

"BACKBONE":

A SERMON ON THE ANATOMY OF THE SPIRIT "

A great national magazine recently featured an article which was somewhat frivolous, and yet also unfortunately symbolic. It informed us that among the leaders of society, the "people who really count, " the newest status symbol is -- back trouble! Apparently, all kinds of discomfort in the back, whether muscular or slipped disc or any of the many afflictions localized in that region, are supposed to be an indication that one has arrived, that he is a blessed member of the in-group of society, that he has evidenced good taste in his choice of illness, and that he is in very high company indeed.

I would not mention this instance of medical snobbism, were it not for the fact that, to my mind, there is something disturbingly representative of our times in this latest fad of those who set the tone among the influential and the popular. A weak back is, indeed, the spiritual affliction and moral malaise of our entire generation. Our affluent society has set up new standards for our contemporary Americans; and they are quite different from the kind of ethics which motivated the pioneers of this country. Not hard work, but the easy life is the way to success. Not the struggle to make a living, and to enjoy the sweet fruits of dedicated effort, but the shortcut to fame and popularity is the goal and ideal of our youth. The generation that labored mightily in order to achieve its

triumph<sup>h</sup> has now given way to their children and grandchildren, who, inheriting their wealth, fortune, or general prosperity, have set a new mood of softness for all Americans. Today's slum-dweller has never heard of H<sup>o</sup>ratio Alger -- he does not expect to climb the latter of success, but to be picked up bodily and placed on top. We prefer security to trail-blazing, play to work, persistent pleasure to pleasureable persistence. Having been acclimated from their very earliest youth to the easy life, most Americans today would rather wish than struggle. They suffer, therefore, from <sup>w</sup>weak <sup>a</sup>backbones, from unexercised muscles and tendons.

The need for a strong backbone in our moral constitution, for unbending courage and the constant exercise of our spiritual and ethical fiber, is one of the great teachings of this Festival of Sukkot. In the Psalms (35:10), King David says: <sup>וְיִנְיָ בְּ</sup>  
<sup>וְיִנְיָ בְּ</sup> "all my bones say: O Lord, who is like unto Thee?"  
The Rabbis of the Midrash saw in this <sup>an</sup>indirect reference to Sukkot. On this holiday, we are commanded to take the <sup>a cluster</sup>arba minim, consisting of the etrog, (citron), the lulav (palm branch), the aravot (willows), and the hadassim (myrtle). These four species ~~are~~ each symbolic, the Midrash avers, of various organs of the human body, all of which harmoniously offer praise to God. The etrog is shaped like a heart, the hadassim like the eyes, the aravot remind one of lips, and the lulav is domeh le'shedrah shel adam, it appears similar in form to man's spine. The cluster of four kind<sup>s</sup> of vegetation, therefore, remind<sup>s</sup> us on Sukkot that all year long man must use all of his organs -- heart and eyes and mouth and spine -- to praise the Almighty. In order to be good Jews, we must have good hearts -- a reservoir of innate

decency and benevolence; we must have goodeyes -- the ability to see into the future, to entertain and cherish great visions; and we must retain the ability to communicate, with our lips, our love of God, teaching the greatness of Torah to our children and to our neighbor's children. Finally, no man can be complete without the lulav which symbolizes shedrah, the backbone. The good heart, the great vision, the fine preaching -- all of these come to naught if a man does not have the courage of his conviction, the strength of purpose, the ability to struggle and to labor in order to realize the wishes of his heart, the vision of his eyes, the preaching and teaching that he does. "All my bones say" O Lord, who is like unto Thee?"

This, then is what Sukkot tells us contemporary Americans in this age of prosperity and this society of affluence. We run the risk of becoming a people of weak backs if we fail to exercise our shedrah, we fail to use enough backbone, especially in our spiritual pursuits and in our religious endeavors. It is an unfortunate sign for any society and for any people when they begin to substitute the wishbone for the backbone, indulging in pious wishes for great ideals in place of honest toil toward their realization.

A backbone, not a wishbone, is the thing that you require  
If you want to make your mark, and gain your heart's desire...  
Wishes! Wishes! Do not sit and wish your time away, **Look**  
**Look** around **you** and see what can be got from life today ...  
Better not to wish at all, contented with your lot, **Then**  
**Than** spend your life in wishing for things you haven't got.

(-- Patience Strong)

Or, to put it in the symbolic language of Sukkot: neither etrog nor hadassim nor aravot alone make a man into a full human being. To these three great qualities he must always add the lulav -- symbol of the backbone. Only then, do "all my bones say unto Thee: O Lord, who is like unto Thee?" No matter what the area of life may be, backbone is always more important than wishbone. Otherwise, all of life becomes wishy-washy.

This is true of one's career: without labor and struggle, without exertion of the intellect and long hours of patient plodding, one can neither master the intricacies of any profession, nor can he achieve great and satisfying success in any business. It is true about children -- if we over-protect them, if we train them to accept easy triumphs, the shortcuts to success, then they will grow up without backbones, nurtured on the infantile conception that a wishbone is enough. Such people can never fly, they can only flutter. Their vision never soars, their dreams remain myopic, their conceptions petty.

The same holds true for our Jewish observance. Without the lulav we have not fulfilled the mitzvah of the arba minim. The study of Torah requires amal, diligence and industriousness. Our survival as full, total Jews requires the backbone to withstand negative social pressures, to hold on to our convictions despite their unpopularity, and the daring to be a minority within a minority.

Indeed, our very blessing indicates that no matter how important the other species and their symbols are, the lulav remains most eminent. For in the berakhah we recite over the arba minim, we single out only one of them. the lulav! We bless God who sanctified us and commanded us al netilat lulav. Without moral <sup>DDY</sup> courage, good intentions, and great dreams and fine talks will never suffice.

Interestingly, the great author of the Rokeiah pointed out that the word lulav itself symbolizes the entire Torah. In Hebrew, the word has four letters: לולב. The Torah begins with the letter "ל" -- the first word of the Chumash is למנוח. The Five Books of Moses end with the words למנוח -- specifically, the letter "ל". The Prophets begin, in the first chapter of Joshua, with the sentence למנוח -- thus the letter "ל". And the end of the entire Bible, the last word of the Second Book of Chronicles, is למנוח, thus the letter "ל". Altogether, they spell: לולב, the lulav! Hence, the author of Rokeiah tells us, lulav in a very real way recapitulates the whole of the Torah. For to be a Jew, to be possessed of this sublime historic faith, to be part of the mission of God and to carry the vocation of Sinai to a resistant and antagonistic world, requires, above all else, the power, the moral strength, the ethical might, and the undaunted conviction that are symbolized by the unbending backbone, the lulav.

To be a Jew means never to look only for the easy way. It means never to sacrifice conviction for convenience, although convenience in and of itself is no sin. It means always to search for the road of the greatest meaning and duty. Rabbi Israel Salanter, the great founder of the Musar, put it this way: " I have never asked myself if I can do something, only if I ought to. And if I ought to, then I always knew that I would be able to". This is the language of the Jew: it is an expression of spiritual backbone, the message of the lulav.

It would do well for our society, especially the Jewish community, so plagued by back trouble, not only in its physical but also in its spiritual form, to pay closer attention, therefore, to the lulav and what it symbolizes.

Jewish Law itself gives us some clues as to what it means to have a Jewish backbone, to have spiritual spine. Let us look briefly at only a few of the laws that the Halakhah has <sup>b</sup>adum<sub>A</sub>rated and we shall discover some of the more significant details.

For one thing, the proper kind of backbone means we must possess vigor and freshness and openness to new ideals and approaches. The Halakhah teaches: לולב דליל אינו , a lulav which is dried out is invalid. A man's spine which is dessicated, which lacks the sap of freshness and of youthfulness, which cannot reach out in new directions, is insufficient and inadequate. And "youthfulness" is not a matter of chronology; it is, rather, a question of attitude and orientation.



In practical terms, permit me to suggest what a fresh, youth, and vigorous lulav can mean ~~in practical terms of~~ <sup>for</sup> our regular program.

For the men of our congregation, the possession of a vigorous Jewish backbone, rather than a rigorous, dried lulav ha-yavesh, means: the strength and sense of purpose and industriousness to inconvenience yourself to the point of coming to the morning Minyan. It is not a token of honor for this distinguished congregation that it must engage outsiders, religious mercenaries, to come to the minyan in order to make sure that we never remain without ten adult males for services. The simply duty of every Center member is: to come to services one single week-day every week, or two full weeks a year, to make sure that we never have any problem about a minyan. The lulav must be held in an upright position, not lie prone. Let us come to services and join our fellow Jews in satisfying and spiritually invigorating prayer with the rest of the community. Let the lulav be fresh and youthful.

A second teaching of Jewish Law is that לולב עליו ראש , if the head of the lulav is bent or removed, the lulav is invalid. In symbolic terms, there must be a head on top of the spine! A Jewish backbone, Jewish courage, requires the use of reason, of thinking, of intellect. Stubborn persistence alone is mere obstinacy, not courage. We must make clear intellectual and rational decisions: when to stand up, and when to bend; when to resist all the currents, and when to swim with the tide. And the use of intellect, the use of reason, is primarily -- the study of Torah! Only when we have immersed

ourselves in the great values of Judaism, are we able to make the proper kind of decisions as to our conduct in real life, in real society. When the head studies Torah, the spine will be straight; otherwise it is merely stiff.

~~In most practical terms, permit me to recommend to you, my~~

With reference to his halakhah, too, I would like to suggest exactly what lulav means in our daily program. It urges upon us the willingness to inconvenience ourselves sufficiently to undertake a regular program of Jewish studies. After the Sukkot holidays, The Jewish Center begins its cultural program for adults. I appeal to all of you, men and women, to take advantage of what we have to offer. I make a very special plea to our women, both young and younger, to avail themselves of the special course currently given on Tuesdays from 11:00 a.m. in the morning to noon. It sometimes is disheartening to notice how our facilities and opportunities are not siezed by our young people; to observe how many bright, perceptive, intellectually curious young ladies we have in the congregation who fail to take advantage of this course. Let us place a "head" upon our "backbone" and emerge with a kosher lulav that will indeed be a source of praise for Judaism and glory to God.

Finally, a third halakhic teaching on spiritual backbone: intrinsic courage and industriousness must be applied to great causes. It is not enough merely to possess true backbone; we must apply it as well. In order for the lulav to be kosher, it must be sufficiently large; it must have 12 ריבוי קצוות נפרדות, enough it must be large enough so that one can perform with it the na'anu'im,



the waving it in the various directions. We must be able to apply Jewish backbone in many different areas of life. It is not enough merely to admire the Jewish ~~herosim~~ heroism of ages past. We must be ready at all times to commit ourselves to a Jewish heroism in the modern day and age as well.

In fact, this idea is distinctive and characteristic of traditional Judaism. The Karaites, the ancient heretics of the Jewish people who did not believe in the Talmud and in the Oral Law, never performed na'anu'im with their lulav. They never waved it and applied it as we do today. Instead, a medieval writer reports, their custom was to take one lulav and hang it up in the middle of the synagogue and gaze at it-- and that is all! We, however, are not satisfied to praise the backbone of generations past without exercising some of it ourselves. The mitzvah of Lulav for us means ~~that~~ each individual must perform the na'anu'im; each individual in his family, in his social circles, in his career, in every aspect of his life, must be a staunch Jew, upright, courageous, convinced, and willing to sacrifice and even suffer for his Jewishness.

Two recent events, related to the past Rosh Hashanah, illustrate both the healthy backbone and the sick, weak spine -- or, spinelessness. In Kansas City, Mo., a non-Jewish business firm sought to make a gesture of good-will to its Jewish fellow-citizens, and so erected ten large signs, in prominent places in the city, on which were inscribed, in Hebrew letters, le!shanah tovah tikatevu. Even before the holiday arrived, the company was forced to remove the signs-- because of protests from Jews who were hypersensitive to the appearance

of Hebrew in public and were embarrassed by this demonstration of Jewishness! Jews -- without Jewish backbone! They were satisfied, like the Karaites, to keep their Judaism in their Temples, but afraid to perform the na'anu'im in public.

A second, and much happier, incident occurred in Washington, D.C. An important bill was to be voted upon on Rosh Hashanah. Several conscientious Orthodox Jewish Congressmen, whose votes were crucial, inquired and received rabbinic sanction to use the House Chapel, for the first time in history, for a minyan of Jewish Congressman to worship, and so violate neither their religious commandments nor their civic duties. What a fine kiddush ha-Shem! They proudly waved the lulav -- and made the whole season for us a zeman simhatenu: a time of joy and pride in our Jewishness and in our fellow-Jews.

When we shall have gotten ourselves this kind of firm backbone, symbolized by the lulav, then -- together with the good Jewish heart symbolized by the etrog, the clear Jewish vision symbolized by the hadassim, and the pure Jewish lips symbolized by the aravot-- we shall be able to say together with David, אני נאמרה אני נאמרה

אני נאמרה, "all my bones say: O Lord, who is like unto Thee?"