

"CREATIVE REMNANTS"
OR: LEAVEN FROM HEAVEN

In this morning's Haftorah, after the immortal Messianic vision of universal peace, Isaiah gives us a specific prophecy concerning the redemption of Israel.

He states: *וְיָשָׁב בְּיָמָיו בְּבֵית יְהוָה וְיִשְׁתָּחֲוֶה לְפָנָיו וְיִשְׁתָּחֲוֶה לְפָנָיו*

"and it shall be on that day that the Lord shall set His hand again for a second time to recover the remnant of his people".

What is this *וְיָשָׁב בְּיָמָיו*, this "remnant" of the people of Israel, of whom the prophet speaks? The Zohar informs us that the Zaddikim, the righteous, are always referred to as she'ar, a remnant -- a theme also found in the

Talmud: *עוֹלָם הָעוֹלָם מֵעַתָּה וְעַד עוֹלָם עוֹלָם מֵעַתָּה וְעַד עוֹלָם עוֹלָם*
the world exists only by virtue of those who regard themselves as shirayim.

What the Zohar and Talmud mean when they say that the righteous consider themselves shirayim can be interpreted variously. Most commentators say that shirayim means "left-overs". In other words, the truly righteous person is one of profound humility ^{who} ~~and~~ considers that he has very little value indeed, no more than insignificant left-overs.

I would suggest an alternative to this explanation of shirayim. Shirayim may mean not only "left-overs", but also "relics". Since they are Zaddikim, righteous people, they

notice the painful disparity between themselves and the civilization in which they live, the disjunctiveness between their most cherished ideals and the unredeemed society in which these ideals suffer sore neglect. They therefore consider themselves nothing more than relics of a glorious age long past, out of joint with their times.

But I prefer a third interpretation of this concept, namely, that the truly righteous consider themselves shirayim in the sense of being--"creative remnants". For shirayim have yet another function, perhaps inappropriate to the festival of Passover, but possibly excusable on this eighth day of the holiday, when we make the transition to weekday. Once, when yeast was not as readily available in packages as it is today, the baker would take the remnant of one batch of dough and use it to sour the new batter, to initiate new fermentation. I am informed by knowledgeable friends that this process is often used today too. So that shirayim are those remnants which create new and healthy loaves. The Zaddikim, therefore, symbolize a past that is great and glorious, but without the self-deprecation suggested by the term "leftovers", and without the pessimism implied by the word "relics". Rather, they regard themselves as the ferment ~~that~~ ~~which~~ will recreate past glory in the present and transmit its creative leavening into the future. This idea of shirayim as creative ferment means that the righteous indeed are a leaven from Heaven, a shirayim without which, as the Zohar put it,

ללא זרע קדש לא יוכל העולם להתקיים, the world cannot exist. According

to this interpretation of shirayim, our Rabbis speak of the crumbs of character, not the character of crumbs.

These thoughts are relevant to the Yizkor which we shall soon recite and in which we remember the past. What indeed is the relation of ourselves to this past? I do not speak of those who have consciously broken with the past, who have no use for our ancient heritage. For them Yizkor is nothing but an exercise in syrupy sentimentalism and is essentially meaningless. But what does it mean for us who cherish what has gone before us, who see ourselves as shirayim of that past--not merely of parents, but of all the Jewish tradition? Indeed, according to the Bible one of the terms used to designate a close relative is שירי --shirayim, as it were, of the flesh. Each of us represents the latest link in an unbroken chain of human ancestry.

Some people may regard themselves as shirayim in the sense of mere left-overs. They consider their marvelous background, contrast to it their impoverished present, and find nothing connecting them to the past other than pious wishes and good intentions. Maybe an attitude of this sort is good for the character in that it impresses us with humility. But it is bad for the soul: despair has never proved spiritually constructive. All of us have a tendency, not always healthy, to over-romanticize the past and, in comparison, deprecate the present.

Others may consider themselves shirayim in the sense of relics. They feel that they themselves have not

broken faith with the past. But what of their children? If I am but a relic, then it means that I have not severed the link between my parents and myself, but that I acknowledge a break in the chain of tradition in the link below me, that between myself and my children. In any case, the great and sacred chain of tradition is ruptured and, Jewishly speaking, I am only a fossil, an unproductive relic.

But it is not enough for right-thinking people to consider themselves as relics-shirayim. Relics were meant to be admired, not emulated; fondled, not followed. Relics speak of a past tied to the present but offer no guidance and guarantee for the future.

Our relation to our parents and to the past must conform to the third interpretation. We who are loyal to Torah may today be numerically only a remnant, but we must remain a creative remnant. Ours is the duty of bringing the ferment of the past into the present in order to re-create a great future which will rival that of the past.

This Shabbat we shall read the first chapter of the Ethics of the Fathers. At the beginning of this first perek, we shall read the statement of ר' שמעון הצדיק, Simon the Righteous, who taught that the world is established on three foundations: על התורה, על המעשה, ועל הגמול on the study of Torah, on the service of God, and on good deeds. Who was this Simon the Zaddik who gave such noble and lofty advice? The Mishnah tells us: Simon the Righteous היה מן הגדולים, he was one of the shirayim of the Great Assembly. Indeed, a Zaddik is always a sort of shirayim, a creative remnant. Simon the Zaddik was this kind of creative

remnant; he represented and embodied all that was holy and precious in the Men of the Great Assembly, and carried over their sacred teachings into his contemporary life, and then enshrined it into Jewish teaching as an imperishable and priceless possession of Jewish posterity. It is only a man who considers himself shirayim in the sense of a creative remnant who can bequeath this kind of teaching to all eternity.

No wonder that as part of the Yizkor prayer, we say, concerning our dear departed, that תהיה נשמתו קשורה בשרשרת חיים, "may his soul be bound up in the bond of everlasting life." If we are not going to be merely left-overs of our parent's culture, if we shall not be but relics of all that they taught and held precious, but if we are going to be creative remnants of the world they created--then indeed we shall be continuing their bond of life forever. Even as the shirayim represent that remnant which brings the ferment of the past into the new batter, and from there into the next one, so the teachings of the past remain deathless and this bond of life continues from generation to generation.

All that we have said needs to be said with special emphasis concerning Orthodox Judaism in the United States of our times. When Orthodox Jews first came to this country, they stifled in an atmosphere of diffidence, in a failure of self-confidence. They gazed across the shores to Europe and knew in their hearts that they were merely shirayim, in the sense of left-overs.

When authentic Judaism survived to a second

generation, they were astonished! Then they considered themselves as relics, as museum pieces that had miraculously been preserved intact, leading a kind of life that was foreign to American soil but that had somehow survived against all expectations. Others, too, regarded Orthodox Jews in America as mere relics, whose days were numbered and whose very survival was a remarkable phenomenon not expected to be duplicated.

But then there arose a new generation, and modern Orthodox Judaism in America considers itself today neither as left-overs nor as a relic, but as a new kind of shirayim -- as a creative remnant. Those who ignore the new world cannot hope to influence it. Those who have abandoned the Jewish heritage have no influence to bring to the world. It is we who refuse to close our eyes to new conditions and new problems and new currents, and yet are determined to remain utterly loyal to the Jewish tradition and the greatness of the past without compromise -- it is we who have the God-given opportunity to become the shirayim, the creative remnant ^{that} ~~which~~ will ferment the batter of the present with the blessing of the past in order to create a better future.

How will this be done? Only through Torah -- through nothing else. At the end of the Neilah prayer on the holiest day of the year we cry out, in the words first written by the great Rabbi Rabbenu Gershom: *אין לנו שום דבר אלא תורה* ^{we have nothing left, no shirayim, save this Torah. It is Torah alone which can transform the new generation and bring}

it back to its Jewish greatness. When we have that -- we have everything. Towards the end of Yom Kippur we proclaim that Torah is a creative remnant which will be sufficient for the whole year to come.

But how shall we go about introducing this old leaven of our holy Torah into the new batter of this generation? The answer is that Providence has provided us with an historic instrumentality: Yeshiva University. Yeshiva is the major institution of American Orthodox Judaism dedicated to the proposition that Judaism is neither antiquated nor hopelessly alien to this world. Wherever you will go in this country, from large city to small town, you will find the graduates of Yeshiva in pulpits and in schools, in communal agencies and in positions of lay-leadership. Were it not for Yeshiva University, Judaism in this country would not only lack creativity, but would not even be survived by a remnant.

It is for this reason that leaders and members of The Jewish Center have always been active on behalf of Yeshiva University. It is for this reason that we have long ago instituted the annual appeal for Yeshiva on the eighth day of Passover. I know and hope and trust that it will not be necessary to belabor the point for you. I might mention, however, that it is absolutely and vitally necessary that you increase your pledge. Few people truly appreciate the tremendous financial pressure on Yeshiva University. Costs rise for institutions as much and even more than they do for housewives and businessmen.

We appeal to you to help bring about the redemptive vision of Isaiah: *לְבַר יְהוָה יִשְׁלַח* even as God, according to the prophecy of Isaiah, will raise His hand a second time again, so must we give again, this year as every year, but more so and with less hesitation. Above all -- *שְׁאֵר* we must add, we must increase in accordance with the increasing needs. If we want our role to be that of shirayim in the sense of a creative remnant, then our contribution to Yeshiva University must not be of the nature of shirayim as left-overs. For the purpose of our endeavors is *לְבַר יְהוָה יִשְׁלַח*, to support and strengthen and recover that part of our people which is truly she'ar, the shirayim, creative remnant, through which and with which we shall make Torah thrive and see Israel redeemed in our lifetime.