

"THREE TABLES"

The Bible, as the Word of God, inspires in us deep feelings of reverence and awe, sometimes even fear. For when we confront it, we stand face to face with the immortal and imperishable words of the Creator of the universe in all His awesome infinity and power.

That is why the Torah often seems to us so austere, so severe. Probably the last thing in the world we would attribute to the Bible is -- a sense of humor. It certainly would seem discordant in the context of Biblical solemnity and incommensurate with the weightiness of the Biblical message.

Yet if one reads our Sidra in truly perceptive fashion he cannot help but notice that the Torah is not at all strait-laced. Indeed, in one verse it gives us an insight into a situation that is genuinely comical, even downright funny.

Consider the situation: at the second visit of the brothers to Joseph, the viceroy of all Egypt orders his Egyptian subjects to prepare a royal banquet for him, the viceroy, for the Egyptian subjects, and for the visitors from Canaan. One would expect that a large official table be set around which would be seated all the guests in appropriate order. Instead, the royal dining room is broken up into three parts, and instead of a large and majestic dining room table, we have three tables: the equivalent of a small bridge table for the sovereign by himself, a slightly larger one

for the Canaanite visitors, and probably the largest of all for the various subordinates and lackeys amongst the Egyptians. "And they set on for him by himself, and for them by themselves, and for the Egyptians, that did eat with him, by themselves; because the Egyptians might not eat bread with the Hebrews; for that is an abomination unto the Egyptians." The King orders a banquet and the subjects bring in -- three tables. It is only a Divine sense of humor that caused this verse to be written down for all eternity. A Divine sense of humor -- and also a Divine act of goodness because God wanted to teach His Jews something for all ages to come.

Let us analyze this comical situation a bit more carefully. I can understand very well two of the tables. The brothers would not want to eat with the Egyptians. After all, they have their peculiar Abrahamitic tradition which endowed them with a special attitude towards food. Even from the days of Noah it was known that some foods are tahor and some tameh, some kosher and some non-kosher. A child of Jacob blesses God over his food and blesses God after his food. His whole approach to eating is consecrated and therefore, by Egyptian standards, abnormal. So they would want a separate table.

The Egyptians too are understandable. They refuse to break bread with these Canaanite Jews. Why should they? Once upon a time, when all of us were younger, in our more ungracious

vocabulary, such Canaanites would have been called "greenhorns." They were foreigners, they were aliens, they were -- to put it bluntly, Jews. Furthermore, as Onkelos explains, the Egyptians found the Hebrews religiously objectionable for the latter ate the flesh of animals the former considered sacred. The Egyptian noblemen made no pretense of ecumenical love, they just did not want to eat at one table with the Jews. So two of the three tables are quite understandable.

But the humor of the situation comes to the fore with that special table for Joseph himself. And here the joke is bitter indeed. I do not refer to Joseph as a specific historical personality, for he had to do what he did as part of the unfolding drama. Rather, Joseph becomes a symbol, he represents the galut Jew who finally made it, the Jew who came to the big country as an unlettered and uncultured foreigner, speaking a Jewish jargon and dressed in Jewish clothes, unacquainted with the sophistication of the big and great Egyptian civilization, who was thrown into a dungeon, and was able to rise from the depths to the heights, from the dungeon to the throne. He became not only an influential politician, but also a powerful financier who manipulated the grain market. He now dressed like an Egyptian, changed his name from a Hebrew to an Egyptian-sounding name, and even especially named his children so that they would remind him to forget his own origins. Joseph, quite unfairly to the historical Joseph who was a tzaddik, has become the

symbol of the assimilated Jew whose only real passion is to obliterate any residual Jewishness that may still taint him.

And yet, this assimilated Jew, who will not break bread with his own brothers, who will not share a table with those too-Jewish Jews -- is still unaccepted by the Egyptians. How galling! He is not invited to sit at the same table by these Egyptians who are, after all, his subjects, his subordinates, his employees! They will obey him, they will flatter him, they will do his bidding -- but they will not let him eat with them, for they consider him, no less than those Jewish-Jews, a to'evah, an abomination!

This successful assimilationist is, after all, a pitiful failure. He has power and money and influence -- and the goy won't have him. He will no more accept him than the Jew who shakes while he prays, or reads the Yiddish paper, or eats special kosher foods, or sends his child to a Yeshiva. The Joseph-Jew succeeds in everything -- except that he cannot become a WASP, and that he regards as the tragedy of his life. So the goy will do business with him, play politics with him, even conduct a dialogue with him -- but he won't let him into his private clubs -- even if he, the Jew, married out of his faith. And if he does allow him into his club, he will not really invite him into his home and let him share his table. From 9 to 5, the goy and the Jew are on equal footing. After 5 P.M., the Joseph, the Egyptianized Jew, is no better than Yehudah or Simeon or Binyamin, the Palestinian Jews.

So the T^orah turns sardonic in this verse: "They set a table for him by himself, and for them by themselves, and for the Egyptians that did not eat with him by themselves." The Bible is inviting us to laugh along -- not to guffaw, not to utter a belly-laugh, but to engage in an ironic smile, perhaps accompanied by a tear of pity. Poor, rich, assimilated Jew!

The joke is really on the inauthentic Jew who tries so hard to make it and never does. The three tables are a scene in a situation comedy as old as the Jewish people.

It is not really too difficult to see how this situation is relevant to ourselves in our own time. It is a tragi-comedy of the first order. The authentic Jew and the authentic Gentile can practice brotherhood with dignity, and both can only be amused by the inauthentic Jew who shuns the table of his brothers and will not be invited to the table of the others.

Some time ago, Dr. Yaakov Herzog told of a lecture he gave before 15 presidents of non-Jewish religious universities. He reports a comment made by one distinguished and wise Christian woman, who was the president of a theological college in Wisconsin. She told him, "The Jew in our university who is proud of his Judaism is distinctive; the Jew who hides his heritage is even more different." The joke is on the Jew who hides his heritage. Much as he tries to be the same as the goy, he ends up at a table -- all by himself. He isn't even distinctive, he is only different.

Let me now turn to another aspect of the matter. It touches a more sensitive nerve, a more serious dimension. And that is, if three tables are comical - only one table is tragic. The third table is funny, but if there are not two tables, it is a disaster.

Recently we were informed that Rome had approved a new step in the ongoing Catholic-Jewish dialogue. In addition to announcing a number of long overdue and welcome revisions of its theology concerning Jews, it has given its permission for Jews and Catholics to engage in joint prayer.

Let us be fair. It took character and courage for Rome to discard some of the pernicious, archaic nonsense it had been teaching about Jews for centuries. Its new stance is certainly encouraging. But there are three items that require wariness on our part.

First, its statement excluding all attempts at conversion of the Jews: I wish I could believe it. Centuries of unfortunate Jewish experience with Christendom cannot be obliterated with a mere written statement. We shall have to judge by fact, not resolutions. Moreover, only a short time ago a leading Catholic theologian also stated that dialogue should not aim at conversion. But a perceptive reader could notice that later in the same article the priest began to hedge his remarks: only in "this" stage of dialogue do we exclude proselytizing. But the goal is "reunion" of Judaism

and Christianity. And to me a deferred 3ND remains 3ND.

Second, the understanding the statement evinces of the relation between Jewish religion and the State of Israel is certainly a step in the right direction. But again there is a modification that indicates large implications: this should not imply "any judgment on historical occurrences or on decisions of a purely political order." That sounds too much like a begrudging and belated recognition of the State of Israel -- provided we give up Jerusalem. And that we shall never do -- not if the Pope asks us to do so, not if U Thant demands it, not even if the President and Secretary of State order it.

Third, and most important -- the invitation to Jews to join in prayer services with Catholics.

Let me at once state our position clearly and unequivocally: NO! -- a courteous and respectful but forceful and determined NO. Two tables, and not one table. There can be no "reunion" of the faiths. We are not prodigal sons who are going to come back, even in the guise of pareve "services." We are perfectly willing to cooperate with any religious or secular community on matters of common concern to all civilized human beings. But we will never consent to spiritual promiscuity or religious adultery.

I should like to spend less time, however, on the Catholic invitation, and more on the probable Jewish response. I do not envy the Catholics their fate. The Jews who respond will be the third-table type - the kind who will not eat with Jews and are trying

desperately to crash the party of the goyim. They are the kind who

will give the Church the least nachas. Who but a sycophantic, un-genuine, public-relations minded, social-climbing, politicized Jew would run to pray together in such bizarre conglomerate services!

I shall venture a guess. The Jew who will participate in praying with Catholics is one who rarely ~~if~~ ever prayed with Jews. Only a denatured Jew, one who has never really lived in his own religious tradition and has no faith of his own, will flock to interfaith services.

Poor Catholics. In their statement they make a gesture to Jews by affirming Israel's "permanent election" -- we were and remain the Chosen People, and are not, as they once taught, a people who were once chosen and then rejected when we failed to embrace their faith. But the Jews they will ~~get~~ will be those who never believed that we were chosen in the first place. [¶] The Catholic Church speaks of Israel's covenant with God. Most of their Jewish customers do not believe in God, let alone in One who can or did make covenants.

Rome speaks reverently of circumcision. How many of their Jewish subscribers use mohalim for their children, and how many allow pediatricians to operate on their children before the 8th day?

The Vatican seeks to compliment us by speaking of the Torah as a "word that endures forever." This is good Orthodox Jewish doctrine. How many of their Jewish table-hoppers really believe that? How many are committed to Torah as enduring and therefore

lay the tefillin or refrain from work on Shabbat or eat only kosher?

The Church will be short-changed. And they will deserve it, for the invitation to joint services is a shallow thing, an unworthy ploy. They will deserve the kind of Jews they will get. These Jews, in addition to the severely unlettered and hopelessly naive, will be the political Jews on the payrolls of the big public relations-minded organizations.

So let us make a prediction: such Jews will ultimately be rejected by their hosts. They will be thrown a few crumbs from the Catholic table, and then they will be asked to leave. But then we Jews, sons of Jacob, who sit around our Jewish table, will not accept them back. They will be condemned to the ridiculous absurdity of their ignominious third table forever.

Chanukah, just concluded, began just in that way. It is simply not true that the only battle fought on Chanukah was by valiant Jews carrying out the first battle for religious freedom against the oppressive Syrians. It is time we came to understand that history is more than a Sunday School story, and far more complex than such a simplistic version of it. The major battle was not the military one but the inner spiritual-cultural battle that took place in the Jewish community. The story of Chanukah is the story of revulsion by loyal Jews against the Jewish Hellenists who no doubt considered the Maccabees as benighted bigots because they would not share the table of the Syrian Greeks.

I have no doubt that those who today take the stands of rejecting this offer of joint services will similarly be classified as intolerant, narrow-minded, benighted, bigoted.

So be it. But our stand is clear. We are Jews, we remain Jews, we refuse to pollute the most unique experience of religion, which is prayer.

Two tables and not one table. Two tables and not three tables. There is as much value and insight and morality in Biblical humor as there is in Biblical solemnity. The Biblical comedy is as immortally precious as the Biblical tragedy -- and sometimes they are the very same thing.

So, every time we return to the portion of Miketz and read of the three tables, let us laugh at the Jew who table-hops, perhaps even laugh at ourselves -- because who, in this pluralistic, affluent society does not sometimes entertain such an inclination? -- and then let us shed a tear for the Jew who, caught up in this mad situation, cannot extricate himself from it in time.

And having laughed and having wept, may the Almighty grant that we can in the future smile as we await the great redemption, which will begin not with arms, not with might, but with the solid determination of every Jew to remain what he is, and what he yet may become -- a true Jew. For the redemption is a time that the Almighty too will smile and laugh -- smile for His redeemed children,

and laugh at those who would deny them their land, their freedom,
their Torah, and their Holy City of Jerusalem. פ'נל א לל

ינל עלל א פנל . "He that sitteth in Heaven laugheth;
the Lord hath them in derision" (Ps. 2:4).