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"STUBBORNNESS"

It was R. Simchah Zissel, one of the giants of the Lithuanian Mussar movement, who pointed out an unusual aspect of G-d's reaction to the worship of the Golden Calf by the Israelites. The divine wrath was kindled at the people of Israel not for idolatry, not for faithlessness, but because HINEI AM KESHEI OREF HU, because it is a stiff-necked people. Evidently stubbornness is, in G-d's scheme, more deserving of anger than idolatry. The Torah regards an obstinate character as more evil than a pagan soul. The calamities that followed the Golden Calf were due more to bad character than bad theology.

Certainly this is a valid point. The man with the stubborn streak has a rigid will. His mind is frozen, and so he cannot learn. His soul suffers from a rigor mortis which prevents him from communing with the Source of all life. Brazenness, ignorance, a closed mind and a dead spirit - - these are the prices of obstinacy and the casualties of stubbornness. A stubborn people will persist in its evil ways and never learn the ways of G-d. A stiff-necked people cannot raise its head above the Golden Calf.

And yet the matter cannot be dismissed so simply. A blanket condemnation of stubbornness does not fit in with the complicated facts of today's Sidra. For while, on the one hand, G-d points to stubbornness as the root of the sin of idolatry, and while he blames obstinacy for His withdrawal from Israel - - KI LO E'ELEH BE-KIRBECHA KI AM KESHEI OREF ATA, I will not go up amongst you because you are a stiff-necked people - - yet, on the other hand, it is this very characteristic that Moses presents as a reason why G-d should rejoin the Camp of Israel! In his second prayer of intercession, Moses says, YELECH NA HA-SHEM BE-KIRBEINU KI AM KESHEI OREF HU! Let G-d go with us because we are a stiff-necked people! The very reason G-d gave for abandoning Israel is the one Moses presents for His accepting them! If stubbornness is an unconditional evil, an absolute sin, then how can Moses point to Jewish obstinacy as a virtue deserving of G-d's attention?

Obviously, then, stubbornness is a virtue as well as a vice,* a mitzvah as well as an aveirah. To be unbendingly evil is worse than idolatry; to be unbendingly G-dly is the greatest virtue. What is dogged obstinacy in the service of a bad cause, is valorous constancy in the service of a good one. Stubbornness depends upon what you do with it and how you wield it. There is an immoral stubbornness that insists, despite all signs of divine faithfulness, that ~~TOV LAMN AVOD ES MITZRAYIM MI-MUSBINU BA-MIDBAR~~, that 'tis better to live like an Egyptian slave than to die free under G-d in the desert. But there is a moral stubbornness that, despite all reports to the contrary, doggedly insists with Joshua that ALO NA'ALEH VE-YARASHNU OSAH, we can reach the Promised Land and build it up. Our Arab cousins practice an immoral stubbornness when they refuse to face the facts of a divinely guided history and daily recite over Radio Ciaro the banal nonsense about pushing the Jews into the sea. But there is a moral stubbornness which refuses to concede that Jews behind the Iron Curtain are lost, and so waits and prepares until they start to come; a moral obstinacy that will fight tyranny on the beaches, landing grounds, fields, streets and hills; a lofty stiff-neckedness that will not let freedom's light darken -

"Patriots in peace, assert the people's right;

"With noble stubbornness resisting might." (John Dryden);

a lovely and blessed tenacity which, according to the Midrash, made the quality of KESHEI OREF worthy of divine pleasure because it is this which enabled the Jew to face up to the challenge, throughout the ages, of O YEHUDI O TZALUV - either give up your Jewishness or die on the cross. We are a stubborn, stiff-necked, obdurate people. We will not give up our national existence, our faith, our Torah, our G-d.

O YEHU

* see Ralbag, ad loc.

** added: Am. Council Jan. appeal to state Dept to stop Rumanian immigration to Israel

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O YEHUDI O TZALUV. That is why we are alive to this today. That same quality that made us insensitive to the word of G-d and caused us to dance about a Golden Calf has been sublimated, and has made us the strong, powerful people of G-d. That is what Moses meant in his prayer to G-d. That same characteristic that made them blind to you, O G-d, will keep them a Holy Nation through trial and temptation, through persecution and program oice they have accepted You. In every condition and under every circumstance, though ridiculed and laughed at, they will say proudly and stubbornly, ASHER BACHAR BANU MIKOL HA8AMIM, G-d has chosen us, and we must teach His word to the world. With principled obstinacy we shall bend the world to G-d.

And if we need convince ourselves further of the worthiness of the right kind of stubbornness, let us turn to the Haftorah where we are given the immortal picture of the Prophet Elijah on Mt. Carmel, challenging the priests of the idol Baal, swaying his people to him and away from Baal by the miraculous fire from Heaven which consumes his sacrifice. What was Elijah's purpose in this dramatic moment? - to prove G-d's existence? Is it possible or even proper to prove G-d by this kind of histrionics which could possibly be duplicated by a skilled magician? Not at all. What Elijah proposed in his sudden appearance out of the desert was to change the character of the people from the spiritual flabbiness of fence-sitting religiosity and wishy-washy faith back to the toughness of the AM KESHEI OREF. Remember the challenge the Prophet flung at this uncertain people, wavering 'twixt G-d and Baal? ~~between~~ - AD MASAI ATEM POSECHIM AL SHETEI HA-SE'IFIM, how long will you waver between two opinions, how long will you keep on jumping from one branch to the other like a bird that cannot decide where it wants to go, how long will you postpone the hard and tough choice: either G-d or the Baal? The Prophet was tired with the softness of the Jewish spirit of his day. He wanted to do away with the jelly-fish spirit. He longed for the AM KESHEI OREF, for a flint-minded, stiff-necked people whose head could not be turned by the glitter of golden idols and whose heart would not be turned to the temptations of pretty pagan customs.

How interesting is the Biblical idiom for stubbornness - KESHEI OREF, a stiff neck. A man who has a stiff neck finds that his body and head must face in the same direction. In the evil, wrong kind of stubbornness, his head follows his body and his mind justifies his material cravings. In the right kind of stubbornness, his body follows his head, and he disciplines himself to follow his principles. When there is POSEIACH AL SHETEI HASEIFIM, when there is flabbiness, then head and body face different directions: the mind expresses the best of intentions, while the body indulges in the worst of deeds. G-d condemned the wrong kind of stubbornness. Elijah condemned all kinds of moral flabbiness. Moses praised the right kind of stubbornness -- where the principles prevail and body must follow mind.

That this teaching of Judaism ~~about~~ is important today as always goes without saying. Our fight for freedom against tyranny, for Jewishness against assimilation, for the moral life against degeneracy -- all these depend, in the end, on how properly stubborn we are. But today allow me to mention very briefly but one element of Jewish obstinacy that we must reaffirm urgently. We are a people who have never allowed our poor and unfortunate to become public charges. We have always "taken care of our own." It is wonderful tribute to our durable stiff-neckedness that we New York Jews, in keeping with this tradition of Tzedakah and caring for our fellow-Jews, have always supported the central, over-all agency for such purposes: The Federation of Jewish Philanthropies. Federation cares for 700,000 people in our city, through hospitals, orphanages, family and vocational guidance, summer camps and Jewish education. It is the source of 90% of Jewish-sponsored care in this city. Last year Federation suffered a \$2 million deficit. This year it faces the alarming deficit of \$4 million. Federation now faces a crisis in maintenance -- it needs no less than \$18 million this year just to continue its work without any expansion or improvement. We are called upon, we of the Jewish Center, to show our moral and ethical strength, to rally to the call of Tzedakah, to reaffirm our insistence that we take care of our own, that

no Jew ever be forced into the humiliation of a public ward. It is a peculiar feeling, and we are stubborn about it -- but it is part of our moral heritage. Let us not stand accused of Elijah's jibe AD MASAI ATEM POSECHIM AL SHETEI HASEIFIM, how long will we remain ambivalent and uncertain whether we will practice Tzedakah or not. Let us brace ourselves, and support Federation even if it hurts a bit. For we are an AM KESHEI OREF.

The Hakakhah teaches us that an animal whose spine is broken is Treifah, it is not kosher. And if we are in doubt, the Halakhah prescribes this interesting test: grasp the spine at its base. If it leans over to the side, that is the sign of a fracture, and the animal is Tereifah. If it stands erect, then the spine has its natural hardness, and it is kosher.

If we want to be kosher Jews, Jews who are genuine and authentic heirs of the Torah tradition -- we must be possessed of strong backbones and stiff necks, we must show spine and stubbornness in the face of adversity and challenge. We must not bow before persecution, we must not bend the knee to any of the modern idols. We must stand proudly and straight upon our sacred principles. Then we shall be kosher Jews. Then we shall not have reason to fear Elijah's taunt. Then we shall prove worthy of Moses' prayer and G-d's affirmative answer to that prayer: YELECH NA HASHEM BEKIRBENU KI AM KESHEI OREF HU, let G-d go amongst us, for we are a stiff-necked people.

Can include prayer quoted in 1911, Vol (16 B unit):
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