

A PAST WORTH PERPETUATING

At the end of Passover, when we celebrate the redemption of the past, the Exodus from Egypt, our Haftorah bids us turn to the future. It speaks of the coming of the Messiah, the redemption that we still await.

This connection between past and future is even more pronounced on the 8th day of Passover when we recite the Yizkor. It is not only the remote past that we tie in with the distant future, but the immediate past that we call upon in order to summon us to greater activity and greater dedication for the days to come. And the more we investigate this relationship, the more profound and germane does it become.

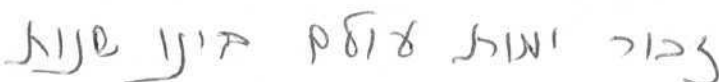
The Talmud (Sanh. 98b) records a strange passage. What, asks the Talmud, will be the name of the Messiah? The answers are obscure, even startling. The school of Rabbi Shila answered: The name of the Messiah will be Shiloh. The school of Rabbi Yannai maintained that the name of the Messiah would be Yinon. The school of Rabbi Chaninah held that Chaninah shemo, his name would be Chaninah. Each school gave the name of its own Rabbi to the Messiah!

What the Talmud tries to tell us is that, on the one hand, the Messiah would not be a strange, unassociated, unrelated soul dropping right out of Heaven. His character would be a composite of all the finest traits of the teachers of old. And on the other hand, there is a little bit of the Messiah in every one who has ever made a creative effort in his life. Every one has something invaluable in his life, something unutterably precious, to contribute to the redemptive process.

It is hard for us to discern what it is that we ourselves can give to the future, to the Messiah. But those after us, contemplating us in retrospect with a sense of perspective and proportion, will be able to tell what in our lives is worth perpetuating, what we can offer to the Messiah, to the redemption.

So, each school and each student examined the role of the teacher and found something unique -- for a name is a symbol of uniqueness, of individuality -- to the whole Messianic development.

Each of us too, looking at his own origins, must find something in the past that is worth perpetuating. The naming of the Messiah is, fundamentally, an expression of the belief that there is something in the past that is worth perpetuating into a brilliant and redeeming future.

Now, this should not be taken as just another pulpit platitude. This is not the truism that it may appear to be. Were it so, the Bible would not have to remind us:  זכור ימי קדמך וימי כל דור ודור , "remember the days of old, understand the years of every generation." Were it so, wise men and thinkers throughout the ages would not have had to remind us, as did George Santayana most recently, that those who choose to forget history are doomed to relive it.

In revolutionary periods, when all men seem to plunge back into a collective adolescence, they react against the past with a special revulsion, attempting to uproot it and destroy it and wipe out all its traces. So, for instance, is it true of the Communist revolutions of Marx and Lenin, and so is it true of today's radicals and revolutionaries,

who believe that in order to build the decent society, it is necessary to eradicate everything of the past.

So, to an extent, even Zionism during its revolutionary period evinced this rejection of the past. That is <sup>w</sup>hy no less a personality than Ben-Gurion can state, with amazing lack of insight, that the history of the Jews ought to be reduced by 2,000 years -- the 2,000 years that we dwelled outside of the Land of Israel.

But this is not a Jewish attitude. We Jews too know of revolution. Our vision of the Messianic future is one which will result from a radical revolution. And our very birth took place in revolution. The founder of our faith, Abraham, was an iconoclast, a man who smashed the idols of the "Establishment," who questioned their most fundamental premises, who revolted against his own father, who was a troublemaker of the most dangerous sort. Yet, despite the fact that he marks an abrupt break from his heathen past, we do not obliterate that past. On the very Seder night we remember that Terach avi Avraham, Terah was the father of Abraham. And one need but study the RaMBaM to see the reverence with which the personality of Terah -- that purveyor of idolatry, that salesman of icons -- is treated by the Sages of Israel. Even in his past they found something worth perpetuating!

So if we today are in the process of the long labor pains of what we hope and pray will be the Messianic age, we must look for his names, his features, his qualities and attributes, in the lives of our teachers, parents, guides, grandparents. From the finest of the past we shall lead on to the brightest future.

Yizkor, then, is a time of such contemplation of the past for purposes of perpetuation. We shall do for our loved ones what the disciples of Rabbis Shiloh, Yannai, and Chaninah did for their teachers. We shall evaluate silently and lovingly, remembering those features which are worthy of remembering, which are enlightening and edifying and deserve to be transmitted to the future.

And yet, there will be a note of regret in such thoughts -- not sadness at the gap and the void and the emptiness in our lives which still exist over the span of the years that separate us from our loved ones, but also of our own guilt. Our nostalgia will be accompanied by the feeling that perhaps, somewhere along the line, we went astray.

Permit me to explain by means of something that my revered teacher, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, said in a recent address.

Before God revealed to Moses his "Thirteen Attributes of Grace," the revelation of His personality, of love and compassion and kindness and patience, He said to Moses something which has become, through the ages, the stuff of mystic contemplation: *אני אלך ואתה תלך* "You shall see My back, but My face shall not be seen."

What does this mean? Rabbi Soloveitchik answers as follows: during the time of Grace, when we are surrounded by love and warmth, when life is good and conditions are happy -- at that time *אני אלך ואתה תלך* we don't see God's "face," we do not "face up" to our blessings, appreciate them and value them. Only later, after God's presence has passed, after the middot ha-rachamim are gone, only then -- *אני אלך ואתה תלך*

do we see God's "back," do we begin to understand how lucky we were -- and are no more; how precious our experience was -- but it is now gone. Now, perhaps too late, we learn to cherish and admire what we should have acknowledged in the first place. We can only see our good fortune as one looks longingly after a train that has passed by and is already receding into the distant horizon. Ah, if only we had been able to look our good fortune, our "Attributes of Mercy," in the face, when they were present, even as we ponder <sup>e</sup>th<sub>k</sub>ir "back" as they leave us!

What young person appreciates his own youth? Despite our Freudian wisdom about the problems of youth, despite all the alienation and wretchedness of youth that we hear about today, who does not appreciate it now that it is past, who would not want it again? Of course, young people today do not appreciate it. Neither did we when we were young. It is only in retrospect, after it is gone, that it will be cherished and longed for.

What healthy person appreciates his limbs -- until, Heaven forbid, they are threatened with paralysis or amputation? What individual is thankful for his heart until it starts to give him trouble? Who knows of his lungs until his breathing becomes difficult? <sup>What healthy</sup>

Hence, as we think of our beloved relatives, as we ponder a past worth perpetuating, even as the students gave their Rabbis' names to the Messiah, we are also a bit sad: we are regretful, and we blame ourselves, for waiting until we can only see the "back" of relationships before appreciating them, for failing to value them while we were face to face with them. If only we had shown more love, more tenderness, more

gratefulness to them while they were alive, to their very faces, and not only behind their backs when they are irrevocably gone! None of us is free of that feeling of pathos, of guilt. We are all of us guilty of that human failing: of waiting until the revelation of love is past and only then looking after it longingly. We are guilty of failing to appreciate it when it was with us.

So let us determine this day of Yizkor and the reading of Isaiah's message of the Messiah, that we shall try to rectify that failing when it comes to the people who are with us now; that we will not only look to the past for qualities to offer to the Messiah, to the future, but we shall live in the present as well. From our feeling of regret as to how we treated the loved ones of the past, let us learn how to act towards our loved ones of the present. Those of us who are fortunate enough to have parents or even grandparents, men who have wives, and women who have husbands, those of us who have <sup>c</sup>children or teachers or guides or friends -- let us begin with a morbid thought and end with a joyous one. Let us remember that life does not last forever, that those we have with us now will not remain with us indefinitely. We have them now, but only for a limited time, so let us cherish them now. They are with us now, let us give them the maximum of joy and friendship now.

I do not mean that we must romantically exaggerate their virtues. I suggest, rather, a realistic appreciation of their good points. Even more, I mean simply to enjoy their presence; and more than that, to determine to let them know our appreciation. Now is the time

to share warmth and affection and appreciation and cherishing -- now, when their face is seen, not later after their backs have irrevocably been turned to us.

Such an attitude, I dare say, will make of us the kind of people and the kind of society that will pave the way for a Messiah, and make us worthy of his appearance.

Then we shall be able to say with Isaiah in today's Haftorah:

ה' אלהיך יגיד , he shall say on that day -- thank you, O Lord.