

"SPIRITUAL LEADERSHIP"
The Moral Risks

I begin this sermon with an apology. I have never liked dramatists who write plays about playwrights, actors who act the roles of actors, or authors who write about novelists. I have always considered this a self-serving kind of literary inbreeding. Similarly, I am weary of rabbis who preach sermons about the rabbinate.

So I beg your leave if this morning I violate my own principle. My reasoning is that, first, I rarely do speak about the subject; second, I tell myself that the nature of the rabbinate and its destiny is of some interest to the congregation at large; third, the role of the kohen (priest) in the special reading of this morning, Parashat Parah, suggests the topic itself.

Religious leadership -- whether of the pulpit or classroom or institution -- moves between two poles, and the tension between them is characteristic of all spiritual leadership. We may locate it, as I have indicated, in the role of the kohen.

Parashat Parah tells us of the par or red heifer. The law is that if a man had contracted impurity (tumah) and desired to reattain in the state of purity (taharah), then he must be sprinkled with the ashes of the heifer. The kohen who ministers at this procedure, in which purity is granted to the one who is defiled, himself becomes tamei or defiled. It is for this reason that the red heifer is considered a paradigm of the mysterious or the non-rational in Judaism: הַפָּרָה הַאֲדומָה הַזֹּאת, the red heifer purifies the impure and defiles the pure.

What is the nature or the essence of this mystery? Rabbi Menachem Mendel of Vorker left us a pithy saying in response: הַסֵּתֶר הַזֶּה הוּא אֱהוּבַת יִשְׂרָאֵל, the mystery or the secret of the red heifer -- is the love of Israel. Now, that is a cryptic remark, appropriate to one who is known in Hasidic lore as הַשֵּׁט הַשָּׁמֶט, "the silent one." A student of Reb Menachem Mendel expanded and explained his master's statement: it refers to the kohen who embraces tumah in order to bestow taharah upon his fellow Israelites. Here is this kohen who leads a normal life of purity, as all priests are expected to. And yet we ask him to submit to impurity in order that thereby some other Jew rise from tumah to taharah.

So it is that spiritual leadership involves self-sacrifice, not of a material kind but, more important, that of moral risk-taking, the acceptance of tumah in order to elevate fellow Jews who are defiled. The kohen exercises his spiritual leadership when he takes moral risks for the love of his fellow Jews.

And this is not only true of the kohen or priest but of the prophet too, for both are species of spiritual leadership.

When I was a student, I used to "daven" in the small synagogue of a saintly Hasidic Rebbe, the Kozhnitzer Rebbe, Rabbi Israel Hopstein, of blessed memory. He was a gentle and saintly man. I remember well a talk he once gave, which went something as follows: when Moses came down from the mountain with the Tablets in his hand, and found the people dancing around the Golden Calf, he raised the Tablets over his head and smashed them at the foot of the mountain. Whereupon, according to tradition, the Lord revealed Himself to Moses with the words לְמֹשֶׁה לֵאמֹר כֵּן "I congratulate you, Moses, upon breaking the Tablets!" Now, says the Kozhnitzer Rebbe, that is strange indeed. Moses smashed the Tablets in a fit of temper, and the Lord congratulated him -- but do we not know that אֵף or temper is always wrong? Did not Maimonides teach us that the cardinal sin of Moses when he smote the rock was that he lost his temper, and for this show of anger he was punished by being banished from the Promised Land? How, then, can the Rabbis say that God congratulated him when, in אֵף or temper, he broke the Tablets?

The answer that the Rebbe gave is good Hasidic doctrine and, indeed, good Jewish doctrine. It is that the תשובה is necessary for the teshuvah of the people; the leader must be willing to descend to the level of his people in order to raise them to repentance thereafter. Only if the אדם or spiritual leader himself somehow participates in the sin of his people, can he himself perform the act of teshuvah and thereby draw his fellow Jews along with him. When we speak of the Golden Calf, however, how can we expect of Moses to descend to the level of idolatry and paganism? The answer is, that the Rabbis said כִּי הָיָה עֹבֵד עֲלֵיוֹ, one who loses his temper is an idolator, for he shows that he worships his own ego and affirms ^{the} centrality of his own emotions and sentiments. Thus, when Moses broke the Tablets in anger, he thereby descended into a kind of idolatry, and was thus enabled to help his people reattain, in repentance, their former eminence. Thus he saved them and that is why God congratulated him upon his show of anger.

That is a quaint Hasidic interpretation, and my more austere friends would probably not approve of it. Yet the idea stands on its own merits. If Moses or the tzaddik or the kohen or the spiritual leader will not risk his own contamination, his people must sink ever lower, until they are irremediably lost. If he is concerned with his own moral integrity exclusively, he must abdicate leadership entirely.

This is the first pole, that of the willingness of the leader to come down and to sully himself. There is an opposing principle: if the leader identifies too closely with his people, ultimately he is not better than they are, and can be of no help to them. The moral risks the leader must take can often result in moral abandon. Indeed, it is a most dangerous idea. It can leave the kohen with a sense of fascination with tumah under the guise of self-sacrificing leadership.

The most blatant historic example of the extremes to which these ideas can be taken is that of the apostate pseudo-Messiah, Sabbatai Zevi. Here was a man who developed to its utmost the theory of "the holy sin," the idea that the highest kind of individual must descend to the very depths of sin, to the very bowels of hell, and thus raise the world up with him. What happened was that Sabbatai Zevi himself became an apostate, converted to Islam -- and instead of raising anyone up with him, left in his wake a train of disaster that began 300 years ago and has still not been completely spent.

No wonder that some of the halakhic commentators (especially חזו"ן פ"א) tell us that even though technically the kohen would not be required to undergo טהרה במים, purification in water, as a result of his contamination with the red heifer -- on the principle of כיון דאורייתא, that he had been working for the community, that his contamination was for the purpose of the public weal, for the love of Israel -- still, he must do so, and undergo his own purification. The purpose of this is to remind himself, as it were, of the risks he had taken, and thus make sure that he will guard against his own further deterioration, and not allow himself to fall into a pattern of impurity.

Contemporary Jewish life offers illustration of these principles. For the tension between the two extremes troubles the spiritual leadership of the Jewry of our times. One the one hand, there are some who are characterized by remoteness, by unattainable perfectionism, by an unawareness of the stubborn and irreducible facts of social, economic, and cultural life. And on the other extreme are those who practice identification and involvement with the masses to the point where the leaders are no different

from the followers, and they are unable to raise anyone to a higher level.

I grant, of course, the good intentions of each group. And I recognize, too, that each is necessary, within limits, to counterbalance the other.

Thus, in Orthodox Jewish life today, we have the heads of yeshivot who are often spiritual and academic purists. Here are people who are unquestionably sincere, indisputably wise and scholarly, who demand full compliance to all ideals. And this is the way it should be. But often they do not understand the weakness the temptations and difficulties of life outside the academy, and therefore they cannot sympathize with it. As a result, they often engage in well-intentioned but misdirected activities.

For instance, twenty or forty years ago it was thoroughly legitimate to strive against Conservatism and Reform. For at that time these groups were drawing away the best talents of Orthodox Judaism. But that is no longer true. The entire situation has changed. Thus, to call a mass meeting for tomorrow (as the Yiddish press has informed us) of Rabbis and Heads of yeshivot to meet with people who are like-minded in order to give battle to a grab-bag of antagonists and enemies -- ranging from Conservative and Reform to "Jews for Jesus" and missionary efforts on campus -- is to misunderstand the whole structure of American Jewry and to evince profound ignorance of what is happening amongst young Jews in this country. You cannot influence American Jews when you have prohibited your own students from attending colleges, even from working with other young Jews for good Jewish causes (such as Soviet Jewry), and when you have discouraged them even from becoming Orthodox Rabbis who serve in pulpits because it is *mal'eh t'fela m'har*, and because it involves the moral risks of which we have spoken. You cannot clean up the situation of American Jewry without dirtying your own hands. You cannot produce taharah without your own tumah. You cannot influence others if your practice insularity. And if you insist upon your ivory tower aloofness and on your inviolate spiritual innocence, you must expect to be a spiritual leader with fewer and fewer followers; or, better, very spiritual but hardly a leader.

And yet, when I consider the other extreme, I find it even more depressing. Those who accept the moral risks and become defiled for the sake of their fellow Jews, often accept that situation as the norm, and proceed to chip away their ideals even more, until before long there are no ideals left, and the fragmented reality is idealized as the perfect state. Jewish

spiritual leadership from the pulpit often tends to be so involved, so outgoing, so "relevant," so concerned, so sympathetic, that it may be leadership, but it is hardly spiritual. There is precious little taharah that can come from a kohen who is altogether tamei or contaminated. I can think of rabbis -- and I here specifically refer to Orthodox rabbis -- who fall into a dangerous pattern in the pulpit. They are involved in pastoral work, in hospital visits, in consultation, in luncheon talks, in invocations and benedictions, in cocktail parties and meetings and fund-raising and administration and golf, in being a "regular fellow" -- and who have lost entirely the quality of authentic leadership, and are deaf to that cry of conscience that comes to us from R. Shimon bar Yochai of 1800 years ago,
יְהוֹכָיִם בֶּן־יִצְחָק , "and what will be of Torah?"

When a rabbi begins to overflow with a love of Israel to the extent that he identifies with them, that he sympathizes with them, that he understands them so well that he feels he no longer can rebuke them, then he will not improve them. He leaves them tamei or impure because he will not get into hot water -- or into any water at all.

And what can we say of the Reform rabbinate which, according to the Lenn Report which they themselves commissioned, informs us that some 40% of the Reform rabbinate sanctions (either by direct participation or by referral) mixed marriages? I have spoken to some of these people. Their rationale is simple:
שְׂמֵיךְ אֲהַבָּה , they love individual Jews and would not cause them heartbreak by refusing to officiate. Furthermore, they love all of Israel: they believe, perhaps sincerely, although I do not see how this is possible, that ecclesiastic approval of a mixed marriage will keep the people within the Jewish fold and contribute to Jewish survival! Our response? --
יִצְחָק , יִצְחָק , יִצְחָק impure, corrupt, vile!

Thus, spiritual leadership -- whether of a rabbi or a teacher of the head of an institution or school or any other function that society devises -- is full of inner tension, dangers, pitfalls. No wonder that sincere rabbinic students are often perplexed and frightened about their future in the rabbinate. Their major concern is not the material one, but the moral problem. And no wonder that authentic Jewish personalities, from Moses to our days, will never grab at leadership and aspire to power for its own sake, but they worry and brood and mull over it; they are full of doubt and tension and hesitation; they have this painful awareness of the dilemma of failing to spread taharah, which perhaps is their reason for existence and their

historic role, against the danger of losing their own soul in tumah.

In a sense, refined Jewish religious personalities feel that this dilemma reflects the tension in our conception of God, who is both far and near, both remote and close, transcendent and immanent, abstract and personal. Spiritual leadership must imitate divine leadership -- but it is so, so difficult, so frustrating to try to keep one's equilibrium and balance and not fall into either extreme, that of אֲבִירָה, a concern with saving your own soul and ignoring the rest of the world, or -- losing your own soul completely.

Perhaps all this can be summarized in a brilliant saying of the Kotzker rebbe. The Talmud declares that God proclaimed אֲבִירָה, "My son Solomon is a wise man, for he decreed the laws of אֲבִירָה and the washing of the hands before eating bread." אֲבִירָה is the act whereby two people who have adjacent property declare their property to be mutually owned so that they may carry from one to the other on Shabbat. The washing of the hands before the meal was ordained by Solomon too.

Why should these decrees mark Solomon as a wise man, a אֲבִירָה? The Kotzker answers: אֲבִירָה means involvement, sharing, identification. אֲבִירָה means the reverse: pulling away one's hands, the act of withdrawal and renunciation and retirement. A wise man must be able to do both, to keep them in balance, to know when to veer towards either extreme. He must know when to become involved and when to withdraw; when to throw himself into the world and when to tune himself out of it; when to go all the way down to the people and when to stay far away; when to risk tumah and when to insist upon his own taharah.

So we have been able to establish only the parameters, only the limits. One must never be so remote from his people that, because of his selfish concern with his spiritual integrity, he is willing to risk nothing for their sake. And one must never be so neglectful of his own spiritual status that he is willing to abandon his own soul in the process of helping his people. As to where the point of balance lies, when to incline towards one extreme or the other -- for this there are no prescriptions, for this one must have both intuitive wisdom and the experience of leadership. For this one must be, like Solomon, a

It is for this balance that a spiritual leader must pray, and pray hard. He must always retain his אֲבִירָה, his love of Israel, by opening up to the world; and his

ה' אהבה, his love of God, by knowing when to turn away from it. Spiritual leadership requires both loves, clash though they sometimes do. And genuine spiritual Jewish leadership will seek to reconcile them in אהבה והתורה, the love of Torah. For only in the Torah, אהבה ואמונה, can these two great loves, of God and Israel, reconcile.