

## "Stained Hands and Clouded Eyes"

This week, after a good two-month vacation, our children will return to their class rooms and again continue the development of their minds and spirits. It will be a momentous occasion, no doubt, for the children themselves. These past few days they have probably been busy purchasing school supplies, arranging programs, discussing new teachers and bubbling over with enthusiasm in anticipation of the new school year. ~~Now they will start out upon a new adventure.~~ I am sure that we all remember how we felt when we started our new <sup>terms</sup> ~~school years~~ back in elementary school. We felt as if we were setting out on a new path, full of hidden dangers and pleasant surprises, and we acted as if we expected a succession of mysteries and miracles at every step. Today's children feel the same away about it. It is a challenge and an adventure.

But while our children are going to be busy being enthusiastic about a hundred and one things, let the parents not forget to take a long look at themselves and their progeny. On the first day of the term, ask yourself what progress your child's teacher will report on the last day. Will your boy or girl forge ahead, or remain just a dull average? Will he swim, or will he just float, carried by the educational tide? How many parents wonder why their child does no more than float in school, sometimes a "dead-man's" float, he is passive in his studies, he goes through school without school going through him. They are prone to blame it on his IQ, and then discover that his IQ hits 130. They blame the school or Yeshiva, and then discover that their neighbor's little boy attends the same school, nay - the same class, and is performing miracles in his work. And they are stumped. Why, after an extensive Jewish education, such parents might ask themselves, should my child remain apathetic to anything with Jewish content? What is it that he lacks? And if the parents are intelligent people, they will ask not "what does he lack," but "what do we lack?" <sup>for</sup> "We have bought him all the books he needs, a Jewish encyclopedia and a Brittanica, we send him to the best school in the city, he gets the best nourishment, and yet he does not live up to our expectations". But these intelligent parents, who payed so much attention to his nourishment, have forgotten something of tremendous importance.

They have forgotten to breathe into his lungs the life-sustaining air of courage; they have forgotten to inspire him with the feeling that the Torah he is learning is of terrific importance; they failed to impress upon his young mind that what he does and accomplishes is of ~~tremendous importance~~ <sup>exceptional significance</sup> to his parents and to every one else. They have shipped him off to school and shoved him out of their minds. In one word, they failed to encourage him.

How remarkably profound was the Bible's understanding of the need for encouragement. In today's Sidra, we learn that if a <sup>שֶׁחַט</sup>, a corpse, was found between two towns under mysterious circumstances, that is - the murderer is not known, then the courts would measure the distance to both villages. And the elders or representatives of that town or village nearest the place where the corpse was found, had to perform a very strange, if not humiliating, ritual. They would take a calf upon whom a yoke had never been placed, bring it down to a brook near ground which had never been ~~walked~~, and there they would decapitate the calf and wash their hands upon his carcass. And they would say as follows:

וְיָדֵינוּ לֹא שָׁפְכוּ דָם וְעֵינֵינוּ לֹא רָאוּ, "Our hands did not spill this blood and our eyes did not see". What strange words! What does "seeing" have to do with the guilt or innocence of a community and its leaders in a murder case? And if indeed "these hands did not spill this blood", then why require the elders to undergo <sup>this</sup> strange and frightening and suspicious ritual? Our Rabbis, anticipating that question, commented on the verse

וְיָדֵינוּ לֹא שָׁפְכוּ דָם וְעֵינֵינוּ לֹא רָאוּ, "and our eyes did not see", <sup>וְיָדֵינוּ לֹא שָׁפְכוּ דָם</sup>, that "we accept moral responsibility because we failed to accompany him <sup>out</sup> of town". How wise were our Sages! With their insight into human nature, they realized that this man had not successfully resisted his attacker because he left that town demoralized. The elders of the town failed to walk that man out onto the highway, they failed to encourage him on his way, they failed to make him realize that his presence in their community was important to them, and that his leaving saddened them. They simply did not take any notice of him. And it is courage, the knowledge of a man that he is backed by his fellows, that is necessary for a man to put a man's fight against killers in the night who fall upon him with murder in their hearts. Without this encouragement, this knowledge that he means something to

someone, a man's resistance to his attacker is nil, whether he has eaten well or not, and he falls by the wayside ~~or not~~ <sup>dead</sup>. And when a community has thus sinned against the lonely stranger in its midst, it must accept full moral guilt for his murder. And the elders must announce in shame, האם לא נהרגנו אותו? אלא כעין כעין. Do you know how the Rabbis would translate that? - "No, we did not murder him with our very hands, but nevertheless we admit that our hands are stained with his blood, because our eyes did not see, we were blind to <sup>his</sup> existence, indifferent to him, we overlooked him, we failed to encourage him and inspire him with the dignity of being a man among men. אם לא נהרגנו אותו? אלא כעין כעין. Do you know how our hands are stained because our eyes were clouded!

To those parents who will cry out against Fate at the end of this school year that their children who have IQs above 130 and attend the best schools in New York are nevertheless dead in their spirit, that their souls are corpses, the Bible gives a high warning: Keep your eyes open - and clear, not clouded. Inspire your child with the courage to take on a double program because it means so much, make him feel important and wanted. Take a long look at your son; don't overlook him. Extend to him the courtesy of ת"ד, of accompaniment, let him feel that you want his company because he wants yours. Go with him to school some day, and ask him what he ~~expects~~ <sup>an</sup> to accomplish that day. Friday nights and Saturday afternoons when you have ~~the~~ <sup>an</sup> opportunity to eat your meal without hurry and rush, discuss with him the problems he discussed in school; respect his arguments instead of dismissing them or, contrariwise, acting as if all the world knew that. Keep your eyes open and clear, and your hands won't be stained.

During the war, I received a letter from a soldier friend of mine who hit the Normandy beaches on D-Day, fought through France and went through the horrors of the Battle of the Bulge. That boy saw more of horror than a man double his age. Yet, he wrote to me, he did not falter for one moment; despite the cold and impersonal grinding of the war machine, he did not feel lonesome or dejected. For the one thing that had helped him most during those long months of fighting was the remembrance of his father who, seeing him off from New York and unable to speak because of emotion, put his hand on his son's shoulder and held him strongly. His father's hand on his shoulder ~~is~~ is what kept his spirit and body

alive in that hell called Europe. It was this accompinent which assured his son's survival. His hand on his son's shoulder was a life-sustaining encouragement. That father's hand was not stained with his son's blood. There was no necessity for him to perform the humiliating ritual of raising his hands and exclaiming, *וְאֵלֵינוּ יָצָא דָּמָא דְּבָרֵינוּ*, my hands did not kill him, but look at them, they are bloody - because my eyes did not see, I overlooked my boy; my hands are stained because my eyes were clouded.

My friends, the closets of the American Jewish community are full of *אִשְׁמוֹת*, skeletons of what ~~once~~ were or could have been good Jews. <sup>\*</sup> It ~~was~~ the great faliure of the last generation to inspire their children with the courage of a Jewish young man getting a Jewish education that is responsible for the ghosts of Jews who clamor in the ball parks on Saturday afternoons and the corpses of Jews who will <sup>eat</sup> just anyplace, from Times Square to Chinatown, corpses whose uniquely Jewishly blood has been drained from them right down to the last drop. It is for these derelicts of the spirit, Jews whose Jewishness died a premature death because they were not properly encouraged and inspired, that the Jewish community at large must answer. Right outside this synagogue there are young Jews and middle aged Jews and old Jews walking past without the least recognition that today is Shabbos. Who is it who will raise his hands and disclaim responsibilty for this situation and say *וְאֵלֵינוּ יָצָא דָּמָא דְּבָרֵינוּ*, our hands did not spill it? Look again at those very same hands. They certainly are stained red with the blood of their Jewishness, because *וְאֵלֵינוּ יָצָא דָּמָא דְּבָרֵינוּ* our eyes were clouded, we were blind to them when they were young and impressionable, we bought <sup>for</sup> ~~them~~ school supplies and filled their lunch baskets, but we failed to inspire them with our sincere interest in them; we gave them a sugar-daddy when what they wanted was a father. And then when they left their elementary schools and *אֲנִי הָיִינוּ*, we failed them again, *וְאֵלֵינוּ יָצָא דָּמָא דְּבָרֵינוּ*, we did not accompany them onto the great highway of life, we left them to fend for themselves as we overlooked their existence. We simply were not interested in anything beyond the immediate welfare of their bodies. Writes George Bernard Shaw in his "Devil's Disciple", "The worst sin towards our fellow creatures is not to hate them, but to be indifferent to them; that is the essence of inhumanity". Well, we are guilty of that inhumanity - *וְאֵלֵינוּ יָצָא דָּמָא דְּבָרֵינוּ*.

\* The words of the poet Bialik ring true: *הָיוּ לָנוּ גֵּרִים וְלֹא הָיוּ לָנוּ בָּנִים*, "The people are indeed a corpse, a corpse dead-heavy without end".

Before Jacob died, he blessed his son Judah saying:

וְיָהוּדָה יָבֵן לְךָ אֶת־אֶרֶץ־יִשְׂרָאֵל וְיָהוּדָה יָבֵן לְךָ אֶת־אֶרֶץ־יִשְׂרָאֵל

"may your teeth be whiter than milk". What a strange blessing! Surely our Father Jacob did not mean to anticipate Colgate and Pepsodent! Explain the Rabbis of the Talmud, as they interpret this bizarre text, אִם יִשְׂרָאֵל יִשְׂרָאֵל יִשְׂרָאֵל יִשְׂרָאֵל יִשְׂרָאֵל, that he who makes his friend show the white of his teeth, that is - he who makes him smile, does him a greater good than he who provides him with milk. This was Judah's blessing - that his smile encouraged his brothers and friends to smile, and that was worth more to them than all the milk on Borden's farms. And the Rabbis place greater emphasis on encouragement than on nourishment.

Your son and daughter will begin their school term this week. You will have provided them with all the physical necessities, and if they're in Ramaz, that means that you've provided the best for them in education. But don't forget to smile, to make him feel proud, to encourage him, to bolster his spirit. Keep your eyes open - and your hands clean.

Benediction:

'Son of man,  
"And G-d said to me, Ezekiel, 'Stand on your feet' and I will speak to you'. And spirit entered into me as he spoke thus, and He set me upon my feet; and I heard Him that spoke unto me". O Mighty yet Tender G-d, if your pervaunt Ezekiel fell into a faint because he feared the greatness of his task, certainly we shake with fear and lack of confidence at the tasks required of us by Your Torah. We know that Your voice calls upon us to return; yet we cannot because we are disheartened. Encourage us, O G-d, teach us to stand on our own feet, that a new spirit may enter into us that we may hear the Divine voice calling us to return to You. Amen.

Rabbi Norman Lamm

Shoftim, 9/8/51

## BENEDICTION

וקלרמס פאון מר יעקב ווויזן ארבעטן אין צייט.

"And you shall bind them for signs upon your hands and frontlets between your eyes"

OG-d, just as you have warned us of the dangers of stained hands and clouded eyes, you revealed to us the benefits and secrets of the Mitzvah of Tefillin., the value of clean hands and clear eyes. May the tefillin which we don every day become eye openers for us, blessing us with the ability to see clearly and benevolently, and may they become signs upon our hands that they are firm and just, clean and unstained, ready to do the work of G-d Almighty. Amen.