

THE COURAGE TO BE YOURSELF

The R. H. prayerbook presents us with what seems to be a glaring inconsistency or, at best, a puzzling paradox. On the one hand, as reflected in our KAN, the whole spirit of Rosh Hashanah is universal in nature. We pray for the welfare of all the world, and hope for the time when all mankind will turn to G-d. VE-YEI'ASU KULAM AGUDAH ACHAS LA'ASOS RETZONECHA BE-LEIVAV SHALEM -- may they all blend into one brotherhood to do Thy will with a perfect heart. On this birthday of the whole of creation, the HAYOM HARAS OLAM, we declare that all men are brothers under One Father and that the entire human community is one family.

And yet, curiously enough, in the very same prayer -- the SHMONEH ESREI -- ~~we thank declare ATA VECHARTANU MIKOL HA'AMIM, "Thou didst choose us from amongst all peoples".~~ In the very same prayer we recite the ALEINU, familiar to us as the closing hymn of every service during the year, but which originally comes from the Rosh Hashanah Mussaf service. And in this prayer we say ALEINU LESHABEIACH, we ought to thank G-d, SHELO ASANU KE*GOYE HA'ARATZOS VE'LO SAMANU KE'MISHPECHOS HA'ADAMAH, SHELO SAM CHELKEINU KA'HEM VE'GORALEINU KE'CHOL HAMONAM -- who has not made us like the other nations of the world and has not placed us like the families of the earth, who has not designed our destiny to be like theirs nor our lot like that of all their multitude.

not an obvious

Is there ~~any~~ inconsistency between this prayer for the brotherhood of all peoples and the expression of thanks that Jews are different, that we are not like the others? Certainly not. The compilers and authors of the Prayerbook were intelligent as well as saintly people. Obviously, what they meant is a principle which is crucial to the lives of each and every person in this synagogue today, something which may well determine the future of each and all of us. They meant to tell us that democracy and universalism, the belief that all humans are precious in the eyes of G-d, the hope that all men can live as brothers, this belief does not mean that all must be the same, that no one must be different. It does not mean that the individual person must succumb to the level of his society, ~~and~~ that the people of Israel must follow the pattern of life of other nations. ALEINU is a fiery protest against blind conformism of all kinds, it is an historic challenge to the human weakness for imitation. And especially where Religion is concerned, ALEINU is a ringing declaration that we Jews are different and determined to stay different. SHELO ASANU K'GOYEI HA'ARATZOS, for G-d has made us different and intended for us to be different.

Keen observers of the American scene are becoming more and more alarmed by this tendency to imitate and conform, a tendency based upon this national mistake that democracy means sameness, that it requires of us to be all alike. Joseph Wood Krutch put it this way: we have changed the Age of the Common Man to the Age of the Common Denominator. The American dream was the Age of the Common Man -- which meant that the common man should be given every opportunity to become uncommon, to become ^{excellent} superior in every aspect of life. What contemporary America has done is to commit the terrible error of making virtue of commonness, of insisting that everyone conform to the least Common Denominator. Of insisting not that the common man be allowed to become uncommon, but that the uncommon must become average, he must become like the common man. In this day and age of mass production and mass communication and mass propaganda, we are pressured mightily to follow the pattern of the average that the masses contain. This Tyranny of the Average has actually cost America world leadership! Until last Yom Kippur when the Russians sent up the first satellite, the scientist was a suspect member of society because he was too educated, he was uncommon, different from the average American. ~~The candidate for public office who had too good a sense of humor, too much of a cultural interest, who was too different from the ordinary and the average, was handicapped by his very differentness.~~ In an age of this sort, we do not ask: how ought a boy

but just parents ought not to
force any one child into the pattern
of his father or mother
a brother or a sister against his will + nature,
to meet each his own

that the Jewish professional must be different in the high code of ethics he practices; that the Jewish youngster must be different in the premium he places on the intellect and in the morality and decency of his social behavior; the Jew must be different in what he eats, how he acts, what he says, how and where he prays. Rosh Hashanah tells us that it is true that all men are brothers, but not identical twins. It is true that all humans are G-d's children, but each has a different lot, a different duty, a different destiny. ZEH SEFER TOLDOS HA'ADAM - the Torah is called the Book of the Children of Men, and our Rabbis told us that that means that every man is a Sefer Torah; and just as a Sefer Torah may not be printed - - making each Torah the same as the other - - but must be handwritten, which means that each will differ from the other, so does each person and each nation have its own unique style of life, a uniqueness that must not be blurred by the pernicious desire to forget yourself and be like all others.

This tendency to adjust, to imitate, to forfeit the holy difference with which we were endowed, is something which begins in the cradle. Have we not heard - - or ourselves said - - "I don't want my child to be any better than the average; all I want is an average child." O Mother, Mother, is that all you want of your child? Educators now tell us that the average American child has little use for culture and is essentially uneducated. Is that the average child you want? The average married couple is decidedly not a happy one. Is that the average you seek for your child? Millions upon millions of pornographic magazines reach our newstands and children's hands - - shall your child be treated to this average reading diet? Harvard University research establishes that as Jews depart from Jewish traditional religion, they tend to have the same number of alcoholics as the general population. Is that what Mother wants for her child? America is still reeling under the impact of the late Dr. Kinsey's reports as to the average behavior of the American woman. Does the Jewish mother still want her child to be "just average" - - or prefer perhaps that he or she learn SHE'LO ASANU K'GOYEI HA'ARETZ, that Jews are different and must be different and can survive only if they try to be different. On this day →

in dignity
self-respect

If there is any one theme I have emphasized more than any other during my four and a half years at Kodimoh it is this theme of being ourselves and not conforming to the pattern of others. It is this I have tried to teach more than anything else: that as individuals we each have our own unique ways which we ought not surrender simply because others do not share them; that as a people we Jews have our own laws and customs and ideals and that we dare not change them just because they are unpopular; that Kodimoh has its own ways and loyalties and traditions and religious philosophy, and that it must remain true to itself and not change its character simply because it is not stylish elsewhere. ALEINU LESHABE'ACH, we ought to thank G-d for our differences, for our individualities, SHELO ASANU K'GOYEI HA'ARETZ.

Of course it is much easier to yield to the pressure for being popular and give up our uniqueness and differentness. In a recent book, a man who has been blind for ten years and then suddenly regained his sight tells of how he had to reaccustom himself to seeing. He writes that he was bothered by light, and then comes this memorable phrase when he tells us that the man who left his room turned out the light. At this act of turning out the light, the patient writes, "I felt as if a burden were lifted from me - - safe, at home in the dark." That is why we sometimes want to be like the others instead of ourselves - - when we are not different, when we are undistinguished, we feel safe, at home in the dark - for then no one can see us clearly, no one can point a finger at us, no one can demand anything of us; we can be forgotten and unnoticed. But I tell you my dear friends that we cannot do this and be happy. As Jews we have a holy duty to perform in this world - to be a beacon unto the nations, to hold aloft the light of G-d, the light of justice and righteousness. In some ways we do that - - we are, as a group, more responsive to social injustice and economic inequality. We give charity much more than other groups. Let us, then, not turn out the light when it comes to culture and faith and Mitzvos and religion. We may feel safer and at home in the darkness of ignorance and un-Jewishness. But our mission in life is to spread light - the light of Torah. Hold that torch aloft - with pride.

I want that to carry out this kind of program;

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It is not easy -- it requires courage, and even daring and boldness -- ~~to hold that torch~~, to be unafraid of the light, to shatter the darkness to bits, to risk being different and unpopular. Boldness is a quality that can be misused and prove repulsive. But it can also be a life-saver. The Talmud tells us that G-d gave the Torah to Israel because Israel was a nation of AZZIN, of bold people. It requires boldness for a people differentiated by Torah to survive the onslaughts of the G-d-haters. ~~It requires boldness to keep aloft the light of Torah and renounce the security and safety of darkness, a darkness in which all differences vanish, in which Israel can be forgotten.~~ Throughout our history it required boldness to remain Jewish though we were a despised minority in the lands of our exile. No wonder we are called "Hebrews" -- for, as our Rabbis told us, IVRI comes from the word EVER -- a side: KOL HA-OLAM MEI'EVER ZEH V'AVRAHAM MEI'EVER ZEH -- the Jew is on one side, the world on the other. To be a Hebrew means to have the courage to be different from everyone else, to stand alone against the world. When we have that kind of courage and resist the temptation to imitate and conform, we are true Hebrews, and we then defy spiritual extinction. ~~The State of Israel was true to its Hebrew heritage when it acted with boldness in holding out against the whole world Arab world and the British empire and declared its existence as an independent state. Perhaps that is what the Tradition meant when it predicted that BE'IKVESA D'MSHICHAH CHUTZPAH YASGEI, that boldness would be increased in the days just before the Messiah's arrival.~~ Only with the courage of boldness were we able to prepare for the Messiah and return to the Land of our Fathers. The State of Israel was again truly Hebrew when it defied the whole world and declared Nasser an unprincipled despot and marched across the Sinai desert to stop him -- at a time when the great powers were still coddling him. We American Jews -- including all of you here today -- showed your Hebrew boldness when, during that same Sinai campaign, the moral cowards known as the American Council for Judaism, damned Israel because the popular American opinion was against her. At that time we were able to rise to the greatest heights of courage, and defying world opinion and President and Secy of State and all the U.N., we stood by Israel and risked the questioning of our American loyalty. We were different from all other sectors of opinion -- and now only after the Iraqi coup does the world see how right we were. ALEINU LESHABETACH, thanks to Almighty G-d, SHELO ASANU K'GOYEI HAARATZOS, that we had the courage to be different and risk unpopularity for our conviction.

If therefore we have that courage and boldness, the daring to be different and unpopular, when it comes to social inequities and we speak out for the Negro, when it comes to economic injustice and we are so charitable, when it comes to international justice and we support what is right -- why then are we silent when it comes to the cultural rights of a minority -- and we are the minority and our culture is Torah, undiluted, unreformed, unchanged? We have the capacity to be "Hebrew", to bravely differ from all others in so many spheres of life -- why then not in the one sphere in which our people has always been eminent and in which it has always distinguished itself, the sphere of the spirit, or religion? Is it not here that we must cry out in pride SHE'LO ASANU K'GOYEI HAARATZOS? We who have so often demonstrated that we are IVRIM, Hebrews, must now take the next step and on this holy day prove ourselves Israelites -- the Children of YISRAEL, a word which means "the champion of G-d." We must harness our courage and our daring to stand alone, to stand against the world, to profess our differentness, and apply to it to the word of G-d and the life of G-dliness, to defy all pressures towards cheap imitation and conformity, to declare to an unredeemed world that we will remain YISRAEL, champions of G-d, even if to do so we have to be IVRIM, alone against all. With the call of the Shofar summoning us to our historic role and our historic destiny, we rise to the challenge of daring to be different by virtue of our Holy Torah, and we pronounce in awe and in reverence, ALEINU LESHABETACH....SHELO ASANU KGOYEIHAARATZOS...

And if we will apply our courage to stand alone as IVRI to our spiritual lives as well -- then by G-d, we shall also be different. The very name indicates, will have and have to stand alone by G-d to this boldness in walking on the edge of the world.

!!! שאלה מרכזית! שאלה מרכזית! שאלה מרכזית!

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