

"RELIGION BY RELEGATION"

In an almost casual, offhand way, our Sidra tells us of a series of incidents in the life of Isaac that are apparently of no special significance, but in which our Rabbis have seen the greatest importance.

Isaac lived in the land of Canaan, which suffered from scarcity of water most of the year, and he therefore decided to dig a well. We are told of three wells which he and his entourage dug. The first two involved him in difficulties with the people of Gerar, a Phillistine people. The first of these Isaac called Esek, because it was the cause of much strife and contention. He was no more successful with the second well; after his servants dug the well, he incurred the hatred of the people about him. He therefore called the second well by the name Sitnah, meaning enmity. It is only when the third well was dug that happiness prevailed once again; and so he called the third well Rehovoth, meaning: room, freedom, scope, peace, or joy.

Of what importance can these apparently prosaic matters be to later generations, who search in the Torah for matters of timeless significance and are not particularly interested in economic clashes and riparian rivalry in ancient Canaan? Nachmanides, following the principle of the Rabbis that *אבותינו עשו מעשים* -- that the deeds of the fathers anticipate the history of the children --

has taught us that the three wells of Isaac recapitulate the stores of

the three great Sanctuaries of the people of Israel. The first well is a symbol of the First Temple, which was destroyed because of Esek, because of the battles and wars waged on the Jewish people by the surrounding nations. The second well, that called Sitnah, represents the Second Temple, for this Temple was brought to ruins by the hatred and enmity that prevailed amongst the Children of Israel during that period. However, the third well, Rehovoth, is the symbol of the Sanctuary that has not yet been built -- that of the great future. It represents the Bet Hamikdash which will one day be rebuilt in Jerusalem, and which will last forever in a spirit of Rehovoth -- freedom and peace and plenty.

However, the question remains: why, indeed was Isaac successful with the third well, whilst he failed with the first two? In what way was the third well, symbol of the third Temple, superior to the first two?

Permit me to commend to your attention an answer which has been suggested to me (by my uncle, Rabbi Joseph M. Baumol), which not only answers this question but also provides us with a powerful moral for our own lives. If we analyze carefully the three verses which tell of how these three wells were dug, we will discover one significant difference between the first two and the third. The first two were dug by Isaac's servants, his hired people. Of the first well we read: וַיִּדְּגוּ עֲבָדָיו, and the servants of Isaac dug the well. With regard to the second well, we

~~_____~~ ויחפרו

Actually, Isaac's career from the very beginning reveals this tension between relegation and participation. Throughout his life we find signs of his struggling to learn this great principle of personal involvement. Even before he was conceived, the message came to his father Abraham that Sarah would bear the child, Isaac. However, the message came not from God Himself, as it were, but through an angel. And so, when Sarah heard it she laughed and ridiculed it -- incurring Abraham's annoyance and God's irritation. Only afterwards do we read, "and the Lord said unto Abraham" -- when God Himself addressed Abraham, by Himself and not through an angel, Sarah began to believe in reverence and awe, and not doubt in mocking laughter, that

she would be blessed with a child.

The great story of the Akedah also reveals this oscillation between relegation and participation. At first, Abraham decides to offer up Isaac himself. At the last moment, his hand is stayed and, instead, Abraham offers up a ram caught in the thicket nearby. The Torah puts it this way: And behold *וַיִּבְרַח הָרָמִים מֵאֶחָד מֵעֵינֵי הָאֱלֹהִים*, which we normally translate: "a ram was caught in the thicket behind them". But this has also been interpreted in an equally valid fashion as: "and behold another ram was caught in the thicket" -- that is, instead of Isaac, another sacrifice was discovered: the ram. Isaac's life was saved and a "messenger" was offered up in his place, the ram!

His very marriage followed the same pattern. Isaac did not himself go to look for a wife. Instead, his father Abraham sent the servant Eliezer to look for a wife for Isaac. According to our tradition, Eliezer was legally a *שליח צדק*, an agent to marry a woman for Isaac by proxy. No wonder, as the "Netziv" has pointed out, throughout their married lives Isaac and Rebecca suffered from a sense of distance and remoteness between them, a lack of complete communication and participation with each other. "Netziv" sees this symbolized in the event that occurred when Isaac and Rebecca first met. There we read: *וַיֵּרָא אֵלָיו וַיִּכְסֶה פָּנָיו מֵאֵימָה*, that at the moment she saw him, Rebecca took her veil and covered her face. This veil is a symbol of a domestic curtain, an obstruction that prevented them from communicating freely. If there is no direct personal participation, then there is a possibility of misunderstanding and even enmity.

So it is with the wells, It took two difficult diggings until Isaac learned that you must not send someone else to do your tasks. He then learned that only if "and he dug another well," by himself and with his own effort, can ~~he~~ achieve Rehovoth, the peace and freedom and room that he needed for his full development.

This idea is especially important in contemporary society. As civilization grows more complex, each man grows less whole and less integrated, for he is less involved in the tasks that require his attention and devotion. With the division of labor, and the progressive concentration of expertise in narrower and narrower fields, we begin to suffer alienation, a sense of distance between ourselves and our fellow man, a withdrawal from all of life to within ourselves. Especially in our crowded cities, this introversion and withdrawal takes place if only as a means to protect what little precious privacy we have left for ourselves.

And of course, to ~~some~~ extent, we must limit our involvement in society and the lives of others. We need the mechanics of the delegation of duties and tasks in order for society to function. A good administrator is one who does not do everything by himself, but sees to it that others do their parts. We cannot and should not do everything by ourselves.

The Halakhah has recognized this idea and incorporated it in the institution of shin'el, agency. We are permitted to make an agent to perform certain tasks, not only in financial law, but even

with regard to such mitzvot as the giving of charity or the writing of a Sefer Torah. Nevertheless, the principle of mitze is not valid for every occasion. For instance, I cannot make an agent to eat in the Sukkah for me, nor can I appoint someone to listen to the sound of the Shofar for me. If I do, I have failed to fulfill my religious obligations. How do I distinguish between those functions for which I can appoint a messenger, and those which I must perform myself?

The author of the "ענין אגף" has put it this way: I may make an agent to perform any commandment save the איברא דאגף, that mitzvah which I am bidden to perform with my own body, my own self. Thus, charity can be given by anyone: the important consideration is the result, that the poor man be fed or housed. Anyone may write a Sefer Torah for me, provided that I commission it and possess it and use it. But when the commandment is that I eat in a Sukkah, or that I hear the Shofar -- that is a commandment relating to my body, to my person, and no one can take my place.

Thus, certain things cannot be delegated and relegated to others. Today, as we are threatened with the progressive depersonalization of life, we must emphasize as never before the איברא דאגף : the significance of the individual, of selfhood, of personal participation and responsibility. We must come to recognize that we are each of us not only a collection of assignable functions, but integrated, whole, unique individuals, who must act by ourselves and as ourselves.

This sense of participation and wholeness is important not only for our individual development, but also for the integrity of family and home. A family is the kind of unit which cannot exist when the people in it conceive of themselves as little islands of humanity who refuse to be involved with each other. A home is a place of people who are concerned with each other, not introverted ciphers. How relevant, unfortunately, to our modern condition is that caustic insight contained in the sarcastic story of a woman who was approached by a real estate agent to buy a home. She refused, saying: what need do I have of a home? I was born in a maternity ward, raised in a nursery, cared for by baby-sitters, sent to kindergarten and then to a boarding school, spent my summers in a camp, lived in a college dormitory, moved to a hotel, I spend my vacations at resorts or cruises, when I am sick I am sent to a hospital, when I am old I will spend my time in a senior citizen's home and I will be buried from a funeral parlor. Who needs a home?

Indeed, if we spend our lives assigning our activities to others, simply giving all of society the power of attorney over our lives, "home" becomes impossible. Modern life encourages *הנהגת אחרים* -- the appointing of others as agents to do our own work, and therefore this same modern life produces an inordinate amount of Esek and Sitnah, of strife and hatred. Judaism, contrariwise, emphasizes the home by stressing *אחריות אישית*, the importance of personal participation and involvement -- with the resulting Rehovoth, the sense of joy, release, and freedom.

(Saadia, in his major work asks: why were not man and society created perfect so that there would be no need of Torah and mitzvot to help us on the road to perfection? He answers, because happiness and spiritual fulfillment require human work, personal effort, individual commitment and participation . If perfection is given to us by God without our endeavors, it is impersonal, and it cannot help us to attain the highest levels of spiritual satisfaction. It is only when we, by our own participation and effort, can achieve spiritual growth through the study of Torah and performance of mitzvot, that we can rightly be said to have enjoyed and deserved what we have called Rehovoth.)

This emphasis is indeed characteristic of Orthodox Judaism; it is indigenous to our whole faith. We believe that many religious duties cannot be delegated, and others should not. Prayer must be performed by the individual, not sung by the choir and chanted by the cantor and ground out by the organ. Torah must be studied by every individual Jew, by himself and in lectures, not left to rabbis and seminary professors. Kaddish must be recited by the mourner himself, not assigned to the sexton or some hired individual. Kedushah must not be confined only to the synagogue; from the synagogue it must extend into the home, so that even the Jewish table becomes an altar. No, there must be no vicarious observance, no religion by relegation.

All the more astounding therefore to learn of a prominent Orthodox synagogue, with a distinguished membership, which lacks that personal commitment to public worship which will enable it to have a regular minyan of members. This, despite repeated requests

by its rabbis, almost to the point of mutual embarrassment, who are now reluctantly forced to conclude that their people lack the sense of personal action, and are almost ready to hire religious Hessians, hired personnel, others to do the work that really ought to be considered (גזר גזר) , a personal, non-transferable obligation.

This sense of involvement which we have been recommending is best symbolized by a rock, one that was placed into the coffin of the late, lamented Rabbi Maimon, ר"מ, the distinguished leader of religious Zionism and the first Minister of Religions of Israel. When he was a young man, he preached throughout the length and breadth of Europe on behalf of religious Zionism. Once, when he was speaking in a synagogue in the Galician town of Kolomea, an opponent of Zionism threw a rock at him, one that was so large, that had it struck its mark it would have brought to an abrupt and tragic end what turned out to be a great and eminent career of a founder of the State of Israel. Rabbi Maimon cherished that rock as a symbol of his utter devotion to the Zionist ideals and he commanded in his will that upon his death, the rock be placed in his coffin as an eternal memento of his personal dedication and participation in the dream of Zionism based upon Torah.

May we too learn to apply our own efforts, energies, and personal talents to the great and sacred tasks at hand. May we dig hard and deep in the soil of Judaism and Jewish life. And may God grant that

the wells of Torah open up, that they gush forth the living waters of Judaism and divine blessings, and that our lives become Rehovoth, possessed of new scope, new freedom, abiding joy and everlasting peace. Amen