

"THE ROD OF GOD AND THE CRUTCH OF MAN"

After Moses is persuaded by the Almighty to undertake the historic mission of leading the Children of Israel out of Egypt, he is commanded v'et ha-match ha-zeh tikaḥ be'yadekha asher taaseh bo et ha-otot, "and thou shalt take in thy hand this rod wherewith thou shalt do the miracles." Moses then proceeds to take leave of his father-in-law and leave Midian for the perilous and fateful journey to Egypt. In obedience to the divine command, we read, va-yikaḥ Mosheh et match ha-Elohim be'yado, "and Moses took the rod of God in his hand." At that moment, G-d turns to Moses and says, when you go back to Egypt, see that you do before Pharoah all the miracles asher samti be'yadekha, "which I have put in thy hand."

Why, asks Abarbanel, the famed Spanish-Jewish commentator, does God not mention the rod, the match, as the agent with which the miracles are to be effected? Had he not commanded Moses to take the rod with him? It seems as if God is purposely avoiding mention of the rod. Why so?

Abarbanel himself provides an answer which is, in its psychological insight, of timeless significance. Moses, he tells us, had a natural fear of returning to Egypt. He was regarded by Pharoah as a wanted man, a traitor and public enemy. His fellow Israelites thought none too kindly of him. His father-in-law Jethro no doubt reminded him of the fact that so far every time he visited Egypt he jeopardized his life and that of his family. So that Moses was delighted when God commanded him to take along the match Elohim, the rod of God. This rod became for him the assurance of his own safety, the guarantee of his security, as he embarked on this highly dangerous enterprise. And so Moses took along the rod, and held it tight in his hand, feeling with every fibre of his being that herein lay the safety of himself, his family, and his mission. At that moment God intervened. Moses, he told him, the rod is only a tool, an implement.

In itself it is of no special value. Re'eh kol ha-moftim asher santi be'yadekha, behold all the wonders which I have placed in thy hand --- that is where the capacity for greatness and the safety of the mission and the reins of destiny lie: be'yadekha --- in your hand. Moses, do not allow the rod of God to become a crutch for man! The match is a divine instrument; it is I who asked that it be taken along. But the moment a man places his faith in a match, he denies faith in himself and weakens his faith in Me. When the rod becomes a crutch for man, it interrupts the dialogue of faith between God and man. Therefore, take the rod, but remember that its function is to serve as a link between the two of us: by grasping it, your hand is grasping Mine. For the moment you begin to rely on the rod as such, the moment you transform it into a crutch, you have broken contact between us.

Abarbanel's interpretation of this dialogue between God and Moses is meaningful for all men at all times. For all religious institutions can sometimes be mistakenly used as psychological crutches rather than as means for the confrontation between man and his Maker; as something to lean upon rather than something to make us worthy of being leaned upon. The young man or woman who hangs a mezuzah around his neck as a kind of protective charm is converting a rod of God to a rather harmless but silly superstition -- a crutch of man.

The man or woman who rushes into the synagogue just in time to "catch" a Kaddish or Yizkor, and then beats a hasty retreat before the end of the rest of the service --- is placing his faith in a flimsy crutch which, in context of a full religious life, is truly a match Elohim. The "national Jews" who substitute Zionism for all the rest of Torah, have taken what in perspective is a lofty and divine rod --- and made of it a mere crutch, so that when the State of Israel came into being they were left, spiritually, like cripples whose crutches suddenly crumbled under them. There is hardly a more pathetic phenomenon than the secular Zionist whose spiritual life is frustrated by premature fulfillment. Had this nationalism been part of a whole Torah outlook, had it been a genuine match Elohim, these same secular Jewish nationalists would not be today cast in the position of individuals and organizations "all dressed up and no place to go."

And what is true of these people is equally true of those Jews whose Jewishness expresses itself only in a passion for civil liberties or only ⁱⁿ ~~for~~ organized philanthropy. Such ideas and institutions ^{as} human freedom and tzedakah are certainly noble parts of the Torah tradition and life ---- but when they are separated from the rest of our heritage; when they become excuses for avoiding a direct approach to God; when they are transformed in the mind and heart into crutches; when tzedakah becomes a kind of "instant Judaism" and loyalty to the First Amendment replaces obedience to the First Commandment --- ~~then~~ ^{then} only frustration, unhappiness, and spiritual misery can result.

In the laws of Prayer, the Shulhan Arukh teaches that during the recitation of the Amidah, it is improper to lean upon the amud -- table or stand -- ^{upon} or ^{one's} neighbor. In our relations with God, we must approach ~~him~~ directly. We must stand on our own two feet and take our spiritual destinies be'yadekha, into our own hands. We must not rely upon the cantor or the Rabbi or anyone else to pray on our behalf. Before God, it is every man for himself. To seek out a rabbi or scholar as a teacher of Torah, that is using a rod of God. But to look to him, as American Jews often do, as someone to lean upon and thus avoid your own intimate, personal religious responsibilities, as a vicarious observer of your religious obligations -- that is using a crutch of man. We must rely upon God, not His rod; upon the Creator, not His creatures.

Part of our problem in modern Judaism is that we are always looking for a match Elohim, when the secret to our success or failure lies only be'yadekha. We spend our time in search of magic wands, when there is magic in our hands if they be but wedded to full hearts and open minds and clear eyes. We are Americans, and thus always in a rush, looking for shortcuts, and with a naive faith in gimmicks. So the rod of God seems ideally suited to our purposes --- and later we discover it's only a weak crutch.

I hope I shall not be misunderstood when I say that even a Day School education for our children can become this kind of false support, a disappointing crutch. There is no doubt that without it Judaism cannot survive in the modern world.

We Orthodox Jews pioneered this form of Jewish education. Other, non-Orthodox, Jews have begun to imitate us. Now even confirmed secular Jews are proclaiming the necessity for Day School education lest we all disappear in easy, smooth assimilation. No more wonderful mateh Elohim is available to us. But like the rod that God extended to Moses, there is the danger of over-reliance upon a tool and avoidance of real issues and real responsibility. All too often, parents think that by sending a child to such a school, they have automatically guaranteed the child's Jewish future. I send my son or daughter to a good Hebrew Day School -- does that not absolve me of any responsibility to teach that child personally? More than that: does not relieve me of the necessity for introducing the teachings of the school into my home? Am I not free, therefore, from teaching by personal example?

That attitude, friends, is no longer a mateh -- it is a substitute for education! All the courses in the world cannot make up for the normal course of home example. All the texts in existence are as nothing compared with the context of proper family atmosphere. No explanation of Judaism is as good as the experience of Jewish living.

So it is with our Day Schools, so it is with all Jewish education. If we rely upon them as magical substitutes for Jewish living, they are mere crutches. If we grasp hold of them be'yadekha and supplement them with enthusiastic, intensive, authentic Torah living, they become a marvelous, wondrous, miraculous rod of God.

The theme of our talk -- that the various institutions of Judaism, the mitzvot, the many different components of Jewish life, must not displace the fullness of Jewish experience with its direct and unmediated faith in our Heavenly Father ---- *of tractate Sotah. There R. Pinhas b. Yair is quoted* is beautifully summarized in the last Mishnah as saying that mi-she'harev bet ha-mikdash, when the Temple was destroyed, bashu haverim u-vnei horin, ve-hafu rosham ve'nidaldelu anshei magseh, that scholars and those of aristocratic descent were shamed, their prestige sunk low, and people of noble action became fewer and weaker.

He concludes, al mi lanu le'hisha'en, al Avinu she'ba-shamayim: upon whom then can we rely? - only upon our Father in Heaven.

Is this a plaintive protest out of weakness, as if, after all else has failed us, only God remains?

It is not that at all. Rather, it is a courageous analysis of a national tragedy and an optimistic discovery of sources of national strength. What R. Pinhas wants to show us is that all religious institutions are sacred --- but they are merely, as with Moses, the rod of God, not the ultimate objects of reliance and faith. There were those who, in the days of the Temple, relied upon it exclusively -- to the point where they escaped ultimate confrontation with the Almighty in their heart of hearts. If there is a Holy Temple, is there a need for holiness in home, office, and market-place? There were those who thought: we have scholars and thinkers, we have gedolim and mehubasim; that absolves us of studying Torah and developing aristocracy of character. There were those who said: we have anshei maaseh, people of great action, outstanding philanthropists, dynamic community leaders. We may leave it to them to worry and prepare for the perpetuation of Judaism and the Jewish people. What they did was to commit a spiritual crime: the transformation of an authentic rod of God into an artificial crutch for man. And so the Lord taught us a lesson. He removed the crutches. The Temple was destroyed. The Scholars and aristocrats were exiled and banished. The leaders and men of action were scattered and lost. And now what shall we do, now that our crutches have been cruelly kicked out from under us? The answer, says R. Pinhas, is to walk by yourself to the most heroic and fateful encounter possible for a human being: that of standing face to face with the Creator of Heaven and Earth ---- and leaning, relying, and having faith in Him and Him alone. Al mi lanu le'hisha'en, al Avinu she'ba-shamayim. On whom shall we lean? -- not on rods, not on crutches, not on anything or anyone else, but: our Father in Heaven!

Re'eh kol ha-moftim sher santi be'yadekha. With that direct faith we shall behold the miracle God has placed in our very hands: the ability to transform our lives from the drab to the exciting, from the senseless to the significant, from the

profane to the sacred, from fear to confidence, from despair to ever-growing promise and hope.