

"UNDER THE TEREBINTH"

A strange ceremony is enacted by Jacob in the Sidra which we read this morning. After the unhappy incident of the violation of Dinah by Shechem, and the destruction of the city by the brothers of Dinah, the sons of Jacob, Jacob calls his family together roundabout him. He scold^s his sons for their excessive zeal and impetuosity in raiding Shechem, and they defend their actions. Then he turns to them, and commands them to put away all the "strange gods," the various idols that they had accumulated as spoils and souvenirs in the course of plundering Shechem. Put them away, he says, and purify yourselves and change your garments. They then give him all the strange gods they had in their hands and all their earrings (which contained figurines of various idols), and va-yitmon otam Yaakov tachat ha-elah asher im Shechem - "and Jacob hid them under the terebinth which was by Shechem."

What a dramatic scene that must have been! Jacob forces his family to purge itself of every vestige of idolatry. Here they stand around a muddy pit near a terebinth, or oak tree, near Shechem, and each member of the family tosses into the pit another figurine or idol or piece of sculpture, another token of the evil which had befallen them. And then the patriarch covers all these repulsive objects with earth, and they are forgotten, and the family is purified once again - ready to proceed on their great mission as the teachers of ^god's word, and to their destiny as the people of the Lord.

Now imagine, friends, if we were to do that, if we were to reenact Jacob's disposal of the tokens of evil under a terebinth now, in 1962. Imagine if we were all standing roundabout a muddy pit, invited to toss into it all the tokens of what is undersirable, evil, and repulsive in our lives. The imagination is staggered by the implications. The possibilities are almost limitless! What a variety of objects, modern idols, would be thrown into that pit! Each one would be a symbol of another

source of unhappiness in our lives. No doubt, someone would throw in a television aerial - symbol of that totalitarian machine which monopolizes the attention of our selves and our children to the exclusion of every form of real edification. Another might throw in a neon bulb - a token of sham, of the kind of bluster that preys on the gullible. Perhaps somebody would cast in a telephone, the one modern instrument which, above all else, has mechanized lashon ha-ra and made of rekhlut a vocation rather than a mere diversion. Another person might toss in a watch, that little instrument which represents the tyranny of ~~a~~ rigid schedules over our lives, preventing us from exercising freedom and spontaneity, and which casts its spell even over prayer, so that we/clock-watching during the services. There might come falling in a transistor radio, a symbol of all the ubiquitous noise that afflicts our ears and peace, and disturbs the silence so necessary for the creativity of the mind; the nose-cone of a missile, which represents the perversion of values of those who concentrate on the conquest of outer space while so many insurmountable problems distress mankind here on earth; a mimeo stencil, the insignia of the public relations man and his artificial "image making"; a pair of theatre stubs, tokens of respectable smut; a driver's license, the threat of the eventual atrophy of human ² feat. It requires no great stress^{tch} of the imagination to be able to add, here and there, a few status symbols of modern man. Be'khol dor va-dor, in every generation people ought to take time out for a reenactment of that ancient scene under the terebinth by the city of Shechem. For our generation, no less and perhaps more than for any other, the reading of today's Sidra is the challenge to a spiritual house-cleaning, to a cleansing of the soul from all the dross that it has accumulated over the years.

However, does this imply a rejection of modernity, a total condemnation of all its concepts as evil and its discoveries as infernal? It would seem so. And yet that is hardly the case.

As a matter of fact, Jacob seems to have been indirectly criticized for not engaging in a more vigorous annihilation of the tokens of evil. You will note that Jacob did not completely destroy these earrings and statuettes. He only buried them

under the terebinth. The famed commentator, Ramban, protests that Jacob was not following the law strictly. Thus he writes, Avodah zarah u-meshamsheha enam min ha-nikbarim, aval tzarikh she'yehei mefarer ve'zoreh le'ruach, o matil le'yam - "all idols and auxilliary objects should not be merely interred, but must be ground and cast to the wind or into the sea."

The Halakhah demands complete destruction, not merely burial of idolatrous images. Ramban's criticism seems to be confirmed by the Jerusalem Talmud, where we read: Rabbi Yishmael bar R. Yosi azil lahadein Napola, atun Kutai le'gabeih, amar le'hon, let atun sagdin le'tura, ela le'tzalma di'techuteih, di'khetiv, va-yitmon... R. Ishmael went to Nablus, which is today the name for Shechem, and noticed some non-Jews bowing to the mountain. Rabbi Ishmael told them, you may not realize it, but you are not really worshipping the mountain but the images that lie buried underneath, as it is written, "and Jacob hid them under the terebinth which was by Shechem." So that the Jerusalem Talmud also implies that Jacob was not sufficiently zealous in destroying the idols his family had gathered from Shechem; he should have ground them to dust and not merely buried them, where they might at some later age again become the objects of ^a veneration by foolish pag^ans.

What was Jacob's opinion? And why may we feel sure that, indeed, he was right in what he did? Besides a halakhic justification, which the commentators present, what other, larger vindication of Jacob do we find?

What Jacob rejected was not earrings and sculpture, but the attitude that one brings to it. Had he completely annihilated these objects, he would have demonstrated his feeling that these articles are objectively evil. But when Jacob merely buried them, he showed that it is not they themselves that are evil - they are neutral, meaningless - but the human propensity for idolizing an image, the corrupt mentality of a person who venerates them; that is to be condemned. Of course, the sons of Jacob did not worship these things. The fact, however, that the people of Shechem did was sufficient to warrant their interment. Jacob thus taught his sons, and generations after them, that mute objects, the creations of man's ingenuity, can become things of exquisite beauty or great ugliness, objects

of usefulness or abominations - all depending on whether the mind and the heart of the man who uses them is pure or impure.

The Torah itself, in this morning's Sedra, indicates clearly though indirectly the approach of Jacob to this problem. Notice that before committing the tokens of idolatry to burial, he commands his family: hasiru et elohei ha-nekhar asher be'tokhekhem, "put away the strange gods that are in your midst" - the idols that are perfected by man's hands are far less pernicious than the potent poison that spews from a perverse spirit, a wicked heart, and a twisted mind. The true culprit, the effective cause of idolatry, is: "the strange gods that are in your midst."

And as if to emphasize this, the story is interrupted: after his command to remove the strange gods from their midst, and before his act of burying these gods under the terebinth, Jacob announces to his children that they will all arise and go up to Bethel and there build an altar, la-el ha-oneh ôti b'et tzarati va-yehi imadi ba-derekh asher halakhti, "to God who answered me in the day of my distress, and was with me in the way which I went." Jacob is here explaining his action. What is important is ba-derekh asher halakhti, "the way which I went." The way, the approach, the attitude - that is what is decisive. Whether an engraving on a piece of jewelry is an ornament or an idol depends on the "way" which you adopt. If it is the way of God, then your life is pure and the artifacts are functional; if it is not, then these same artifacts are idolatrous and destructive. "And they gave ~~me~~ to Jacob all the strange gods that were in their hand ^{and} the rings which were in their ears - and Jacob hid them under the terebinth which is by Shechem." All Jacob could bury physically was the physical objects -- the ornaments "on their hands" and "in their ears." The inner idolatry, the poisoned attitude, the corrupt approach -- that each individual must purge by himself, from be'tokhekhem, "your midst".

So it is with us. What we must protest is not the inventions of science and technology which have caused us, in so many various way, unhappiness and even grief. Certainly we ought not to object to the insights and methods of science.

Rather, we must fear and beware of their misuse by dull hearts and narrow minds. Orthodox Jews sometimes rue and bemoan the advances of technology and yearn for "the good old days"; but that is as irrelevant and silly as the over-zealous enthusiast of scientism who naively proclaims man's divinity and his imminent arrival at Utopia because of science. Both these attitudes attribute more power - whether good or bad - to the instruments of science than they deserve. The determination of whether science will lead us to a golden age or to a futureless age depends not upon what man's mind discovers in Nature, but what Nature will discover when it uncovers man's heart.

There is no doubt that the same objects which may cause us moral distress and psychological tension, can be the agents of moral bliss and psychological relief. The same television screen which distracts a child with trite, nonsense, and worse, can become the channel for education, a decent respite for a hard-working person, or a blessing for the shut-in. The watch can become the symbol of an ordered and hence efficient life. The same telephone which can be misused for malicious gossip and idle talk can be used for words of significance and exchanges of meaning. ~~Above all else~~ All modern inventions can spare people from a life of grind and allow them the leisure for creative personal activity. Above all else, nuclear power which threatens to destroy the world can also, as we read recently, be used as a new source of power to move mountains and make life more liveable for man.

What we have said holds true not only for the use of science's practical inventions, but for the whole enterprise of scientific study. There are those who are amazed at the fact that there exist such strange beings as religious scientists. They are astounded into disbelief when they hear of the existence and thriving activities of the Association of Orthodox Jewish Scientists. Yet there should be no surprise at all. On the words of the Torah, ki hi chokhmatkhem u-vinatkhem l'einei ha-amim, that this Torah is our wisdom and understanding before the eyes of nations of the world, the Talmud comments that this "wisdom" refers to tekufot u-mazalot, the study of astronomy. So important is this, the Talmud adds, that one who has scientific ability and does not use it for scientific purposes, is not a worthy individual.

But what does Jewish excellence in the natural sciences have to do with "before the eyes of the nations?" R. Jonathan of Lunel (quoted in Chidushei ha-Ran on Shabbat 75a) explains that the Talmud urges Jews to study astronomy in order to show the glory and regularity of G-d's creation, and thereby refute the superstitious notions of the pagans for whom the ~~heavens~~ ^{constellations} are the signs of fate and destiny. When the Jew engages in astronomy, he discovers the truth, and denies thereby the falsehood of astrology.

So must it be in our day. Today, it is not astrology that is the problem, but a superstition far more pernicious because it sounds more sophisticated: the deification of science, the abandonment of G-d, the assumption that the world is a meaningless accident and history a cruel joke. When Orthodox Jews excel in science and remain not only confirmed but strengthened in their faith, it is the assertion of chokhmah and binah that issues from Torah, a proclamation that the greater man's knowledge, the greater his reverence for Almighty G-d, a declaration that all science -- chokhmah and binah -- is a hymn of glory to G-d. When the entire Jewish community, laymen as well, lives in and with the modern world; when we do not allow modernity to distract us from divinity, and do not allow our countless gadgets to rule over us, but we remain in control, our personalities uncrushed, our aspirations noble, our goals sacred, and our derekh the way of Torah; then we purge the world and ourselves of the "strange gods" in our midst. The Torah Jew, therefore, cannot and does not abandon the modern world. He seeks, rather, to master it and avoid being enslaved by it. Just as Jacob taught by burying rather than destroying the ornaments of Shechem, that they are mere tools that can be misused or used depending upon the "way" or attitude you bring to them, so must our approach be to the various inventions of modern science and to all of modern life. We must retain our moral freedom and our spiritual eminence, learning to master the implements devised by technology in order to further humane goals, to advance our spiritual purposes, to glorify our Creator from Whom we derived the wisdom, in the first place, to conquer Nature.

It is in this sense that every now and then we ought to reenact the scene of Jacob disposing of the tokens of evil under the terebinth by Shechem. Let us purge ourselves of the strange gods which disturb our inner life. Let us, without seeking to escape from modern life and the responsibilities it places upon us, condemn to the pit of oblivion the various symbols of our moral distress that, because of our wrong attitudes, have been the cause of our ethical failings. Let us, then, rededicate ourselves la-el ha-oneh oti b'et tzarati va-yehi imadi ba-derekh asher halakhti, to the God who answers us in the time of our distress and is with us in the "way" which we go, so that our ways will be blessed and we shall learn to live in the world as free men, created in the image of God, not manipulated by brute mechanized objects.

For only by being truly the servants of God can we become the masters of our own destiny.