

"GOD, MAN, AND STATE"
(ISRAEL INDEPENDENCE DAY)

The conjunction of the two Sidrot we read today, Tazaria and Metzora, is remarkable. The first speaks of birth, the second of a kind of death: metzora harei hu ke'met, a leper is considered as partially dead. Tazria describes the joyous acceptance into the fold of a new Jew by means of berit milah, circumcision, while Metzora tells of the expulsion of the leper from the community.

Yet, these two portions are read on the same Shabbat with no interruption between them. The tension between these two opposites, this dialectic between birth and death, between pleasure and plague, between rejoicing and rejecting, speaks to us about the human condition as such and the existence of the Jew specifically. Even more, this tension contains fundamental teachings of Judaism that are relevant to the problems of the State of Israel whose 18th birthday we shall be celebrating this Monday.

After delineating the laws of childbirth, the Torah in the first Sidra gives us the laws of circumcision. The Midrash Tanhuma relates a fascinating conversation concerning this Jewish law. We are told that Turnus Rufus, a particularly vicious Roman commander during the Hadrianic persecutions in Palestine, spoke to R. Akiva, the revered leader of our people. He asked R. Akiva: ezech mehem na'im,

which is more beautiful: the work of God or the work of man? R. Akiva answered: the work of man. Turnus Rufus was visibly disturbed by the answer. He continued: Why do you circumcise your children? R. Akiva said: my first reply serves as an answer to this question as well. Whereupon R. Akiva brought before the Roman commander shibolim and gluskaot, stalks of wheat and loaves of good white bread. He said to the Roman: behold, these are the works of God, and these are the works of man. Are not the works of man more beautiful and useful? Said the Roman to R. Akiva: but if God wants people to be circumcised why are they not born circumcised? R. Akiva replied: God gave the mitzvot to Israel le'tzaref ba-hen, to temper or purify His people thereby.

Here is the triumphant Roman commander, activist, arrogant, proud, and power-drunk. In an attitude of contempt, he faces the aged Jewish leader of this conquered people, a man who proclaims that the greatest principle of life is the study of Torah. What can these other-worldly mystics know about the world, about reality, about life? So he taunts the old rabbi: how come you circumcise your children? Do you not believe that man, as God's creation, is already born perfect?

But the Roman pagan is amazed by the response: NO! All of Judaism -- its philosophy, its Torah, its mitzvot-- is based upon the premise that God withheld perfection from His creation, that He only began the task and left it to man, His tzellem, "image", to complete. In Genesis, we are taught that God rested from creating the world asher bara Elohim la'asot,

"which God created to do" -- and R. Samson Raphael Hirsch interpreted that to mean that God created the world for man "to do". Therefore, R. Akiva shows Turnus Rufus the wheat stalks and the white breads, to teach him that God has created wheat because He wants man to do something with it. It is God's will that man make the created world more beautiful and more perfect. No wonder that in the Jewish view science and technology play such a positive role. No wonder that religious Jewry has contributed so mightily, throughout the ages and today as well, to the advancement of science and the control of nature.

Therefore, too, the mitzvot, and especially circumcision, were revealed to Israel to teach that man must act by himself in order to perfect his self and his world, and in the process, le'tzoref ba-hen, to purify himself and fulfill all his sublime potentialities.

Indeed, R. Akiva himself exemplified this great principle. He was, on the one hand, one of the saintliest spirits in all our history. The Talmud, in imaginative grasp of the truth, tells us that when Moses ascended Mt. Sinai to receive the Torah and he saw the sacred soul of R. Akiva, he protested to God that Akiva was more worthy to be the bearer of Torah than he. And yet, on the other hand, it was the same R. Akiva who did not isolate himself in the academy, but became the sponsor of Bar Kochba, the great Jewish general who led the revolution against Rome.

This, then, is what milah teaches us:

maaseh basar va-dam na'im, the work of flesh and blood is beautiful indeed. The world is an uncompleted creation; man's fate is to finish it. It is the principle of activism. The State of Israel was built by people who perceived this Jewish principle. They were the ones who refused to stand aside, outside of the stream of history, but who actively took it upon themselves to rebuild Jewish statehood. Their activity was in full keeping with the Jewish tradition as taught by the law of milah. More than enough Jewish blood was spilled in the effort, and the sweat and tears invested in the State shall never be forgotten.

Yet, this is only half the story. There is an opposite danger. If man is indeed a creator, then there is the peril that he will become intoxicated with power and self-delusions, that he will begin boasting and bragging and proclaiming bombastically: kohi ve'otzem yadi, my own power and my own strength have performed all this. When he circumcises his child, he tends to forget that a healthy child is the gift of God. When he bakes his bread, he does not always realize that the wheat came from God's earth. When he builds his state, he ignores the fact that without the divine promise to Abraham and divine guidance throughout the ages there would be no Jews to build the Jewish state. When he is self-completing, he tends to become, in his imagination, self-creating. He is self-finishing and thinks that he is therefore self-made; and God spare us from self-made men!

To help us avoid this dangerous delusion, we have

the teachings of Metzora. Just as Tazria and milah warn us to avoid the passivism that issues from a misunderstanding of faith, so Metzora and the law of shiluah ha-majaneh, the banishing of the leper outside the camp, teach us to avoid the fatal illusion that issues from faithlessness. Just as one Sidra tells us to circumcise the flesh and assert our manhood, so the second tells us to circumcise the heart and serve our God.

The great medieval scholar, R. Elazar of Worms, explains the law of Metzora and his banishment outside the camp by means of a comment on a famous verse in the Psalms: ve'adam bi-yekar bal yalin nimshal ka-behemot nidmu, man does not abide in his glory, he is compared to the animals. Man, says R. Elazar, is born naked and ignorant, without understanding and intelligence. But God puts him on his feet, grants him wisdom and insight, feeds him and clothes him and makes him great. But then man forgets and does not understand that all this glory came to him from his God. Therefore, he becomes like a behemeh, a mere animal. An animal is not kept at home, but sent out to pasture; he is unfit to live in a truly human community. So man who forgets God is a metzora, he is morally sick, and must be sent outside the camp of his peers. The leper symbolizes the man who acquired self-confidence at the cost of fidelity to God and he therefore is reduced to the role of a beast.

Man, then, must be a co-creator with God. Tazria teaches that man must imitate his Maker; Metzora reminds him not to impersonate his God, not to be an imposter. One Sidra

stresses the virtue of human commission; the other -- the virtue of human submission to God.

Indeed, in an insight brimming with tremendous significance, the eminent Italian-Jewish thinker, Rabbi Mosheh of Trani, finds this second principle in the commandment of milah itself. Just as circumcision teaches that man must act, so its particular designation for the eighth day teaches that his actions must not lead to the mere amassing of power and self-importance. Rather, man must acknowledge and reach out to the Creator of all the world. The number seven, R. Mosheh teaches, is the symbol of Nature. Seven is the number of days in the week, the unit of time which establishes the rhythm of our lives. The earth itself agriculturally follows a seven year cycle in Judaism - that of the Shemittah. The number seven, therefore, stands for this world in its fullness. The number eight, however, is beyond seven: it teaches that you ^{must} transcend what seven symbolizes, you must go beyond Nature and reach out for the supernatural, for God, He who creates Nature. Were milah on the seventh day, then the duty of man would be to correct the imperfections of Nature, but forever to stay within it as nothing more than a clever animal. But milah was commanded for the eighth day, to teach that the purpose of all man's activity, the purpose of his work on Nature, is to elevate himself beyond the perfection of body and mind, beyond the conquest of the world, beyond technology. When man controls his environment, he fulfills the number seven; when he controls his instincts, he reaches number eight. His technology is symbolized by the number seven; his theology by eight. Milah on the eighth day teaches that man must not only complete him-

self but must grow beyond himself; he must yearn and aspire to something higher. It signifies not only milah but berit; not only a surgical cut, but the sign of the covenant, a contract with God sealed in blood. It means that if a human being will not strive to be more than human, he must become less than human, an animal, nimshal ka-behemot nidmu. Then, man becomes a metzora, and like an animal, must be sent out hutz la-mahaneh, outside the camp of human beings.

Indeed, this is the crucial problem concerning the character of the State of Israel. Is it to be the symbol of seven, or the symbol of eight? Will it be just a natural state, or something higher, something nobler? If Israel will be only natural, a state like all others, a small sliver of real estate on the shores of the Mediterranean, considered nothing more than the creation of the Haganah and Sabra ingenuity, then it has no special claim on Jewish communities throughout the world -- no more than its population warrants. It has no right to Messianic pretenses. Such a conception places it hutz la-mahaneh, outside the purview of authentic Jewish history, an aberration. It is then in defiance of the covenant; it is the way of tum'ah, impurity. Only by fulfilling the symbol of eight, of loyalty to the covenant of God, of Torah, lies the way of taharah, of purity and rebirth, of joyous fulfillment of the historic dreams and prayers and prophecies of our history.

This, then, is the real problem on this eve of

the eighteenth birthday of the State of Israel: Will it be milah or berit? Surgery or covenant? Tazria or Metzora? Taharah or tum'ah? Striving to be more than a natural human political entity, or falling to a mere natural group which, under the impress of secular nationalism, often becomes beastly; nimshal ka-behemot nidmu?

Such decisions are never made all at once. They involve long processes measured in historic time, certainly more than eighteen years. Many facts will determine the answer, and not the least of them will be the spiritual leadership in the state under the resolute stewardship of our distinguished and revered guest, His Eminence, Chief Rabbi Unterman, may he live and be well. Their enormously difficult task is to be both responsive to their fellow Israelis, and responsible to our Heavenly Father. Like the Kohanim in our Sidra, they must confront all Jews, the perfectly pure and the perilously impure. Sometimes it is their unhappy and tragic task to say to a man: tamei, impure, you must go out! Yet their greater and nobler task is to teach this same tamei to return, to bring Jews back into the historic community of Israel, to train all Jews in the way of the Torah's taharah. It is by no means a simple duty; it is, in fact, unenviably difficult. Our hopes and good wishes and our prayers for divine guidance and blessings go to Chief Rabbi Unterman and his distinguished colleagues in this historic mission.

We have spoken of berit milah in relation to the

State of Israel. The eighteenth birthday also has another significance: shemoneh esreh le'huppah, the eighteenth year is traditionally the year of marriage. Let us conclude, then, by extending our wishes to Israel in a manner appropriate to both events. Let us all wish the State of Israel divine blessings: le'Torah le'huppah u-le'maasim tovim. May it be a future of Torah -- in which Israel will accept the divine word and turn to its Father in heaven. May it be the time of huppah, the marriage of hearts between Israel and Jews throughout the world. And then, having returned to God and to Jews throughout the world, may Israel become the shining beacon of maasim tovim, of good deeds and noble living, throughout the world and for all mankind. Le'Torah, le'huppah u-le'maasim tovim. Amen.