

Shabbat Bereshit

(J. M. Baumol Farewell Party; Mizrachi Wom. Million Dollar Fund,
in Brooklyn)

The Book of Lamentations comes to an end with an anguished cry of hope, a plea for restoration: hadesh yamenu ka-keddem, "renew our days as of old." It is a cry that we repeat every Sabbath as part of our prayers.

The Rabbis towards the end of Mid. Ekhah Rabati analyze that verse. They tell us that the word keddem should not be understood as a temporal reference but as a spatial one: it refers not to olden days, but to a place, namely, East of Eden. They refer this word to the verse in the first Sidra: Va-yegaresh et ha-adam, the Lord expelled Adam from the Garden of Eden, va-yashken mi'keddem le'gan eden et ha-keruvim v'et lahat herev ha-mit'hapekhet lishmor et derek etz ha-hayyim, and He placed at the east of the Garden of Eden (at keddem of gan-eden) the cherubim and the flash of the turning sword in order to guard the way to the Tree of Life.

What a strange statement! We ask God to restore our days, to renew our life, as in the days of keddem -- and the Rabbis say this refers to the expulsion from the Garden of Eden! One would imagine that we would ask God to renew our days as they were in Paradise, not after we were chased out of Paradise.

But there lies here a great and marvelous secret which the Rabbis tried to teach us.

Every man and every woman has his own private gan eden, the paradise of his dreams and his youthful ambition. For some people it is great wealth, walking into a life where he has millions at his disposal. For another man it is a great novel that he will write without sweat, a great scientific discovery without perspiration, the great legal theories or philosophical discourses that he will develop at the drop of a hat, or a life of love and popularity and fame and happiness and satisfaction.

What the Rabbis try to tell us is that this kind of paradise which hangs on the gossamer threads of our imaginations and is glued together by the unreal cement of our wish-fulfillment, is something that is terribly dangerous, that if we try to enter it we simply fall into an endless pit. Such a gan eden is really a gehennom.

Look at Adam himself. As long as he and Eve were in paradise, they got into trouble: they submitted to all kinds of blandishments, they caused curse and malediction to come upon the world, and they began to hate each other.

It was only after God did them the favor of expelling them from this gan ededⁿ which He, God, had created for them, that they became human. In essence, the human biography of Adam, the story of man as a fully creative human being, begins only after the expulsion from paradise.

Why so? Because the true gan eden is not the one that we

dream about as youths, but the one we create as mature people. The true paradise is not the one that God gives us, but the one that we build for ourselves. In a ready-made gan eden, there can be no happiness and no fulfillment and no satisfaction. It is after we are expelled from that illusory paradise that ve'ha-adam yada et Havvah ishto -- in its literal sense rather than in its idiomatic signification, Adam first begins to understand and to know and to recognize his wife. There is an existential closeness that develops between them, as love flourishes and the family is built and the human story begins.

So that it is only after we are expelled from the primordial paradise of our imaginations and the way for us back is blocked, and when we are commanded to exert all our energies and tap the deepest resources of our existence in order to build our own gan eden, that we are the recipients of divine blessing. God places at keddem, East of Eden, at the entrance to the gan eden of our dreams, the keruvim and the lahat herev ha-mit'hapekhet, the cherubim -- angels with faces of little children, symbolizing family and children and youth; and lahat herev ha-mit'hapekhet, the flash of the turning sword, which our Rabbis (see "Ha-ketav ve'hakabbalah") consider the symbol of Torah, for it is keen and sharp and analytic and with it we can plunge to the heart of the mystery of life itself. These cherubim and this sword of Torah are there not to block us from

returning to our paradise -- when we have matured we no longer really try to return there -- but lishmor et derek ezt ha-hayyim, which means to allow us to cherish the "way" and approach and philosophy, the derekh, of the Tree of Life, of the divine teaching.

What holds true for individuals holds true for a nation as well. As children, our concept of Eretz Israel was that of a primitively beautiful paradise. What was our dream, after all? -- Of a land flowing with milk and honey, where everything is available without hard work; of a land full of sanctity, in which, as Yehudah Halevi puts in one of his greatest poems, the very air is filled with souls; a land of great Torah-learning there but for the asking.

But such a paradise never existed -- nor, perhaps, does it deserve to exist. The real paradise of Eretz Yisrael is the one that was drained from the swamps and built on the rocks and forged in the desert. The real gan eden of the State of Israel is the one that was built brick by brick, taught tractate by tractate and page by page. There, at the keddem, East of Eden, outside of the paradise of our dreams, we built a paradise of reality.

Your organization has done just that. It has not been satisfied with day-dreaming about an illusory national paradise, thus frittering away energies mindlessly. Instead, it has undertaken to build this paradise -- physically and spiritually, by building villages and schools, by teaching trade and by teaching Torah...

My uncle recently told me of a beautiful interpretation told to him by one of those in charge of building the great port city of Ashdod. The Rabbis say that tov la-lun be'midbariot shel Eretz Yisrael mi-ba-paltarin shel butz la-aretz, "it is better to sleep over in the deserts of the land of Israel than in the palaces of the diaspora." Is that really so? After all, when you sleep in a palace it is comfortable and convenient and pleasant. The answer is, that we must read carefully the words of the Rabbis. They did not say "he who sleeps," but tov la-lun, "one who sleeps over." When you go to sleep in Israel, you go to sleep in the desert -- but when you wake up in the morning you find a palace. But in the Diaspora, you go to sleep in a palace, and when you wake up in the morning you find that it is -- a shambles, a slum. You go to sleep in Israel, and you wake up in the morning to find that an Ashdod has been rebuilt, that a Beersheba rises magnificently in the desert, that the swamps have been drained, that new institutions have arisen, that so much has changed for the better. But in the Diaspora, no matter how wealthy and comfortable, there is disintegration and deterioration, more and more.

There are great causes that demand our attention and our support her^e in the United States. I am in favor of all of them, and actively dispose in activating some of them. But there can be no question about the priorities. Whatever money we put into the Diaspora will serve our purposes for five years or ten years or twenty years -- but not forever. But the money and the substance

we put into Eretz Yisrael will last forever and ever and ever.
For there shall the palaces of Jewish life rise, and elsewhere
there shall be only desert and wasteland.

Thus our plea and our hope is: hadesh yamenu kas keddem,
O God, renew our days and our strength so that, even as Adam who
found himself at keddem, East of Eden, expelled from the paradise
of his empty dreams, was ready to invest all his vitality in
creating a new gan eden, so may our strength and our initiative
and our energy be renewed to continue to build our paradises here
on earth, and especially in the Land of Israel.