

WHEN RABBI SIMEON WEPT

(orig Kodinh 4/28/56)

Lag Ba'Omer, the minor holiday we celebrate tomorrow, is a happy day in Jewish life. Especially in the Holy Land is Lag Ba'Omer celebrated in a colorful manner. Perhaps the most outstanding aspect of this day is its intimate relationship with that stream of the Jewish tradition known as the Kabbalah, the mystical tradition of Judaism. On this day of Lag Ba'Omer, the Zohar, the source book of all the Kabbalah, is said to have been revealed to the world some eighteen hundred years ago. The dominating figure in the Kabbalah, the reputed author of the Zohar, is Rabbi Simeon b. Yochai, who died on this very day of Lag Ba'Omer. So that tomorrow is the yahrzeit of the great Rabbi Simeon and the single most important day in the Jewish calendar which represents and reminds us of the Kabbalah.

It is appropriate on this Sabbath preceding Lag Ba'Omer, therefore, to read again the last words of Rabbi Simeon. For his last remarks, as the Zohar relates them, are of utmost significance to all of us moderns. In a particularly dramatic and beautiful passage we are told:

זוהר יומא 232 א' כ"ז  
שמינין אומותאן דאין דאין, הוה מסדר מלכו. אתבנין קרית א"י ז"ל... (והוה אומותאן דאין)  
זקן ז"ל ע"ה וזמאן דאומותאן דאין דאין זמאן דאין דאין כ"ל  
הוה ז"ל מרדכי הוה דפניו זכרון קאין... אסתר אשל קאין, ומרדכי  
לא אתרסק... והוה חמין דאין דאין דאין דאין.

On the day that Rabbi Simeon was to depart from this world, he prepared himself for the end. The friends and disciples of Rabbi Simeon came to his home to bid him farewell. Rabbi <sup>Simeon</sup> lifted his head, opened his eyes and saw that itmalei beta -- that the house was full, the room was packed with tearful disciples and students. At this sight, bakhah Rabbi Shimon -- Rabbi Simeon began to weep, and said, once before when I was ill and thought I was going to die, only one person came to visit me -- and that was Rabbi Pinchas b. Yair. And when he came to see me, is'char isha -- a great fire

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enveloped him right in front of me, and that fire never left him. Now I see that many people are here -- itmalei beta, the room is packed; but the fire is gone.

Here is a great Jewish attitude which emerges from the weeping of Rabbi Simeon. It is more important to have one Rabbi Pinchas b. Yair than a house full of cold people. It is more important to concentrate upon a few people who will be genuine than upon the many who will remain superficial. Better one person afire with holiness than a packed house with cold and uninspired onlookers. When that Jewish attitude breaks down and Jews become more interested in itmalei beta, a full house, than in the flame of great devotion -- is'char isha, when they prefer quantity over quality, then it is an occasion which warrants bakhah Rabbi Shimon -- the weeping of a Rabbi Simeon.

To Judaism both the individual and the crowd are important. Numbers have a value too. The Halakhah maintains that certain sacred services can take only in the presence of a minyan. Often the Halakhah encourages as large an attendance as possible: be'rov am hadrat melekh. Yet numbers must remain secondary to warmth, to love, to holiness, to the depths and the heights to which each individual must aspire. Without is'char isha, the great multitudes are of little value. The masses alone remain dormant unless a few people of true religious fire are willing to share their fiery passions for decency and Torah with them, unless they are willing to ignite with <sup>the</sup> a fire of their own souls the near dead timber of the souls of others.

Just look at Jewish history. It is largely the story of individual Rabbi Pinchas b. Yair's in every generation.

Abraham was alone. He is called Abraham the Ivri, which we generally translate as "Hebrew." Yet our Rabbis said that it comes from the Hebrew word which means "the other side." Abraham, they meant to tell us, was on one

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side, against the rest of the world which was on the other side. He was one man against a whole civilization. Alone -- but afire with the discovery of G-d. No wonder he prevailed! We nowhere read about Abraham that he went upon a large membership campaign to get people to join his congregation. We nowhere read of his successful public relations drive. Instead, we read ve'ha-nefesh asher asah be'Charan -- the souls which he won, ~~For~~ his efforts were not so much extensive as intensive; he aimed at developing ve'ha-nefesh, the depths of one's feeling, sentiment, and devotion.

Moses was only one man amongst 600,000 Jews. Yet our Rabbis tell us that his efforts counterbalanced the efforts of all the others. Without him the 600,000 would have remained in the desert not forty years but a thousand years. And Moses taught his people just this. He reminded them on his deathbed, even as Rabbi Simeon reminded his disciples thousands of years later on his deathbed, that G-d chose Israel lo me'<sup>u</sup>rabkhem mi-kol ha-amim, not because they are a numerous people, Ki atem ha-me'at mi-kol ha-amim, for they are a minority amongst all the nations. Rather G-d chose them because of His love for them, and primarily because of the oath asher nishba la-avotekhem -- which He made to their ancestors! Imagine! The whole drama of history from the Jewish point of view is because of a promise G-d made to only three solitary individuals. For these three patriarchs had the quality of is'char isha -- they were afire with a great loyalty, and that is how they changed the course of history and moulded destiny itself.

All our prophets were not people who had won popular support. They raised lonely voices, crying out in solitude, while the multitudes of cold, silent men bowed down to the ~~Molech~~ <sup>Molech</sup> and the ~~Baal~~ <sup>Baal</sup>.

Maimonides understood this principle. In the introduction to his "Guide to the Perplexed" he writes, in characteristic fashion, "When I find the road narrow and can see no other way of teaching a well established truth

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except by teaching one intelligent man and displeasing ten thousand fools, I prefer to address myself to the one man and take no notice whatever of the condemnation of the multitude."

But I speak not only of giants, people of genius, I maintain that every so-called ordinary Jew has within him the potential for is'char isha. I am not preaching a doctrine of religious aristocracy. I am preaching a very hard doctrine of religious responsibility by every single Jew. Not all of us can have the self-sacrifice of an Abraham, the holiness of a Moses, or the genius of a Maimonides. But we all can ignite the fuse of faith with the spark of love which G-d has given us. Enthusiasm is a matter of will. Whatever institutions Orthodoxy has in America are not the fruit of great geniuses. They are the fruit of the labor of ordinary Jews and Jewesses who were afire with a holy enthusiasm, determined to prove to the world that one can be a Jew even in America. They aimed not at itmalei beta, but at is'char isha.

It is in the mirror of this teaching of the Zohar that we must look for our own reflection, and thereby judge our current, contemporary Jewish situation. It is possible that we may conclude that were Rabbi Simeon alive today, he would have sufficient reason to weep. For far too many organizations have overdone their campaigns for more and more adherents. Of course, large numbers of members is in itself quite good. But the tragedy is that we have begun to sacrifice quality and abandon principle after principle in this obsessive drive for size and numbers -- and even religious groups are guilty of this cardinal sin. We have made a fetish of itmalei beta while overlooking is'char isha. I suspect that the sociologists' assessment of our "return to religion" as being mostly sociological and very little religious, is essentially correct. For the fire has gone out of the long string of suburban temples and the cold and unenthusiastic worshippers who crowd the sanctuaries in our towns, cities, and suburbs. Judaism will not be saved by cold crowds. It will be

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saved by fiery individuals.

Yet even as this teaching implies a criticism of most of our Jewish organizations, including Orthodoxy, it is also a source of encouragement and optimism. What Lag Ba'Omer and the Zohar and Rabbi Simeon b. Yochai combine to tell us today is that we must remember that the numerical disadvantages of Orthodoxy do not spell failure or tragedy. The fact that we are not a majority amongst our people ought not make us despair. Our strength lies in our quality, not in our quantity. We must remember what Matthew Arnold said in a lecture in America: "It is always a remnant that saves the nation and the race." The cause of truth, says Rabbi Samson Rafael Hirsch, "counts not the number of its adherents." Itmalei beta, Rabbi Simeon b. Yochai told us, can leave you cold; what really counts is is'char isha.

If we Orthodox Jews will ever strive for greater quality; if each of us will individually try to become a better man and woman<sup>a</sup>, a better Jew and Jewess; if our synagogues will aim at developing intensively rather than only extensively; if our schools will reach for depth, rather than for mere size; if our national organizations will set themselves goals of greatness rather than mere bigness<sup>-</sup>, then we shall become like Rabbi Pinchas b. Yair: furnaces of the spirit wherein will be forged a confident and happy Jewish future. Then with our passion for righteousness and Torah, we shall lead the rest of Jewry on to new heights, to new visions, and to new "Zohar" -- splendor. Then we shall lead Israel, and Israel shall lead the world, to the fulfillment of the ancient prophecy: ve'hayah ha-Shem le'melekh al kol ha-aretz. Then all mankind will be quickened by the fire of the Lord, Ba-yom ha-hu yihyeh ha-Shem echad u-shemo echad, in that day will the Lord be One and His Name One.