

"WHAT HAST THOU IN THE HOUSE?"

In the fourth chapter of the Second Book of Kings we read of a most interesting episode in the life of the Prophet Elisha, the famed successor to Elijah. It is a moving account of ^{the} dire poverty of our people in ancient Israel, and of the heart-warming response of one of the great early Prophets.

V'ishah achat mi'neshei bnei ha-neviim tza'akah el Elishah lemor, the widow of one of the young prophets cried unto Elishah saying; my husband has died, and you know that he was a G-d-fearing man. And now tragedy has struck my family again. Ve'ha-nosheh ba lakachat et shnei yeladai lo la-avadim, the creditor has come to demand his payment, and because I have nothing, he wants to take my two children away as bondsmen, as slaves. And Elishah said to her, "what shall I do for you? - hagidi li, mah yesh lekhi ba-bayit? - tell me, what hast thou in the house?" And she answered; ein le'shifchatekha kol ba-bayit, I have nothing in my house, ki im asukh shemen, save for one pot of oil. The Prophet then told her to gather into her home all the empty vessels she could borrow and a miracle would occur: she would pour from this one pot of oil into all the others and they would fill up from it. This she could sell, pay her debt, and thus save her family.

Why do I tell you this story on this holy day of Rosh Hashanah? Because, as in all of Torah, I see in this not only a delicious piece of the history of our people in ancient days, but also a parable for our ^{own} times. I see in it the outlines of a ^{stirring} message for us of 1960 that ought to stir each of us into a new awareness and new responsibilities, that ought ~~us~~ to make us leave this House of G-d today troubled and disturbed, dissatisfied with ourselves and discontent, so that by next year in this time we can achieve a new and more elevated kind of happiness and peace.

this day

The meaning of this parable is important today because ^htoday we begin a ~~New~~ Year; because today we must each of us make a cheshbon ha-nefesh, a reckoning with ourselves. It is especially relevant on Rosh ^{both} ~~"~~ ^{and Haftorah} ~~ashanah~~ ^{because} our Torah ^{reading} deals with the great human question of one's children, of the longing of Abraham and Sarah for a child and the subsequent birth of Isaac; and because the Haftorah too deals with a child, with the birth of Samuel to Hannah, her passionate yearning for a child and her stirring ~~prayer~~ of thanksgiving when G-d had granted her request. *perpetuation of our people & the ~~the~~ future of our faith.*

The widow in the parable, to my mind, voices a heart-rending ^hcomplaint that many Jewish parents feel today. "The creditor is come to take unto him my two children as bondsmen." Who amongst us has not felt a twinge of worry deep within him about the Jewish future of his or her children? Who has not looked at his children and wondered if ^hhis own parents would ever have anything in common with them, if indeed he ^{himself} will have much in common with them? Who amongst us has not feared that as we send off our children to college they may ~~not~~ return with a non-Jewish mate, that indeed once the Bar Mitzvah is done that ~~all~~ contact with Judaism is ^{ended} ~~lost~~? There are so many demands upon our children! We want to keep them on a high moral plane, but there comes the nosheh, the creditor and demands our children to conform to the street -- nay to the gutter! You want your children to live decently, morally? No says the nosheh ^{from every bill-board and in every movie I will} called The Street, I want them as slaves to my standards. I will flaunt Kinseyan statistics before them and ^htell them that everyone is doing it. I will make them feel like outsiders and call them "squares" if they dare resist. Do you want your children to learn the virtue of happiness with their lot in life? There comes the nosheh in the form of the advertising industry and lays claim to your children's peace of mind. Henceforth you must no longer be a sameiach be'chelko, content with what you have materially. I will create new wants for you, I will make you a slave to new needs, you will behold the Joneses and realize that you cannot live without a foreign car and cannot be happy until you too own an outboard motor boat.

You want your child not to be Jewishly illiterate, but how can you get him to ~~continue~~ attend a Jewish school, certainly beyond the magic age of 13, when the whole of society rises like an enraged creditor and with a hoarse cry declares that your children belong to it, not to you? Little League makes demands, music lessons come first, entertainment takes its toll, all of our popular culture stages out its claims on the child first. Try to teach your child that the most important thing is to continue to be a Jew and that you would regard it as an unmitigated tragedy if he were to marry out of the fold, and there are forces in our society that will tell him that his parents are really bigots, that for one as sophisticated as he is such ideas are nonsense, that we are living in a free country, that, after all, love conquers all. "The creditor is come to take unto him my two children to be bondsmen." Modern parents cry together with the widow of ancient Palestine. As she turned to Elishah, so do we turn to the Rabbis, to the Synagogue, and we say: what shall we do? How shall we save our children?

But listen again to the exchange that follows between young widow and old Prophet, and you will hear the echoes of contemporary life ^{in ancient dialogue} that ^{Terah foresaw}. Elishah turns to the young woman and says: hagidi li, mah yesh lekhi ba-bayit, tell me, what do you have in your house? This is not only a request for information -- this is a devastating accusation, this is a damning charge of parental neglect. Listen to her feeble answer: ein le'shifchatekha kol ba-bayit -- nothing, nothing at all; my home is empty, hollow, a vacuum. Absolutley nothing!

Elishah speaks to us today again, my friends. Are you worried about the demands on your children that threaten to take them away from you, to place them in a different world, to remove from them every last vestige of "Yiddishkeit?" Then answer this question: mah yesh lekhi ba-bayit? -- "what hast thou in thy house?" What kind of home do you have? Did your child ever see Jewishness lived in his home? Did he ever hear a berakhah pronounced over his food? Did he ever see his parents open a Siddur?

Indeed, is there a Siddur in your home? Was a Jewish problem ever discussed at the table? Do you have Shabbat in your home? Is there true Kashrut in the house? Did that child ever witness true love and mutual respect between parents -- the sure mark of a truly Jewish home? Does that blessed union of Torah and Derekh Eretz have a welcome place in your home? Hagidi li, mah yesh lekhi ba-bayit. If you want to know why your children fall prey so easily to the creditors of Society and Street, first look into your own home and ask yourself how much Yiddishkeit you gave your child, how much you enabled him to learn by example. Parents who can offer no more than the limp confession of ~~the young~~ ein le'shifchatekha kol ba-bayit -- nothing, my home is Jewishly empty, barren, sterile -- have only themselves to blame!

4 Let all Jewish parents take note of this before it is too late: there is no magical formula for guaranteeing your children's remaining Jewish. A Sunday school will not do it, not even a Talmud Torah, certainly not a chat with the Rabbi when it is already too late. There must be, it is true, a good, solid Jewish education in an adequate school. But even that will not do if ein le'shifchatekha kol ba-bayit. An empty house will breed empty Jews. A house hollow of Judaism will breed Jews with hollow hearts. For too long have American Jewish parents deluded themselves into thinking that by sending their children to school and sending instead of bringing them to the Junior Congregation they can keep them Jewish. They seem to have regarded Judaism like one of the druggist's strong potions which are marked "FOR EXTERNAL USE ONLY". Internally they reject the prescription called Torah, and expect somehow that by rubbing in a bit of Jewish reading or story-telling externally the plague of intermarriage and the disease of assimilation will disappear.

4 (Our Rabbis told us that if we want to steer clear of sin we must know what is above us -- da mah le'maaleh mimekha -- a seeing eye and a hearing ear and all thy deeds recorded in a book. They meant, of course, that if we realize that G-d sees all and hears all and records all then we shall refrain from transgressing G-d's laws. I would perhaps ^{add to} modify that. If you want to stay away from averah, if you want to spare yourself the agony of alienated children and estranged grandchildren,

if you want to assure the continuity of your Jewishness, then it is not enough to know what is above you -- then you must also be aware of what is within you, in your very home. It must be so thoroughly Jewish that the members of your family will be able to see Jewishness with their eyes, hear it with their ears and read it in your books. Judaism is decidedly not for "external use only". It is not only "above" but "within" you.

When I went to school I studied ~~about~~ French -- but I never became French culturally or otherwise. I studied about "skimoos", but I never became an Eskimoe. I studied Judaism and became a Jew only because I saw it and heard it and lived it in my parents' home. Had I not seen it there, then very likely I would have no more become a convinced Jew than I have become a Frenchman or an Eskimoe.)

Remember that when the young widow complained about losing her children, the Prophet did not ask her if she bought them Bible Stories or arranged for private lessons or had them join a Jewish boy-scout troop or prepared a sumptuous Bar Mitzvah party for them. All he asked her was "what hast thou in the house?" Her tragic confession -- "I have nothing in the house" -- made all other questions unnecessary.

Today is the Day of Judgment, the day each of us must answer for ^{himself} ~~ourselves~~ before our Maker. The Jewish tradition has always envisaged Rosh Hashanah as a formal trial, and we make many ^erefernces to that in our prayers. Now in every trial there are witnesses. Who will be the witnesses either for or against us? Listen to what the Talmud had to say on that: avnei beito ve'korot beito shel adam hem me'idin bo (Hagigah 16a), the stones or bricks and the beams of a man's house are his witnesses. The story the bricks and beams of a man's house relate about him to the Divine Tribunal determine the outcome of the trial. Well what kind of testimony ~~will~~ the bricks and beams of our houses ~~give~~ about us? Will they relate that they encompassed only a television set or ^ttwo, but never a Jewish book? -- that they waved the banner of an antennae but never held aloft a mezuzah? -- that in their rooms there

was many a cocktail party, but never any kiddush or havdalah? -- that hospitality within their confines was only for entertainment, never for charity? If we will not ourselves bravely face the challenge of "what hast thou in the house," assuredly the house itself -- the very bricks and beams -- will tell the whole story. And if they won't -- the destiny and future of our children will.

I hope, my friends, that I have not spoken too harshly. I have not come to scold anyone, just to remind you. I speak to myself as well as to anyone else here. The future of our faith is much too important to treat it with kid-gloves when we should roll up our sleeves and work with the sweat of honest toil.

I would be less than honest if I did not say ~~the~~ what I did, for I feel to the very core of my being that we shall win or lose not in the ~~defense agencies~~, not approval of our Americanism by politicians ^{the future fight against anti-Semitism,} in the ~~pats-on-the-back by candidates~~, not even in the classrooms -- but only

in our parlors and kitchens. There, in the home, is where the future of our faith is being forged. If a Rabbi fails to highlight the tragedy of the Jewishly empty home because of considerations of politeness, because he ^{does not want} ~~is afraid~~ to upset his people, then he might as well resign ~~himself to certain defeat~~. If I am honest with you it is also because I am deeply convinced that there is a chance, and more than just a chance, for the future of Orthodox Judaism in America. It is because of my faith in you and my faith in the ability to live as a full Jew and completely participate in America and the culture of the Western World that I urge you to pay attention to your homes.

For that too was the attitude of Elishah. I have been perhaps unfair to the young widow in the story, and so must ^{remind you} ~~mention~~ that she did have one thing in her house: asukh shemen, one pot of oil which, our Rabbis tell us, she used to help the scholars and young prophets; it was used as a lamp for them at night. She did not have much in her house, just this one little mitzvah -- and that proved enough. With it, and with enough determination and will-power, she was able to fill up all the empty vessels, the kelim rekim, all that was previously empty and meaningless to her.

We can do no less ourselves. ~~There is no~~ Every one of us has some connection with Torah, no matter how tenuous; some link with Judaism, no matter how weak, — or else we would not be here today. It is either High Holiday Services or Yizkor or Shabbos candles or Yahrzeit or a kosher home or JNF box. If we have that then we need not regard it as the last breath of a dying faith, but as the first breath of a new and vigorous revival of Judaism. It can be not the ~~end~~, but the beginning. All we need do is bring back into our homes all the kelim rekim, all the institutions ~~and~~ practices and observances of Judaism that we had abandoned as empty and meaningless and without relevance and significance ^{for} to us. Let us try them once again, and let us pour into them part of the asukh shemen, part of the little cruse of oil that we have kept — the loyalty that we put into kaddish or yizkor, the warmth and love with which we kindle the Shabbat candles, the care and concern for the State of Israel and the Holy Land — and miracles can and will occur. Our homes will no longer be empty. Our children will thrill to new experiences and new beauty and warmth. Judaism will become not a medicine for external use only, but a vitamin for internal use, one which will make ~~of~~ our families healthy ⁱⁿ spirit and vibrant and vigorous in Jewishness. The loud claims of the nosheh will be stilled. The Street and Society that have clamored for our children's loyalties will be silenced. And we will be granted by the good Lord a year of health and blessing, ⁵ and greatest amongst them the blessing of knowing that our children and grandchildren are not strangers to us, aliens to all we hope and live for. U'RE'EH VANIM LE'VANEKHA, SHALOM AL YISRAEL, we will live to see children's children continuing the same glorious tradition and handing over the same rich heritage to generations following, and peace will be upon Israel and upon all the world.

Amen.