

"THE SAME OLD THING?"

One of the great problems that Judaism has to face in the modern world, is the human desire for change and novelty. In a society and an atmosphere which encourage this quest for newness, whether genuine novelty or mere fad, traditional religion hardly stands a chance. So, traditional Judaism is declared to be hopelessly static, unresponsive to the creative urge for something new, and it is disregarded and jettisoned in favor of the newest fad of the day. All *mitzvot*, observances, customs -- all prayers, all Torah -- are dismissed as "The Same Old Thing," and ignored. They are considered boring and unexciting.

Now this horror of "The Same Old Thing" is a very real reaction. A man does not want to read yesterday's news, tune in yesterday's programs, see T.V. reruns only, wear yesterday's style hat. "The Same Old Thing" cannot hold him, therefore, in religion too.

This instinctive reaction against "The Same Old Thing" -- a reaction which keeps newspapers and the communications and textile industries, amongst others, in business -- is responsible to a great extent for the spiritual breakdown of modern man. But it goes further than that. The horror of "The Same Old Thing" accounts as well for deterioration in many another vital aspect of life. We give up old and dear friends -- because we want a new face, not "The Same Old Thing." We lose interest in our professions or in our businesses -- we do not wish to face, every day, "The Same Old Thing." We hear of infidelity in marriage -- our desire for change and novelty and dislike of "The Same Old Thing" leads us into the strange byways of immorality. Too many marriages are breaking up, more than ever before, because of such arguments as "I have to find myself," "I need room for personal growth," "I have to have more experiences" -- all euphemisms for all too quick boredom, for an irresponsible lapse into "The Same Old Thing" syndrome.

How can, and does, Judaism respond to this challenge? It will not do merely to condemn it. It is an innate feeling and, I suspect, a deeply rooted part of the human psyche. But whether indigenous or not, it certainly is a fundamental part of our culture and our psycho-social condition in this urbanized, technological age. You cannot banish the desire for change and newness merely by denouncing it. Yet you obviously cannot submit to it. What then?

Our Torah tradition understands that there is yet another deeply implanted instinct that goes in the opposite direction to the desire for change, and that is: the desire for permanence. Both of these coexist within each of us: the wish for the new and the need for the old. Just because we live in a world of such wrenching change, where everything is always coming apart, we want some measure of continuity, some feeling of being rooted, some element of permanence and changelessness. So that there are two seemingly antagonistic instincts to be accounted for. And God in His wisdom has given us the wherewithal to achieve harmony in our lives by balancing off within us the drive for newness and novelty with the desire for the permanent and the unchanging, the familiar and homey.

What Torah has done for us is ingenious: it has solved both problems, satisfied both penchants, in one bold stroke. Torah gives us the rhythm of the Jewish calendar. It prescribes certain *mitzvot* for certain times. It schedules them to reappear and recur at clearly defined intervals. In this pulsating rhythm of the Jewish year, we find both the old and the new. *Pesah* may be old -- you may have celebrated it twenty or fifty or seventy times before. But this year it is brand new. It makes you feel comfortable in its permanence, reminding you of the Seder in father's or grandfather's home many a year ago. But you wait for it anew each year as for something excitingly novel. *This* particular *Pesah* is a new one: there is a new face

at the Seder table, a new family situation, new prospects for the year ahead. The very fact that we observe it every 15th of Nisan satisfies our desire for the permanent and familiar. The very fact that this particular holiday, in all its unique individuality, has not been observed for twelve months, makes it refreshingly new.

I believe that this idea is implicit in a key phrase in the Haggadah, one which otherwise would be most difficult to understand. Towards the end of the Haggadah, after telling of all the miracles God performed for us, we raise our cups and announce *וְנִשְׁבַּח אֱלֹהֵינוּ חַיִּים וְקַיִם*, "Therefore ought we thank and praise and exalt God." We conclude on this climatic note: *וְנִשְׁבַּח אֱלֹהֵינוּ חַיִּים וְקַיִם*, "Let us sing before Him a new song." We breathlessly wait for the new song we have just said we will sing. A new melody from Israel? New lyrics by a great Hebrew poet? Brand new verses created for today by some latter-day Yehudah Halevi or Jewish counterpart of Rodgers and Hammerstein? -- No, not at all. Instead: the old, tried, worn *Hallel*! The same *Hallel* that you and I have been reciting for decades, the same *Hallel* your fathers and grandfathers, and their fathers and grandfathers before them, back to the days of King David, have been reciting every single year at the Seder table as well as on Festivals and Rosh Hodesh! And yet we introduce *Hallel* with a flourish: *וְנִשְׁבַּח אֱלֹהֵינוּ חַיִּים וְקַיִם* -- a new song!

So puzzled were some commentators on the Haggadah by this apparent anomaly of announcing a new song and singing an old one, that they suggested that the words *shirah hadashah* were a mistake, perhaps put in by an over-exuberant copyist, and ought to be omitted in a correct reading of the text!

And yet the Jewish tradition as such has not accepted these suggestions. It has experienced no perplexity and has refused to be puzzled and confounded by the presentation of the old *Hallel* as a *shirah hadashah*. For our people throughout the ages have instinctively understood that the rhythm of Torah combines the old and the new; that it allows us to recognize the familiar in the new, and the new in the familiar; that in the old words of the *Hallel* and the familiar melody in which we chant them, we can indeed find elements which are tantalizingly new: not only the newness of rhythm, the fact that for a year now these words were not recited in this mood, at this table, and in this manner. But new insights are possible, insights that come with age and wisdom and experience. *הַלְלוּ יְיָ הַלְלוּ יְיָ*, Thank God we are servants of the Lord -- and not the servants of Brezhnev, incarcerated behind the Iron Curtain! *כִּי עַל כָּל גּוֹיִם ה'* - The Lord is exalted above all the nations -- and will exalt Israel above even oil-producing countries, and above those who deny Israel the right to exist in its natural Homeland. *מִיָּמִי מֵעַפְרֵי דָם*, "He raiseth up the lowly out of the dust." Who of us has not experienced some low point this past year, some feeling of lowliness -- whether psychological or spiritual, with regard to family or business? Yet God has raised us up -- or He will do so!

*מִיָּמִי מֵעַפְרֵי דָם* -- old words, but what refreshingly new thoughts we can bring to them! *מְשֻׁבְּבֵי עֲקֵרֵת הַבַּיִת אִם הַבְּנִים שִׂמְחָה הַלְלוּ יְיָ*, "He maketh the barren woman to dwell in her house as a joyful mother of children." Those words are startlingly new not only for the mother who was blessed with a child this year -- but also to the parent who had been disappointed with children and grandchildren, and whose grieved heart was perhaps encouraged. A child showed signs of improvement in school. Another changed his attitude from rebellion to friendship and responded to love. Another learned, finally, that even parents are worth loving -- *שִׂמְחָה הַלְלוּ יְיָ*, the mother of such children is happy beyond words. *הַלְלוּ יְיָ*! To those who have not been fortunate enough to experience such "nachas" this year, the old words give new courage -- try harder, think clearer, love stronger, and God will help. *מְשֻׁבְּבֵי עֲקֵרֵת הַבַּיִת אִם הַבְּנִים שִׂמְחָה*. We need not go through the entire *Hallel* to prove the point. It is, I believe, clear enough. The old and the new are combined in the rhythm of Judaism. Both instincts are satisfied. The ancient *Hallel* is indeed also a *shirah hadashah*.



All of life testifies to this meeting of old and new in rhythm. Nature is the same every year: *אין כל חדש תחת השמש*, "there is nothing new under the sun." Springtime is as old as the earth itself. We go through it every year. We know just what it consists of. Yet is anyone ever tired of the first breath of Spring? Are we bored by the first explosion of delicate colors? Do we recoil from it, sneering, "Oh, that same old thing again?" Indeed not! The old season is always new! *הנחמד בטובו בכל יום תמיד*. Every day God *renews* the old work of creation. Old and new are combined.

And does not Art follow Nature? Who but a Phillistine, a totally unesthetic and insensitive person, would turn aside from an old master's painting, an old and beautiful symphony, with the words, "Oh, I saw that -- or heard that -- once before. It's the Same Old Thing!" Indeed, there is much that is new in that which is old.

Our Torah is an old Torah. Its principles came down to us from Sinai. It is always the same Torah. Yet every year we reread the Joseph story, and no one but an obtuse and unthinking person, an eternal adolescent, would quarrel with its reading by saying "I already heard the end last year." For every year we each have some new aspect, new insight, new feeling. Only one who has immersed himself totally in Talmud study, at least for a while, can appreciate the combination of old and new in *talmud torah* -- the familiar folio of the Talmud tome, the deliciously musty smell of its yellowing pages, the familiar cast of characters -- those old friends and teachers -- Rashi, Tosephot, Rambam, Maharasha... And yet -- always the breathless anticipation of something new, of some *hiddush*, some novel idea, creative interpretation, new insight.

Prayer may be a repetition of the same words -- but there is *חידוש בתפילה*, new feelings, new insights. People often complain about their inability to pray: The Same Old Thing, the same words, verses, ideas. Doesn't it become boring? Isn't it enough to say in once for an intelligent person? But the answer is that prayer is not an intellectual exercise which, once learned, has no need for repetition. It is a spiritual exercise which, like a love poem, needs repetition in order to bring out new shades, new nuances, new hues of sacred thought. Repetition is dull in the realm of the intellect. It is vital and reenforcing in love.

In fact, take love itself -- married love. If the old and the new will not be combined, if there will be only the horror of "The Same Old Thing" -- there must be infidelity, unhappiness, breakdown of married life. That is why Torah in its sacred wisdom has legislated laws of *Taharat ha-Mishpachah*, "Family Purity." Love must never become stale, prosaic, routine, the "Same Old Thing." So Torah sanctified the natural biological rhythm of life, by superimposing on it the rhythm of Torah, and gave the old and the permanent the challenge and freshness of the new and the novel. It taught married couples how to sing the old *Hallel* as a true *shira hadashah*, how to find both desires -- for the old and the new -- satisfied in love sanctified by God. For only so -- is love also lovely.

Here, then, is the lesson of the new song of the *Geulim*, the redeemed. The unredeemed can never understand this. We are always to combine the old and the new -- to find new insights in the old, and relate the new to the permanent and unchanging. To abandon all that is old, as if life and tradition and religion were just newspapers or TV programs made to tickle our fancies and provide us with an endless round of new entertainment; to denigrate Orthodoxy and try to invent Judaism afresh each generation as is the wont of so many "ritual committees" in suburbia; to lose our respect for *Masorah* and pant only after the latest fads; to strive only for the new and neglect the old -- is to engage in no more than unworthy sensationalism, and to reduce Torah to sacred journalism. And then our *shirah hadashah* is not a new song but a cheap ditty.

Yet, we must never be satisfied to keep the old without adding to it any of the dynamics of one's own soul, any of the life throbbing in our spirits and pulsating in our hearts. We must never forget to sing the old *Hallel* as if it were truly a *shirah hadashah*. If we fail to strive for *hiddush*, for the element of newness -- then we are at the mercy of boredom -- the horror of that "Same Old Thing" -- and that is the death of the spirit.

Somewhere I read that Robert Frost once said that not only Sight and Insight are important, but also: Excite... We must keep the old in Sight; perceive in it the new through Insight; and as a result learn -- to Excite our souls, our spirits.

This, then, is what the *Geulim*, the redeemed, teach us this Pesah. The *Hallel* was sung by the *Geulim* of Egypt. It will be sung by the *Geulim* when Messiah redeems us completely. Meanwhile those of us who have been slaves -- either to a static conception of the old or to the unlettered, rootless, and phillistinic pursuit of fashion and sensationalism -- we too, by virtue of this lesson, may regard ourselves as spiritually redeemed. For we have learned the great lesson of the spirit -- the fusion of old and new, old *Hallel* and new song.

O Lord, *hadesh yamenu ka'kedem* -- "renew our days as of old,"