

"WEAKNESS -- THE FATAL FLAW"

Our Sidra this morning tells of one of the most painful episodes in Biblical history, one which was seared into the consciousness of the people of Israel. It is the incident of מִקְדַּח הַיָּדָיִם, "the waters of contention." The Israelites, after the death of Miriam, complained about the lack of water. From a mere water shortage, they escalated their complaints to a general attack on Moses, expressing a preference having remained in Egypt as comfortable slaves over being in the desert as starving and thirsty freemen.

Thereupon, the Lord told Moses and Aaron
וְאַתָּה וְאַהֲרֹן יִצְאֻם אֶל הָעָם הַזֶּה וְיֹאמְרוּ אֲלֵיהֶם וְיֹאמַר ה' אֵלֵינוּ, you shall address the rock (or, speak concerning the rock) before them, and it will give forth its waters. Moses and Aaron then turned to the Children of Israel and said: הֲשִׁמְנוּ אָזְנוֹתֵיכֶם הַיּוֹם וְיֹאמְרוּ אֵלֵינוּ, "Listen here, you rebels, shall we bring forth water for you from this rock?" Then Moses raised his hand with the staff in his hand he smote the rock twice and the water came out.

The punishment ordained for Moses and Aaron was severe:
כִּי לֹא הִשְׁמַחְתֶּם בְּיָמֵי הַיָּדָיִם, because you did not have sufficient faith to sanctify My Name before the Children of Israel, therefore you will not enter the Promised Land but will die on this side of the Jordan.

What was their sin? The Biblical text is unclear, and many interpretations have been proposed by commentators both ancient and modern. Rashi offers the most popular explanation: Moses was commanded to talk to the rock, and he hit it instead. However, Nahmanides is unhappy with this interpretation because everything Moses did during his ministry was performed by the striking of the staff. Besides, as we indicated above, Moses and Aaron were not commanded to speak to the rock, but about it. Maimonides maintains that the sin of Moses and Aaron was their anger. They lost their temper when they said, "listen here, you rebels." Nahmanides, however, criticizes this interpretation as well because, first, Moses was right in expressing his anger, and second, there are other occasions when Moses appeared to lose his temper and he was not reproached. Nahmanides therefore follows the interpretation of Rabbeinu Hannanel and maintains that the sin of Moses and Aaron was to use the first person, "shall we bring forth water," rather than, "shall He (the Lord) bring forth water."

My own interpretation, which I respectfully submit to you, is an expansion of and modification of that offered by Abarbanel and certain modern exegetes. And that is, that the misdeed of Moses and

and Aaron was that of -- weakness. The first reaction of Moses and Aaron when they heard the rebellious complaints of the Children of Israel was not the immediate response of challenge, but of fear and retreat.

Moses and Aaron retreated from before the congregation, to the entrance of the Tent of Meeting and there they fell on their faces. When they should have stood up, they fell back.

More precisely, I believe we can pinpoint the sin of Moses in -- the second strike of the staff. Permit me to explain.

Moses and Aaron started to assert themselves when they confronted the Children of Israel and said, "listen here, you rebels." However, they kept themselves back. They restrained their response. Now, psychologists, especially psychoanalysts, have taught us that inhibited aggression is usually directed against the self or against inanimate objects. If I am angry at someone and secretly wish to harm him I will stamp my foot or slap my thigh.

Now, the first time that Moses struck the rock, that was understandable. Everything he did, from splitting the Red Sea to bringing forth water, was performed with a strike by the staff. However, the second time that he did so, it was an act which expressed misplaced hostility, originally felt toward Israelites, now redirected towards the rock.

Why was that wrong? What should he have done? Simply this: he should have expressed his anger directly at the Israelites, rather than the inanimate rock. Crudely put, he should have wielded the נֶזֶק (the staff) not on an innocent rock, but on the heads of this ungrateful and recalcitrant people who, after 38 years in the desert, still proved that they were immature slaves, still whining $\text{לָמָּה לָקַחְתָּנוּ מִמִּצְרָיִם}$, "why did you take us out of Egypt?" One could expect this from a generation that was born in slavery and still primitive and immature -- not from a generation born in freedom in the wild desert.

Moses and Aaron should not have fled, not have feared, not have conceded, not have compromised, not have taken it out hysterically on a rock. They should have encountered the Israelites with force and indignation.

In other words, Moses and Aaron were taught -- and through them, we are taught -- that weakness in a leader can be a fatal flaw.

Jewish leaders have always been commanded to be tender and loving. Moses and David are, in our tradition, the archetypes of gracious leadership. The Midrash teaches us that they were taken

from the sheepfold to become the shepherds of Israel. Just as a shepherd must learn to look after every stray lamb, to pick it up tenderly and hold it close to his breast, so must the leader of our people be a shepherd to human charges. But -- not always! There are times that strength and power and courage and resistance are called for in a leader. So, the first King of Israel, Saul, was deposed because *שָׁמַח*, he was too merciful, too compassionate, too soft, where he should have been hard and manly. The Talmud (*Ket.* 103b) tells us about the death of Rabbi Judah the Prince, who was both the most eminent scholar of his generation and the *לוי*, the political leader of all of Israel. On his deathbed, his children came in to bid him farewell. Rabban Gamliel, his son, entered, and *לוי* *וְרַבּוֹן* *וְרַבּוֹן*, his father transmitted to him the orders of leadership, telling him how to conduct himself as his successor. And he said to him *וְרַבּוֹן* *וְרַבּוֹן* *וְרַבּוֹן* -- my son, conduct your presidency with strength, with courage; lead from on high, with dignity and power and pride.

Leadership is not meant for diffident weaklings. A leader must often act against the masses. A leader need not necessarily be a "consensus president." He must be at the head of his people and sometimes demand of them, reproach them, rebuke them. That vox populi is vox dei, that the voice of the people is the voice of God -- is not a Jewish idea! Despite the fact that the proverb *וְרַבּוֹן* *וְרַבּוֹן* *וְרַבּוֹן*, which means the same thing in Hebrew, is often quoted, it does not come from any sacred Jewish text, but is merely a translation from the Latin.

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This interpretation I have offered is both text and pretext for my comments on certain Jewishly significant news that has come to our attention this past week or so.

The abdication of Jewish religious leadership years ago and today as well, has produced an ugly harvest which we only now are reaping.

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In the beginning of the opening of the Jewish communities to the Western world, Jews began to acculturate. Now, from our point of view, that was perfectly understandable. To cull the best of Western culture -- that is commendable. But what happened was that certain people began to approach the Western world with inferiority feelings, and with the desire to break down the discipline of Halakha. Thus, the Reform rabbinate yielded to the social-cultural pressures of their newly prosperous congregants. They cut out almost all Hebrew from the prayerbook; did away with mention of Zion and Jerusalem (because, after all, Germany was our mother-land and Berlin our Jerusalem); legislated that the Sabbath always begin at 6 P.M. and end at 6 P.M. winter and summer; and then changed

Saturday services to Sunday.

What was the rationale for this radical surgery performed on the Jewish tradition? Simply, that this is what people demanded; especially, "give youth what it wants!" What they forgot was that, first, youth does not always know what it wants (that is the special privilege of youth); second, youth changes its wants every few years; and third, the word of God is permanent and the complaints of whining youth are temporary, and Halakhah must always remain superior to fashion.

Where has all this weakness led us? This past week or so we were startled to read in our daily press that the Central Conference of American Rabbis -- the Reform rabbinic group -- had commissioned a statistical report of its body, and that this report known as the Lenn report, informed them of its most shocking finding: 41% of Reform rabbis will officiate at mixed marriages, by which is meant marriages between a Jew and non-Jew where the non-Jew has not even converted according to Reform standards.

I do not mention this because of any feelings of institutional rivalry, or any kind of parochial glee that I derive from this news. Those who attend regularly know that I rarely speak out against Reform and Conservatives because we have plenty of our own work left undone. Indeed, I welcome -- with modifications -- the new trend towards tradition by some Reform rabbis. But I am heartbroken at the news of this catastrophic failure of the Reform rabbinate.

Worse yet, the report of the 41% is only the tip of the iceberg. Consider the following facts, culled from the Lenn Report, which constitutes a fairly thick volume:

1. "'Over one fourth of Reform rabbis do not believe in God in the traditional Judaic sense, or as modified in terms of 'my own views of what God is and ^{for} what He stands.'"
2. Concerning the congregants of Reform temples: "less than one fifth of Reform congregants believe in God 'in the more or less Judaic sense.' Another 50% add, 'as modified in terms of my own views of what God is and for what He stands.'"
3. "Two thirds of Reform congregants say 'I remain a Jew because it is simply the most convenient thing to do.'"
4. "The vast majority of Reform congregants do not consider themselves religious."

Now, consider the seminarians, students at Reform rabbinical

schools. What do we have to look forward to from them?

5. "Some 44% of Reform seminarians identify themselves as agnostic."

How about the youth of the Reform temples?

6. "On every issue of Jewish identity on which they were queried, Reform youth seem to be more detached from Judaism and Jewishness than their parents."

7. "Some 50% of Reform youth believe in God 'in the more or less traditional sense'; 32% are agnostics, and 4% are atheists."

8. "Only two out of three Reform youngsters are solidly pro-Israel. Many express strong anti-Israel positions."

Moreover, on the major issues of performing mixed marriages, one half of the 59% that do not preside at such weddings, regularly refer the mixed couple to a colleague who will perform such marriages! Here the failure is not so much religious as moral. I am told that there are certain Orthodox rabbis who do similar "referring." If that is true, they are no less and far more culpable.

A few months ago, I was invited together with four other Orthodox rabbis to attend an unpublicized meeting of the CCAR Commission on Mixed Marriages. The Reform rabbis were assigned to study the problem of mixed marriages, and to recommend whether or not their rabbinic group should enforce discipline against those who preside at such mixed marriages. The committee wanted to test the opinions of those outside their group. And so, they asked us questions and we answered as honestly as we could. Afterwards, I asked one of their number who was advocating the performing of mixed marriages, and who does so regularly himself, what his reasons were. His answers: first, compassion for the couple, especially the parents and grandparents who earnestly seek Jewish approval; and second, this is a way of keeping them in the fold and not losing them altogether to Judaism.

Is this leadership, or pettifogging Milquetoastism?! If these people were really leaders, they would have raised their staff over the heads of their congregations and brought it down in a sharp line and said, NO! Even Reform has certain limits. Even the breaking of Halakhah cannot go beyond a certain point.

Let us not lose our sense of proportion. Sometimes, Orthodox Jews chafe at the machmirim in our Orthodox camp, those who always take the more strict or stringent view and seem to delight in issuing prohibitions. I object to that too. But there is an infinitely more serious charge against the other extreme, those of

the non-Orthodox groups who seem to have one answer for all problems: *הכל מותר*, everything is permitted. But in such an attitude of permissiveness, religion cannot grow. If everything is permitted, there is no religion, there is no morality, there is no civilization.

And what is the result of this submissiveness to the *מנהג*, to the "waters of contention" of Reform congregations?

I quote again from the Lenn Report: "more than one in three congregants, of the age of 20 to 24, is now married to a spouse who was born non-Jewish. One in four of this group is married to a spouse who has not converted." This corroborates an intuitive feeling I have had from my limited experience with Reform congregations: they are, to a very large extent, the centers of those Jews who have married out and still wish to retain some tenuous connection with the Jewish community. It is important to remember that the practice is so wide-spread, that certain Temples do not engage a rabbi who does not promise he will preside at mixed marriages! Let us bear this in mind when Reform and Conservative groups lobby for the government of Israel to recognize them as valid rabbis in matters of marriages and divorce, and with regard to the "Who is a Jew" problem.

If a young Jew wants to marry out, let him do so. This is a free country. But to provide a rabbinic presence is to grant him or her the illusion of sanction, that is dishonest. For a "rabbi" to be present and preside at such an occasion is a matter of fraudulent posturing, as if the berobed eminence of a sacerdotal rabbinic personality is the imprimatur of the Jewish tradition granted to one of the greatest transgressors of our faith and our tradition. The occasion calls for sitting *shivah*, not for co-officiating with a priest or minister, with caterer, band, dancing, and drinking. And compassion or the desire to hold a Jew in the fold this way -- that is not an answer, but is a self-defeating and fraudulent rationalization. Solomon had already taught us: *אל תהיה צדיק ורעבה פיה*, don't be too much of a *צדיק*, too moralistic, too self-righteous.

The bitter failure of Reform is no consolation to us Orthodox Jews. It increases our sense of pessimism and depression about the survivability of the American Jewish community. But it must be a lesson to us in many ways -- religiously, communally, and in matters of family and personal life.

For the Torah teaches us something of historic importance in recording the punishment meted out to Moses because of that second strike. Weakness is a fatal flaw in Jewish leadership.

Sometimes you think you are being good, when you are really doing evil. You think you are helping, and you are destroying. You submit to momentary compassion, and in the process you lose the Promised Land.

A Jewish leader must be gentle, but must be strong. He must be considerate, but he must know how to use power. Power, of course, can corrupt. But the attainment of a good life requires the benevolent use of power. Without it, we are in contempt of ה' (faith) and we have failed to perform עליון,
(the sanctification of God's Name).

When we do use power benevolently, then it becomes a source of blessing: ה' אלהינו יהי רצון
"Blessed art Thou, O Lord, who girds Israel with strength."

And blessed is Israel when it responds with its own strength.