

"REMEMBER ME?"

One of the most dramatic moments in all of the Torah comes when Joseph reveals his true identity to his brothers. It is not remarkable that he has to repeat the words אֲנִי יוֹסֵף אֶחָיֶכֶם, "I am Joseph your brother," twice. That is to be expected because the shock is too great to be absorbed all at once. What is rather unusual is that the second time he says it he formulates his introduction somewhat differently. Thus, the first time, he says: אֲנִי יוֹסֵף אֶחָיֶכֶם הַיּוֹד אֵלַי הִנֵּה, "I am Joseph your brother; is my father still alive?" The second time he says, אֲנִי יוֹסֵף אֶחָיֶכֶם אֲשֶׁר מָכַרְתֶּם אוֹתִי מִצְרַיִם, "I am Joseph your brother, whom you sold into Egypt."

The commentators discuss the differences in these two verses. What seems to concern many of them is that the first identification is more jarring and unnerving to the brothers than the second, whereas we would expect the reverse.

This morning, however, we shall take both expressions as models of two kinds of self-identification of Jews, to the non-Jewish and to the Jewish worlds.

In presenting ourselves to the non-Jewish world, we can never ignore the past. Healthy and reasonable relationships cannot be established by an act of transcendental ignorance. Our people is steeped in memories. We are a people that sanctifies memories. We can no more let the world forget what it did to us, than we can ourselves forget. "I am your brother Joseph whom you sold into Egypt!" This coming year will mark the 30th anniversary of the liberation at the end of World War II. It may be thirty years already, during which a new generation has grown up which did not know the Holocaust, but the people of Israel will never forget.

I can understand why gentiles would want to forget. Those who were guilty, or who lived in the countries where the crimes were perpetrated, find the burden of guilt simply too onerous, too crushing, too overwhelming, to be able to live with the consciousness of that guilt on a day-to-day basis. The new generation that was born after the Holocaust feels that it cannot assume guilt endlessly, and it is not fair to make them suffer for the sins of their fathers. At times, I can appreciate what they are saying and what they are feeling.

I might even be inclined to accept such a reaction, were

I to feel that the Holocaust had at least left some mark, some teaching, some lesson of value. But when I see the old anti-Semitism crawling out of the woodwork, as ugly as ever, but disguised as anti-Zionism and anti-imperialism, as anti-colonialism or as anti-Israelism; when I notice that French politicians to this day continue the policy of De Gaulle who considered us an "arrogant" people; when British politicians reveal their real intentions -- in October 1973, during the Yom Kippur War a Jewish Member of Parliament arose and declared, "Israel is a steadfast and loyal ally of Britain," whereupon Sir Alec Douglas-Home retorted, "if that is what you think, then you are neither"....; When the United States can tolerate a General Brown as its chief military officer -- then it is time for us to turn to the world and say:

אני יוסף אחיכם אשר מכרתם אותי מצרימה

Remember me? I am the Jew, the Joseph, whom you attacked in pagan Rome as a lazy parasite, and in the empires of Christendom as a pagan renegade; whom you harrassed and tormented in crusades and inquisitions, in pogroms and in holocausts; by Fascists and Communists, Leftists and Rightists, atheists and saints: . It is the selling into Egypt all over again.

אשר מכרתם אותי מצרימה

Remember me! And think carefully before you lightly undertake a flirtation with bigotry again. It may be thirty years since the Holocaust, but it is only thirty years since the Holocaust...

Yet, in confronting the gentile world with the memories of the Holocaust, we should not necessarily always appear in a mournful and baleful guise. When Joseph told his brothers that "I am the one whom you sold into Egypt," he was not whining resentfully. What he was saying is: despite all your best efforts, I am still around!

Richard Reeves, in an important article in the current issue of New York Magazine, has the following to say:

The Holocaust, six million murdered Jews, has as much meaning to most Americans as visions of the Japanese as slant-eyed pilots diving towards Pearl Harbor... Sleep and rain wash away all things -- the Jews here are no longer victims. One does not instinctively feel sorry for his dentist or for the chairman of CBS.

So, our self-identification as the Joseph אשר מכרתם אותי מצרימה "whom you sold into Egypt," must be positive as well as negative: you did it to us once, twice, a hundred times before -- but never again,

no more! Whether it is the PLO or the Third World or the Communists or the Sadat's or the Fahmi's and their incomparable insolence, we are here and we are here to stay!

Not only that, but even though our presence is interpreted by the world as a threat to peace and as a potential source of nuclear destruction, we tell the Western World what Joseph told his brothers: you may not realize it now, but you will eventually -- ב' למה שזחן לפניכם Providence has placed us here as a way of saving your lives! Were Israelis not in "Palestine," you might have been strangled a long time ago by the Soviets acting through the Arabs in control of oil. Some day you will thank us openly for being in the Middle East and insisting upon staying there.

The other statement of Joseph's credentials is directed to the Jewish world: "I am Joseph your brother. Does my father still live?" We must appear to our non-observant fellow Jews as the bearers of the tradition, as ambassadors of Israel's spiritual heritage. We must remind them that we are not only brothers -- ethnically allied -- but that we share a common spiritual patrimony, we have a mutual father. We must never let up in our efforts to educate fellow Jews in Judaism.

It is this time of the year when we suffer the usual depression, realizing the extent to which assimilation has insinuated itself into our children's lives. This past week I was coming down the elevator from my study, together with a meshulach, a white-bearded Israeli rabbi. The elevator was full of little nursery school children, all of them from Jewish homes. As soon as they saw him, they gleefully cried out, "Santa Claus, Santa Claus!" Regretfully, the old man flustered and came up with the wrong reaction. In his broken English, he said, "No, no, I am not Santa Claus, I am a businessman." What he should have said is, in a manner understandable to children that age, אני יוסף אחיכם, I am your brother, I am a Jew just like you are! Not all Jews have to look like WASPS, not all Jews must look like tired middle-aged businessmen, or college professors, or suburbanites on a Sunday afternoon. I am a rabbi, and you had better learn what a Jew, a rabbi, looks like. העיר אבי ה' This is what my father and his father -- and what your great-grand parents -- looked like. You must, if not look like them, at least live like them..."

But that is not the only source to which is directed that disconcerting and unnerving question, העיר אבי ה', "Is my father yet alive?" I fear that it is directed with brutal immediacy at Orthodox Jews as well.

It gives me great pain and anguish to discuss what I now am about to mention, but I fear that should I refrain from doing so, that would be an abdication of my moral responsibility. I refer to the scandal in the nursing home industry which has been appearing on the pages of the New York Times and other newspapers, as well as other branches of the media, for the last several weeks. I know that you are bewildered. I too am bewildered, and I do not know if I can offer you guidance. But let me at least invite you to share with me some of my personal reactions.

First, we must beware from joining a hanging jury before the verdict is in or even the indictment legally prepared. Newspapers cannot convict, and such information has known to be faulty in the past. Jewish law and civil law and simple ethics all teach us: you do not hold a man guilty until you have corroborated and established the facts of his guilt. Let no one be a hangman whose own neck itches. Furthermore -- although this is apparently not relevant to the issue at hand -- we must make a difference between one who is guilty of a single wrong act, and one who is enmeshed in a whole pattern of systematic corruption. A man may be guilty of one crime or one misdemeanor, but we should not rush therefore to condemn him in public.

כי אדם אין צריך בארץ אשר יעשה טוב ולא יחטא

There is no one who is wholly innocent. Let us not be too impetuous in rendering judgment.

Second, we must beware, and make others aware, of generalizations. Because one or two or five or a thousand Jews do something wrong is no reason to blame all Jews. Because one or two or five or a hundred Orthodox Jews sin, is no reason to hold all Orthodoxy guilty.

האיש אחד יחטא ונעץ כל העדה כולה תקצוף ?

"If one man sins, shall You be furious with the entire congregation?" The media have generally been restrained in dealing with the current scandal. Yet there are occasional slips, and when I see someone who is accused of wrong-doing described as "Orthodox," I am annoyed. How often is a mugger identified in the press as Black, a rapist as a Puerto Rican, a pick-pocket as Episcopalian?

Third, the statement of the Reform congregational body, the Union of American Hebrew Congregations, blasting the accused, seemed to me somewhat offensive in that it was overly defensive. I was somewhat amused by a group such as the Reform, which consider themselves thoroughly American, completely at home in this country, feeling constrained to dissociate themselves from other Jews who are accused of wrong-doing. Did the Pope apologize

to Archbishop Capucci, who smuggled arms to the PLO in Israel to kill Jews? He did not; he even defended him indirectly! Does the President of Italy apologize to the President of America for the Mafia? Does Rev. Graham apologize for President Nixon?

And yet, despite all, speaking only in the family, as it were, who of us does not feel tainted? Who of us does not feel embarrassed to the roots of his being?

Our house is not in order. It has not been in order for a long time. We were all too lax in failing to inspect the credentials of those we permitted to take the reigns of leadership. And that holds true not only for one individual or one industry, but, may God have mercy upon us, for many other areas as well!

I now can hear the reproach of Joseph rolling down like distant peals of thunder through the ages, becoming deafeningly louder as it approaches us and ultimately envelops us:

אני יוסף אחיכם I am your brother Joseph! Remember me? Remember the Joseph who resisted temptation even when he could have gotten away with it? -- הלא יוסף אחי -- does my father yet live? Is my father Jacob still alive for you -- that Jacob who was a זקן, an old man, sick and infirm, and whom you treated callously and for which you suffered? An old man who, like other elderly, ought to be treated with deference and tenderness, not ignored and defrauded?

אבינו שבשמים -- is our Heavenly Father, alive for you, He who taught and teaches and always will teach צדקה ושלום (justice and righteousness) and אהבה (love) and מוסר (ethics) and דמיון (the obligation of the Jew to respect the laws of the country)? Has your Judaism ossified into rite and rote, into mere cult, with no moral passion and no ethical dimension, and no sense of a living God? הלא אבי? Can we continue as we have continued, when all the labor and effort we have put into building Jewish life in this country, especially the Torah community, is undone because we are struck with such Hillul Hashem instead of arriving at a state of Kiddush Hashem?

So we must not be impetuous in passing judgment. We must never condemn before the facts are in. But the כבוד, the dignity of Orthodoxy and Torah, takes precedence over individuals. במקום שיש תילול השם אין חילוקין כבוד לך Where the desecration of the Divine Name is concerned, no individual can deter us from our task. We must resolve that in the future we shall never allow principle to be

sacrificed for expediency.

So as we read today's Sidra and Joseph's immortal words
 אֲנִי אֶחָד מִבְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל , we know that these words are still
 relevant and germane to non-Jews, to other Jews, and to our-
 selves.

"I am your brother Joseph whom you sold into Egypt", and
 never again will we allow that to occur.

"I am your brother Joseph, is my father yet alive?"; we
 shall hope and pray -- and even more, strive and labor -- to
 deserve the answer and hear it loud and clear: אֲנִי אֶחָד מִבְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל ,
 our Father yet lives!