

"THE LORD'S CHILDREN"

Normally, when the Torah records a mitzvah or commandment, it does so without offering any reasons or explanations. In this morning's portion, however, we read one commandment for which no less than two explanations are offered. The Torah tells us, lo titgodedu -- you shall not cut any gashes in your body as a sign of mourning. It was the custom of the pagans of antiquity that as a sign of grief they would cut into their flesh until they bled. In prohibiting such disfigurement, the Torah begins by telling us banim atem la-Shem Elokekhem, you are children of the Lord your God, and then after the commandment it explains, ki am kadosh ata, for you are a holy people.

These two explanations -- that of being a holy people and that of being children of God -- were interpreted by one of our most eminent commentators (R. Yosef Bekhor Shor) as follows: It is not fitting for a member of a venerable people, possessing a proud and sacred history, to tolerate such disfigurement; in addition, every man must remember that he is a child of God. Therefore, even if he suffers excruciating loneliness because he grieves for a lost parent or other relative, he must recognize that his solitude is never absolute, for he is a child of God, and His Heavenly Father lives forever. Therefore, in addition to the dignity of being a Jew, his mourning must be tempered by the knowledge that man is never alone as long as

God is there.

Actually, these two motifs can serve as splendid insights into all the commandments of the Torah. All the mitzvot enhance the dignity of the Jew as a Jew; they reinforce his nationhood and endow it with a particular grace. Furthermore, in addition to the nationalistic aspect, there is a purely spiritual obligation that man owes to his Creator.

Of course, the two elements of nationalism and religion are truly universal. We need no elaboration of the prevalence of nationalism as a fact of modern experience. What is interesting is the most recent confirmation of the irrepressibility of religion as a natural inclination of man. Only this week we read how in Russia itself, on the eve of the fiftieth anniversary of the Bolshevik revolution, the Russians have discovered that the third generation born into official governmental atheism still shows remarkable signs of religious initiative. The daughter of Stalin speaks of God, the Christian sects refuse to disappear, and Communist youth publications still must debate the existence of God and of religion in their newspapers.

But whereas the two facts of nationalism and religion are indeed universal, with Jews they are especially important because they are so intimately associated with each other. One category flows into the other, and one cannot exist without the other. Perhaps this is what our great Kabbalists meant when

they said in a most interesting comment in the Zohar (to Mishpatim, 97b-98a): Who is a child of the Holy One? When one reaches his thirteenth year he is called ben li'knesset Yisrael, a child of the congregation of Israel; and when he is twenty years old -- if he is deserving because of his obedience to Torah and the Commandments -- he is called ben le'Kudesha Berikh Hu, a son of the Holy One. And that is why it is written, banim atem la-Shem Eloekhem, you are children of the Lord your God.

In other words, the nationalistic awareness and the spiritual striving are two levels of maturity that are indigenous to every Jew. He cannot attain spiritual eminence and fullness unless he is first ben li'knesset Yisrael, a loyal son of Israel; and once he has become a loyal child of his people, he is on his way to becoming a child of God.

That this is so has been amply demonstrated in recent months and years. For one example, Elie Wiesel in his Jews of Silence, tells of his experiences when he recently visited Russia. One of them is especially worthy of retelling. A certain Jew in Russia was known to be a mohel which is, of course, a completely illegal profession. He did his sacred work clandestinely, at the risk of imprisonment or exile or even death. One day, this mohel heard a knock on his door and the man who opened it was a colonel of the Russian Army in full uniform. "Is it true," asked the colonel of the frightened mohel, "that

you circumcize children?" The man denied it vehemently, frightened at the appearance of this army officer in full regalia. "I do not believe you," said the colonel, "and I order you immediately to get dressed, take your bag of instruments, and follow me." When the mohel did so, the colonel blindfolded him, took him by his arm out of the door and into his car. After a frightening half hour drive in which not a single word was exchanged, he was led out of the car and into a house. There his blindfold was removed, and he saw before him a woman--obviously the wife of the colonel -- in bed with an eight-day old infant. "This is my child," said the colonel, "and I want you to perform the circumcision at once." After the mohel did so, he was asked for his fee, and replied that he would not charge anything at all for this mitzvah. But the colonel insisted, paid him well, gave him some gifts, blindfolded him once again -- he would trust no one with the knowledge of his illegal act -- and returned the mohel to his home.

Here, then, was a man born into a materialistic and atheistic society, deprived of even the most elementary Jewish education, but who nevertheless recognized himself as a ben li' kneset Yisrael, as a Jew -- and this feeling translated itself into the performance of a great mitzvah, although the entire idea was so vague and alien to him intellectually. Intuitively he knew that once you seek to identify yourself as a ben li' kneset

Yisrael, you already are on your way to a ben le'kudesha Berikh Hu; every act of Jewishness, no matter how apparently unexpressive of spiritual content, is in and by and of itself at least a partial confirmation of the acceptance of the Holy One.

Indeed, the world saw this when at the capture of Old Jerusalem, many young Israelis who had never seen a picture of tefillin gladly and enthusiastically donned their tefillin at the Western Wall. Once we recognize ki am kadosh ata, then we are ready to approach banim atem la-Sehm Elokekhem; a child of the congregation of Israel is on his way to being a child of the Holy One.

This places upon us religious Jews a dual obligation. One is to encourage every manifestation of Jewishness, no matter how superficial and vacuous it may seem to us who are more committed. It means that every self-identification as a Jew is a spiritually precious phenomenon.

And second, it means that we ourselves must make the trek from Jewishness to Judaism, from our national consciousness to a spiritual consciousness, from being a son of our people to being, as well, a son of the Lord our God.

Indeed, this is the essence of the month of Ellul which we welcome this day. The entire summer is spent by the Jew in concern with his people, in affirming ki am kadosh ata. We observe Tisha Be'Av, and mourn over the destruction of the Holy City, the Temple, and our national independence. Then we emerge

into Shabbat Nahamu and the shiva de'nehemta, and we entertain the consolations that are promised to us in the future -- and this year, thank God, we were able to experience this consolation in the present as well. And then, out of this profound awareness of each of us being a ben li'knesset Yisrael, we come to the last month of the year, the month of repentance when we reach out for God Himself. It is during this season of repentance, beginning with the new month of Ellul until the end of the High Holiday season, that we recite each day the psalm that begins with le'David ha-Shem ori ve'yish'i. In it David speaks of his confidence in God despite all the enemies that beset him. And in one particularly moving verse he cries out, ki avi ve'im
avuni ve'ha-Shem yaasfeni, though my father and mother forsake me, nevertheless the Lord will gather me in. Even when the ki am kadosh ata is in jeopardy, even when my knowledge that I am a ben li'knesset Yisrael is not of much avail to me because I, together with my people, am surrounded by oppressive and cruel enemies -- even then I realize that the ultimate anchorage of our people is in heaven itself. Though earthly parents abandon us, or do not understand us, or have left us orphaned, yet the Lord is our ever loving and eternal Father, and it is to Him to whom we look for our ultimate help and redemption.

That must be our special spiritual orientation on this day and for the months and season that follow. We must strive

for the greater and more mature status of ben le'kudesha
Berikh Hu. And David told us how to strive for that in the
verse immediately following his declaration of faith in our
Heavenly Father: horeni ha-Shem darkekha, u-neheni be'orah
mishor. Teach me, O Lord, Thy way, and lead me in the path of
righteousness. Give me the strength to observe Thy Torah and
commandments, and then we will have fulfilled the great and
ineffable potential with which we were created -- the image
of God.