **חמס בכפ'יהם**, the "violence of the hand." The Third World nations embody the Noah-type of enmity: **ויתמסא הארץ חמס**, violence for its own sake.

I can foresee, in my more hopeful moments, that Arabs and Jews will some day achieve Shalom, peace. The hatred of the Arabs for Israelis, though unjustified, is understandable on the grounds of a narrowly conceived self-interest. I can understand them in the way I can understand a criminal who wants things for himself. But I wonder how long, how very very long, it will take for Jews or Israelis or any morally sensitive non-Jew to take up real friendship again with the Third World. Of course, in international affairs, friendships and loyalties come and go. But I refer specifically to those people who did the applauding -- to those moral misfits, those malice-mongers of third-rate autocracies which constitute so much of the Third World, after the shameful demonstrations of this past week and month and year.

Sadly, this has proved to be a Noah-kind of world, not a Jonah-kind of world. Accordingly to the strictest canons of justice, the **מדת קד'ן**, they are deserving of a cataclysmic, watery end, the flood all over again. Yet I remain hopeful. The Torah, after all, promised us that no more would such floods decimate the population of the world; that even if we deserved it, divine compassion would prevail.

But more than that, I am hopeful because of the words of David in the Psalms: **ה' למבול ישב, וישב ה' מלך לעולם ועד**, "The Lord sat enthroned at the Flood, and the Lord will remain enthroned as King **עולם ועד**" -- which means both forever, and for the world; for the world will survive.

But its survival cannot remain forever that of the human jungle, which is worse than that of the animals -- the jungle of **חמס** for its own sake. For the next verse must inevitably follow, **ה' צוה לעמו יתן, ה' יברך את עמו בשלום**, "The Lord will give strength to His people, the Lord will bless His people -- and all the world -- with peace."