

- A 312
1. The major portion of this morning's first Sidra deals with mundane, prosaic financial law -- the disposition of real estate, the law of Shemitah (the sabbatical law which controlled agricultural development), with loans and debtors and creditors, and with the care and treatment of the poor and the indigent.

And then -- at the very conclusion -- we find an abrupt shift from a Torah for businessmen to the great and timeless religious principle which is so often repeated in the Torah and is one of its sacred fundamentals: LO SA'ASU LACHEM ELILIM, UPESEL UMATZEIVAH LO SAKIMU LACHEM. And here the student of Torah wonders: what does real estate and commerce have to do with idolatry? What is the relation of illegitimate business dealings to icons?

Our Rabbis were in all probability as vexed by this passage as we are. And that is why they clearly identified the idol here intended by the Torah. They maintained that in this verse the Torah did not have reference to all idols in general, but especially to the one called MARKULIS, a pagan idol also known as "Mercury" or "Hermes."

2. And with this interpretation of the Sages, the Biblical passage assumes new dimensions and becomes extremely meaningful to Jews of all times, and for us as well. For Mercury or Markulis was the pagan god of the merchants, the idol of commerce. And what the Torah thus tells us is that if Torah is to be just ceremony, just synagogue procedure, just dignified ritual, and not a way of life which governs our conduct in business and trade as well as in shul -- then we are no better than the worshippers of Markulis or Mercury. For if G-d and Torah have no place in the professional life and business life of the Jew, then he is in effect worshipping business and trade as an end in itself, he is a devout communicant in the cult of Mercury, god of commerce.
3. This is the challenge of today's Sidra: either G-d or Mercury. There is no middle position. Either you are a Jew all day and all week, or you are a pagan even when covered by a big Tallis. Either one welcomes the judgment and tracing of Torah in his conduct in trade and his relations with business associates and his charity contributions and his everyday life -- or it is as if he had worshipped the very idols so repugnant to our whole religion. When you lock G-d up in the shul and disregard Him in the marketplace, you have effectively killed the whole spirit of Judaism.
4. Of course, this does not mean that there are those who insist that Religion should be confined to the Temples and that one should be consciously dishonest in his personal dealings. Of course not. Everyone is against dishonesty and for good citizenship. But that is perhaps why the peculiar form of religious service of the idol Mercury was -- stoning him. You served Mercury by throwing rocks at him -- in other words, when you denounce dishonesty, when you reject open lack of ethics, but at the same time immunize business life from the word of Torah -- you are still worshipping the idol! Yes, even when throwing rocks at Mercury one worships him, provided that his domain -- business and commerce -- is kept out of G-d's jurisdiction.
5. And this worship of Mercury is an unfortunate development of modern times in Jewish life. Before the Emancipation, Jewish life was able to boast of a healthy wholesomeness. All aspects of life, without exception, were treated from the point of view of Torah. In other words, the Jew looked on all problems from the point of view of G-d. Torah controlled the diet, guided sexual expression, determined financial questions, regulated prices, adjudicated disputes, approved or disapproved of contracts.

But in modern times, Judaism became fragmentized. Judaism became a matter of where you prayed, not how you lived; what Siddur you used, not how regularly you paid employees or bills; how long was your Shmoneh Ezrei, not how faithfully you worked for your salary; how good a tenor you got as a Cantor, not how ferociously you destroyed a competitor or "took in" a customer. Our whole Sidra of this morning was forgotten, and business life became G-d-less -- or better, became itself an object of worship and blind obedience.

Lord, Dorah,

And so Jews rejected the God of Torah and accepted Mercury, god of commerce.

Why did this split between Religion and Life come about, this shrinkage of the area of Torah's influence? Probably it was part of the secularization of life in general. But more probably it was a Christian influence, an influence which gave religion a monopoly on relations to G-d, and relegated to Caesar a virtual monopoly on things relating to Caesar. But whatever the source of this split, it spells a tragedy for Jews. For they became worshippers of Mercury, of Markulis -- and he was not only the god of commerce but also -- the god of thieves!!

6. What is necessary for the revitalization of Jewry in our day is a new appreciation of the fact that Judaism, unlike Christianity, is not relegated to one holy place and one holy day. When a local Jewish fraternal and social organization organizes a baseball picnic on Shabbos, it is violating the integrity, the wholeness of Jewish life. When another group, part of a great nation-wide organization, organizes a golf tournament on a Jewish fast-day and serves a luscious treifa dinner -- it reveals its paganism especially when it resents a Rabbi rearing his head out of the pulpit and extending it into the secular clubs. And even golf itself must be treated as part of a way of life -- that is, it too is not immune from Jewish opinion. That is why a country club must conduct itself Jewishly, both in matters of diet and holidays and business-wise.
7. Every morning we say: LE'OLAM YEHEY ADAM YEREY SHAMAYIM BASEISER UVAGALUY. A man must always be G-d-fearing, in private and in public. Generally we take that as meaning that not only must a man be G-d-fearing in public, where all can see him, but even in private, where no one else can check on him. I beg to change that emphasis. LE'OLAM...UVAGALUY -- ...not only in private, not only in the intimate matters of the heart, not only in the strict secrecy that guards a man's prayer and the innermost communication of his heart with his Creator must a man be religious -- but also BAGALUY, in public, in the market place, in the professional office, in the store, in the club, in the factory, before the bar.
8. There is no dearth of Jewish law on social and business relationships. Under the influence of this split, of this shrinkage, of the effect of this Mercury cult, some of us may be surprised at how great a literature we have concerning activity outside the synagogue. All one has to do is open a Shulchan Aruch or a Ramabam. There are laws of prayer -- and interest; tefillin -- and profiteering; tallis -- and sexual relations; mezuzah -- and tax evasion; shabbas -- and larceny. Rabbi Meimon has calculated that there exists by today over 100,000 teshuvos (responsa to questions, or case histories) relating to social law or business law alone!
9. So that we today must return to this fuller and greater understanding of Torah, as it is presented to us in today's Sidra. By subjecting all of life to G-d's influence, we will have smashed the statues of Mirciey, instead of merely throwing pebbles at it. By opening all areas of our existence to the teachings of our Tradition, we will have acted as genuine Jews, not as half and one-quarter Jews. We will have grown to the fuller spiritual stature of one who realizes that  
 LASHEM HAARETZ UMLOAH...  
 and therefore all life must be lived so as not to be embarrassed by His presence. LE'OLAM YEHEY ADAM YEREY SHAMAYIM BASEISER UVAGALUY...not only in private but also in public. Then and only then can we conclude that phrase: UMODEH AL HA'EMESS, then will we have understood the great truths, the EMESS, of Judaism, VEDOVEIR EMESS BILVAVO, and then will the truths of Torah be not superficial and external, but then they will have penetrated to the very innermost depths of the heart, so that VEXASHKEIM VYOMAR, so that we may rise each morning and say with full knowledge and commitment, RIBON KOL HA'OLAMIM -- you, O G-d, are the Master of the whole world, and nothing is beyond Your greatness and Your scrutiny.