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Tenth Century, 1959

(EMOR)

"COURAGE MISUSED"

22/1/76

After offering a detailed list of the high standards of the kehunah, after enumerating the lofty ideals to which the kohen is expected to aspire and which we expect him to attain, our Sidra adds one last verse of instruction which indicates ~~an~~ disappointing lack of confidence in the kohanim. Consider the "build-up" -- and then the anti-climax. Le-nefesh lo yitama b'amav. The priests are to be dedicated to life and refrain from any contact with death. Lo yikr'chu karchah be-rosham. They are to emulate none of the pagan rites of priesthood for they are kohanim to the One G-d. The Torah legislates special marriage restrictions upon the kohanim, for they to be so elevated in their marital life as to be a model worthy of emulation by others. Et lechem elokecha hu makriv. They officiate at the solemn services as dignitaries in the Temple of the G-d of ^{The kohanim} ~~His~~ ^{entire} ~~character,~~ his whole career of dedication and devotedness is to be revered -- kadosh yihyeh lakh. What a build-up for a mere mortal!

But then, in conclusion, comes a statement which brings the kohen down from his high perch with a stunning suddenness: Don't marry a woman who is a loose woman -- if the daughter of such a kohen leads an immoral life, becomes a loose woman, she desecrates her father and must be put to death. From the man who has attained holiness -- to fathering a woman of ill-repute! Be dedicated to life, keep away from paganisms, elevate your marriage, minister at the altar, be holy -- and don't raise degenerate children! This verse, as our sages were wont to say, cries out: interpret me!

I suggest that what our Torah meant to teach with this sudden switch is an idea as relevant and important today as it was three thousand years ago.

It meant to warn us against inheriting a great tradition and neglecting it; against wasting talent and misusing courage and plundering potentialities; against reaching the summit and letting our foot slip and plunging into the great abyss; against being a kohen, a descendant of Aaron, and still ~~ending~~ falling into crimson sin. This is all too human a failing, this perversion of genius and misdirection of natural gifts. That is why the Torah warns the kohen, of all people, that the bigger you are the harder you fall.

I believe that that is just what R.Chanina ben Ch^{ok}chilai had in mind when he said (Abot 3:5) : *מנוח לו שיהיה עירובי עובדי כוכבים* - he who keeps awake at night, and travels on his way alone, and turns his heart to idle thoughts, forfeits his soul. I do not think that our Sage had any special prejudice against insomniacs or those who abhor rush-hour traffic. What R.Chanina meant is that those who have the wisdom to be awake when others sleep, to be enlightened when others are ignorant, to be conscious and aware and alert and gifted with insight when others are dull and insensitive; and those who have the courage to "go it alone" and strike out on their own paths, individualists and non-conformists who will resist the pressure of the masses and brave the cry of the crowds -- those who have such rare virtues and heavenly talents, and yet mefaneh libo le-batalah, turn to idle thoughts, thwart the wisdom, misuse the courage, and sin against their own G-d-given talents -- such people forfeit their souls, they lose their very spirits. What the Torah said about the kohen and his mission of life and peace and nobility who sinks to immorality, our Perek says of the wise and the brave who allow their virtues to dwindle to batalah, to insignificance.

This message seems tailor-made for our own generation. What an unstable and neurotic culture ^{is it} ~~we live in~~ that it can give birth to a whole group of people, centered on the west coast, who are neier ba-lailah -- intelligent, intellectual,

with an insight into men's foibles and illusions -- and are me halekh ba-derekh yechidi -- vigorous non-conformists who have the backbone to hold by their ways in the face of ridicule -- and yet who ^cspread this wisdom and this courage in the most foolish, vain and insipid kind of batalah. I refer, of course, to that phenomenon called the "Beat ^{RT} Generation." Here are people who have so distorted their natural gifts as to make a mockery of literature and thinking in general. More, they have taken the courage of "going alone" and, instead of using for high principles and worthy ends, have misused it by expressing their individualism in dressing, acting and disporting themselves in every strange, bizarre, anti-social way. What a criminal waste of talent! Harei zeh mit'chayev be-nafsho!

This warning not to bring the heritage of and potential for kehunah to shame, of not wasting wisdom and misusing courage, is directed to every individual whom G-d has in some way singled out for special blessing -- and that includes most of us. Some of us have been blessed with wealth. How important to remember to use and not misuse it, to employ it for the constructive ends of our people or mankind and not merely to gratify our craving for batalah, for idle indulgences and trifles. Others have reached positions of influence -- and how thin is the dividing line between the use and misuse of power! The more endowed we are by our Creator, the more directly does the Jewish Tradition address us with the sharp reminder not to be false to the responsibility that we bear. No wonder the prophet Amos reminds Israel that because it was chosen as the people of G-d al ken pekad'tikha, therefore will it be the more severely punished for its failings.

Our words apply as well to the State of Israel, whose eleventh birthday we celebrated this week. We will not be accused of racial haughtiness if we avow that our people, in the past and in the present, [~]have been blessed with great resources of talent and ability. Our people has always been the neior ba-lailah, those who are

awake in the middle of the night. The world asleep in its pagan stupor, kneeling before sticks and stones and praying to mute statues, when our people saw the light and proclaimed that "the Lord is G-d, the Lord is One." When in the Middle Ages Christian Europe lay blanketed under the black cover of ignorance and hatred and superstition -- the "Dark Ages" -- our people were experiencing the "Golden Age." When others were asleep, at the beginning of the Hitler era, asleep at the beginning of that long and terrible night, and the dread disaster that stalked through it, and dismissed the clear signs as the rantings of an insane painter, we held aloft the light, the torch of humanity, pleading, though vainly, for the assertion of our self-respect as humans. We have indeed been spiritual insomniacs, neior ba-lailah, awake when others sleep, tossing and turning by virtue of the spark of wisdom within us.

And we also have shown courage, the courage to be a ma'lekh ba-derekh yechidi. The State of Israel today is founded on the bedrock of Jewish courage that goes back into antiquity. I refer not only to the courage of a Moses smiting an Egyptian and upbraiding a Pharaoh, or the courage of an Akiva studying Torah at the pain of death and defying the forces of imperial Rome. I mean even the courage to build a state and yearn for it and settle it. From the courage of a Yehudah Halevi who not only sang to Zion and wept for her but took his last and lonely and fatal trip to embrace the ancient stones of her jackal infested ruins; to the Gaon of Vilna and the Hasidic R. Nachman Bratslaver who combined piety and learning with a practical program for settling the land; to the modern founders of Zionism whether they came from the ranks of journalists or chemists or physicians; to the frail youths who cleared the rocky and malarial land; to the Sabras who sacrificed life and limb to defend the honor and integrity of Israel resurrected; all these are examples of the courage of the lonely traveller who prefers the courage of his convictions to the comfort and security of what he does not believe in.

And now there stands before us the great question of our age, the question that spells the dilemma of our times: what will all this wisdom and courage amount to? How are we going to use it? To what end shall we employ these gifts and these insights and these sacrifices? The answer should be clear. The priest who permits immorality in his family has desecrated himself! He who lies awake at night and travels alone -- and yet turns his heart to idleness -- has sold his soul! If all these rare ^{Jewish} virtues are to be misused merely for setting up a tiny banana-republic on the eastern shores of the Mediterranean, for creating an industrialized Lebanon where the choicest and most banal vulgarities of both East and West will merge with the teachings of Karl Marx -- harei zeh mit'chayev be-nafsho -- then, heaven forbid!, we have lost our very souls. It will be the most tragic batalah in world history if all our efforts and talents be directed -- misdirected! -- to producing a shrine to secularism, where weighty questions of Jewishness will be decided by Social^{ist} doctrine instead of Shulchan Arukh, by Marx instead of Maimonides.

We are the mamlekhet kohanim, the priests to the world. We are a people dedicated to life over death, entrusted with the Torah of life by the Living G-d. As ministers of the Lord in the Temple of the universe we have a heritage of kedushah as a G-d-obsessed people. If we misuse that courage, thwart that wisdom, prove false to that tradition and treacherous to that heritage, if u-bat ish kohen ki tachel liznot, if we sell our history short and curry the favor and buy the charms of lewd idols, ancient or modern -- abihah hi mechalelet, we desecrate our Father in Heaven, we forfeit our very souls.

We voice such sentiments not -- chalilah -- as critics, but as brothers, as part of the very same am yisrael. We owe our brethren in the State of Israel every last shred of loyalty and respect and love. If we think we are as wise as they are, we must admit that their courage is greater than ours. But we want this wisdom

ennobled, not cheapened. We want their courage used, not misused. We shall ever help Israel materially. But we love her enough to be concerned about her spiritual destiny, enough to worry about mit'chayev be-nafsho, about her soul and the soul of our people.

We conclude with this observation. This week we celebrated Israel's eleventh birthday. Eleven, in our numerals, is written as two "one's" standing side by side. That must define the character and aspirations of the State of Israel -- the harmony of the two "one's", the two great unities. One unity is G-d: shema yisrael ha-shem elokeinu ha-shem echad. And just as we Jews inscribe this belief in G-d's unity in our tefillin, so does G-d, according to the charming Agadah, inscribe in His tefillin the words of the prophet proclaiming the unity of Israel: u-mi k'ankha yisrael goy echad ba-arets. These are the two "one's" -- G-d and Israel -- who must from this eleventh birthday and on always go together, even as we have in the past. From this old-new harmony may we derive greater wisdom, greater courage, greater holiness, so that all men throughout the world may learn to live in peace and tranquility.

N.L.

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