

"A PLEA FOR PROPER PRIDE"

Every generation has its own special vices. Every people has its cardinal sin; sometimes cruelty and sometimes immorality, sometimes idolatry and sometimes intolerance. Ask any of today's teachers of religion what, in their opinion, is the greatest sin of our generation, and they will unhesitatingly tell you: Pride. Preachers of all faiths regularly attack our pride in our technological progress. Moralists berate us for our pride in our scientific accomplishments. And recently theologians have been scolding modern man for what they call "the pride of the intellect".

There is, of course, a kernel of truth in all this. We are foolish if we think that building better machines makes us better men or that constructing greater cyclotrons makes us greater human beings. Yet, it seems to me, they miss the point. For while all this pride is sinful, it does not constitute the special, characteristic sin of our generation, the generation of Americans and especially American Jews we represent. I prefer to think that our great crime, our cardinal sin, has been, quite the contrary, not enough pride. We have too much pride in things, in possessions, in techniques. But we have a crying lack of proper pride - a lack of pride in ourselves, a lack of appreciation of the human beings we are, with the infinite capacities for good with which we are endowed. The tragedy of our age is not our foolish pride, but an unwholesome humility which makes us forget that we were created in the TZELEM ELOKIM, in the Image of G-d. It is this lack of self-appreciation and proper pride which ~~makes~~ accounts for the mediocrity of the spirit, for the religious shallowness, for the amorality of our day. It is our accursed inferiority feeling that breeds our inferiority. We have so convinced ourselves of our lack of worth, our incapacity for greatness, that we no longer strive for it.

One of the greatest sociologists of our time, Prof. David Reisman, has noted the same unfortunate tendency in his own students, college graduates training for one of the most respectable of professions. He observes that as a result of their lack of proper pride, they "want social security, not great achievements. They want approval, not fame. They are not eager to develop talents that might bring them into conflict... Few of them suffer,

like youth in an earlier age, because they are 'twenty and so little accomplished'." And he concludes that the song popular some years ago, "I don't want to set the world on fire," expresses a typical theme, the theme song of our age.

And that theme, friends, runs counter to all that Judaism teaches. It is for us not a theme song but a dirge. If anything, Judaism demands of us that we do set the world on fire. Every human is born with a NITZOTZ ELOKA MI'MAAL, with a spark of G-d on high, within him, and it ~~his~~ his life-long duty to fan that spark until he sets himself and his world on fire with it, until he builds a heavenly flame of that Divine Spark so that others may benefit of the warmth of his goodness, kindness and generosity, and the light of his insight and understanding and ^{wisdom} ~~nobility~~. Abraham set the world on fire when he taught that there was only One True G-d who demands decency and ethics. Moses set the world on fire when he taught it to cherish freedom and law. Isaiah set the world on fire when he taught it that justice and not injustice would ultimately win out. They set the world on fire by recognizing and exploiting the Divine spark they - and each of us - had within them. Without a fiery pride in that spark, without a highly proper pride in the noble and lofty capacities with which G-d blessed them, ^{they would have been lost to us forever} this world of ours would have been a dark, dank, cold mausoleum.

This analysis of the sickness of our time, this conclusion that a lack of proper pride has inhibited us from expressing the true greatness that lies within each and every one of us, was first broached not by sociologists or philosophers, but by the Sages of the Talmud. In a remarkable little story, they tell of the Prophet Elijah walking along the way and being accosted by a gruff man who ridiculed the Prophet and laughed at what he was saying. Elijah turned to him, after having been thus insulted and embarrassed, and said: MAH TASHIV LE'YOTZRECHA LE'YOM HA'DIN - how are you going to answer for this to your Creator on Judgement Day? The man was taken aback by the words of the Prophet and apologized by saying: BINAH VE'DEIAH LO NITNAH LI, I do not have the necessary understanding and wisdom. I do not have the talent of tact, nor the intelligence to understand your deep words. BNI, said the Prophet to him, my son, how do you earn your livelihood? And he answered, TZAYAD ANI, I am a fisherman. Ah, cried Elijah, to know how to spin the flax and with the ropes to weave a net,, to know when the fish are hungry and where they may be found, to learn their intimate habits and peculiarities, to catch the fish - for this you have

BINAH VA'DEIAH, understanding and wisdom, but for the words of the Torah about which it is written KI KAROV EILECHA HA'DAVAR ME'OD, that this thing is very close to you, for this - for Torah - you have no wisdom, no talent, no understanding? No, you are too skillful, too capable, too talented seriously to entertain such inferiority feelings and complain BINAH VA'DEIAH LO NITNAH LI, I haven't got the head for it.

My dear friends, as we stand here on this Judgement Day, at the threshold of a new year, the words of the great Prophet ring to us from across the centuries: MAH TASHIV LE'YOTZRECHA LE'YOM HA'DIN, what are you going to answer to your Creator on Judgement Day? How are you going to explain away the fact that you have not even attempted to draw close to Torah and make it a part of your life? We most certainly shall not be able to put on the mask of false humility and argue BINAH VA'DEIAH LO NITNAH LI, I don't know how, I haven't the capacity for it. Of course that is a spurious argument. Each of us in his own endeavors and in his own career knows the ropes and manages to land some pretty big fish. We have wisdom, talent, time, competence, patience. Why then do we not use it for Torah too? Why do we not have a proper pride in ourselves, and especially in the very special spiritual competence which is ours? What and how shall we answer to G-d on this Judgement Day and on the ultimate Day of Judgement?

I have had considerable dealings with that great majority of you here this morning who are engaged in business in one way or another. I have learned to admire and respect the knowledge and the skill that goes into making up a modern businessman. I have seen you at work in what you lovingly call ~~your~~ "the organization". I have seen your tact in dealing with unions, your efficiency in managing sizeable industrial establishments, your broad knowledge of the techniques of manufacture and merchandising and retailing. I have seen your administrative skill as executives, your use of psychology in selling. I have admired your sixth sense and hard practicality which is a gift from heaven. You know the ropes and you often catch some big fish. Of course! - you are brimming over with BINAH VA'DEIAH. For G-d's sake, then, why do you plead inferiority when it comes to the sacred business of Jewish life? Why do you become impatient and restless when dealing with the "organization" known as the synagogue? Why do you plead incompetence when asked to become a regular shul-goer and develop the spark of G-d that lies within you - and which you reveal in your work?

Why is it that a Hebrew Day School, the greatest guarantee for the future of Torah in our city, must plead with urgency for the skills and abilities you so ^{abundantly} ~~eminently~~ possess, and receive only blank stares in return? How can you logically and consistently maintain BINAH VA'DEIAH LO NITNAH LI, I can't, I don't know, I haven't the time. The excuse holds no water. The question of Elijah burns with a fearful ferocity: MAH TASHIV LE'YOTRECHA LE'YOM HA'DIN, how are we on this day of stern judgement going to answer to G-d for this lack of proper pride, this ~~la~~ over-humble lack of application to the sacred business closest to us: Torah?

I have come to know and deeply like those of my people who are lawyers. I have a healthy respect for so many of you who are endowed with a sharp, incisive and brilliant analytical logic and can argue the law masterfully. Why, I wonder, do you not apply only a fraction of these talents to the study of Talmud, a discipline similar to your own? Ignorance and incompetence is certainly no excuse for a member of the bar. Why are we so incapable of listening to a serious lecture, without the attraction of comedy and entertainment? Why is it that once we leave our offices, the sanctuaries of our professions, we become possessed of this infernal inferiority feeling, so that when it comes to Religion, the most important part of life, we worship at the shrine of mediocrity? MAH TASHIV LE'YOTRECHA...how shall we answer for this when we are called to account and become the defendants before the Divine Tribunal?

Those in the medical professions have learned to master an abstruse terminology which remains a deep mystery to the outsider. Why is it so difficult for you, then, to engage in the religious discussions we have on Sunday mornings, or the language of Prayer and Tefillin on the same day? No time? Maimonides was as busy and as great as any American physician. Yet he found time to become a community leader, a renowned philosopher and the greatest Talmudist of the ages. Why do you not tolerate sloppiness in your professions, yet suffer superficiality in the career of Jewish living, a profession closer to you than the practice of medicine or dentistry?

I address myself to the ladies in our congregation today. You who are mothers have such sensitive souls that you wake instantaneously out of deep sleep in the middle of the night at the slightest whisper of your child. In that case you have the BINAH VA'DEIAH, the soul and the sensitivity to hear the still, small voice of G-d within your own selves. The ordinary

housewife of 1955 must be able to master an array of gadgets and techniques that would have completely bewildered her grandmother. Why not, then, learn to master the simple elements of the Hebrew language, which any of our six-years olds do successfully, so that you can follow simple prayers? -Why not, then, be here on Saturday mornings, with your children at their services, and with - or even without - your husbands? Why are you so shy, and why do you feel so inferior - when there is no earthly reason for this feeling, when there is a heavenly reason for feeling proud and confident?

The Rabbi who challenges you with this question certainly ~~does~~ not hold himself faultless in this matter. He manages to find time for the 101 diverse duties that devolve upon the modern Rabbi, not all of crucial importance, and yet he is barely able to eke out enough time and concentration for his own study of Torah, which is closest to his heart, and without which the title "Rabbi" becomes a horrible mockery.

What, I wonder, will the leaders of our various and sundry Jewish organizations of this city answer to our Creator on Judgement Day, when He will demand to know how it is that we surpass ourselves in BINAH VA'DEIAH when we stage parties and run dances and have teas and organize bingo and put on plays and raise funds, but find ourselves petered out, fatigued, helpless, unresourceful and pressed for time when asked to help convince eligible Jewish children to learn Hebrew in the high schools - so that out of the whole Jewish population ^{minimum of} of Springfield we have been barely able to marshal the/twenty students? What are they going to answer when they will be challenged and asked what is their right to the title "Jewish", when they have wisdom and talent for every kind of activity, worthwhile or nonsensical, but not for that which is deeply and culturally Jewish?

A century ago, the famous French historian De Tocqueville wrote of Americans, "the same man who cannot endure subordination...has so contemptible an opinion of himself that he thinks he is born only to indulge in vulgar pleasures. He willingly takes up with low desires without daring to embark on lofty enterprises of which he scarcely dreams." Shall we allow that to be said of us too? Do we too have such a contemptible, vulgar opinion of ourselves? Must we always fall back on that disingenuous cry, BINAH VA'DEIAH LO NITNAH LI?

These professions of inferiority, this lack of pride, has indeed been the ~~bane~~ ^{than} of our age. What better example can I offer you ~~but~~ the future of the very synagogue in which you now worship. This past year has been a fateful one for Kodimoh. During this year we have taken a long, deep look at ourselves, and after much discussion and earnest thinking decided that it was time for Kodimoh to expand, to build. No doubt this decision sent a thrill into the hearts of all who are true to Torah and loyal to Kodimoh. It is a great undertaking, not without its difficulties and even dangers, but one of great potentialities - and the congregation has agreed to the plan. But I cannot refrain from making mention of the reservations and the ^{and doubts that sometimes plague even the most enthusiastic of us.} hesitations. They fit into the pattern we have been discussing. It is the old cry of the fisherman, BINAH VA'DEIAH LO NITNAH LI. We are told Kodimoh ~~can't~~ build. Kodimoh members will not give. We haven't the place. We haven't the loyalty. We haven't ^{enough} ~~the~~ leadership. We haven't ^{There's been too much building already in this community.} the interest. There is no urgency. My G-d!! There is room and interest and loyalty and funds and leadership for every conceivable kind of building from ranch-house to club-room to gymnasium, but for this citadel of Torah in whose holy precincts the future of Judaism is ^{formed} ~~assured~~, for this there is no BINAH VA'DEIAH? For parties there is talent. For arts-and-crafts there is patience. For gymnasiums there is money. For steam-rooms there is urgency. For meetings and outings there is efficiency and wisdom. And for Kodimoh, for Torah, there is nothing? What shall we answer to G-d if we fail to ^{rise} ~~answer~~ to the call of the hour and ^{respond to} ~~the~~ challenge of the decade? You and I, ~~WE~~, certainly are able to do it. Together, we have the talent, the skill, the funds, the wisdom, the BINAH VA'DEIAH to build. We must build Kodimoh. We can build Kodimoh. We shall build Kodimoh. With pride and love and devotion, with your full cooperation and with the help of G-d, Kodimoh will be rebuilt.

How do I know that you can do all this? How do I know that you can become Torah Jews? -that you can learn the language and procedure of prayer, that you ~~can~~ absorb a serious lecture, that you ^{can increase} ~~can~~ build, that you ~~have~~ BINAH VA'DEISH?

I know it because of my confidence in you as friends whom I know and have seen at work and at play demonstrating real ability and manifest excellence. I know it because of my confidence in you as human beings created in the Image of G-d and containing the Divine spark, a confidence born of the faith in the G-d we all serve. I know it because of my confidence in you as Jews, ^{a people} ~~chosen~~ for a spiritual role, heirs to a great, magnificent and

glorious past with the accumulated wisdom of the ages. I know all this because I think I know who you really are.

^{Do}
~~And~~ you ~~must~~ know who you really are? (You are human beings whose duty it is to fan that Divine spark within you and set your worlds on fire with it.) You are the sons and daughters of kings, the Princes and Princesses of the House of David. In your bones is the marrow of prophecy, of the kind that moved the Isaiahs and Jeremiahs and Amoses. In your veins courses the blood of Hillel and R. Akiba, of Rashi and Maimonides, of martyrs and saints, of teachers who gave their lives for their teachings and pioneers who opened ~~a~~ deserts equipped with nothing but a mighty faith. In your hearts beats the rhythm of the hammers of great builders who built two Temples, who built and rebuilt a Land and a culture, builders of synagogues and ^{builders of} schools. That is who you are.

With a greatness of that sort we dare not face our Creator on this Judgement Day with hollow protestations of inferiority, with that hackneyed, stereotyped, lame excuse of BINAH VA'DEIAH LO NITNAH LI. Grant it to our Jews, our Rabbis were fond of saying, that if they are not themselves Prophets, they are the sons of Prophets.

Let us remember with pride that we are heirs to that mantle of greatness, the mantle of wisdom and understanding. Let us recognize with proper pride that we can prove ourselves worthy of it and ourselves exercise that greatness. As we approach the Divine Judge on this Day of Judgement, let us affirm that we shall exploit that greatness for Torah ^{+ for the glory of G-d.} KI KAROV EILECHA HADAVAR ME'OD, BE'FICHA UVILVAVCHA LA'ASOSO, for this Torah is very near unto thee - it is within thy mouth and within thy heart, that thou mayest do it.