

MAY 1969

PEREK V

(Given at home of Max Stern during his period
of mourning for his brother Gustav)

One of the things mentioned by the Mishnah, in addition
to the first ten items that were created Erev Shabbat 112
אונן, is: *אין זה חריף*. What a strange thought!

What the Ranna is trying to teach us, I believe, is
how to stabilize our views and our assessments of our fellow
men. He is trying to help us avoid succumbing to the danger
of extremes in our evaluation of others, especially after
they have died.

Consider the extraordinary case of Moses. An unbiased
reading of the Torah leads us to the startling conclusion that
he was probably one of the most unpopular leaders in the history
of mankind. His people were afraid of him, and had little
love for him. He literally had to force them out of slavery
and into freedom. No matter what occurred that was untoward,
they blamed him. The Jewish tradition even maintains that
they accused him of some of the vilest crimes in the annals of
mankind, not excluding adultery. He had to defend himself explicitly
against implied charges of graft, bribery, and stealing.
This holiest of all men, this chief of all Prophets, was
treated with utter contempt and apparently without a shred of

acknowledgement and appreciation of his unparalleled greatness. He was resented, disliked, hated.

Yet as soon as he died, the Israelites experienced a sudden and radical change of heart. We are told that God Himself buried Moses, and did not allow his burial place to be known:

לפי שכן לא ידעו לאיפה הוציא אותו אלהים

Why so? Because, our Sages tell us, God was afraid that the sudden wave of admiration for Moses by the people would have evil consequences: the adulation might lead to idolatry and worship. God did not want that Moses, the great teacher of monotheism and the great enemy of idolatry, should himself be apotheosized and made into an idol.

So that the feelings of the Israelites for Moses ran from one extreme to the other: from hatred to worship, from contempt to idolization. Before he died, they wished he would. After he died, they were disconsolate in their mourning. That is why the Tanna tells us that the burial place of Moses was created *היה זהו מקום*. The interim period between day and night, when the light is soft and darkness is only approaching, when *היה זהו מקום* when light and dark intermingle -- that symbolizes the nature of man: an interpenetration of good and evil, a comingling of the admirable and the detestable, a tension between the

angelic and the diabolical. Man is neither altogether daylight nor altogether darkness, neither all white nor all black. He is *הינןן /א*. He is neither all holy nor all profane, neither all pure nor all impure -- he is on the borderline between Shabbat and hol. A fearsome leader, remote and demanding, should never be hated. And the chief of Prophets, the saintliest of all men, should not be worshipped.

is a time that bespeaks moderation and warns against excess and extreme. Every man is, by virtue of his humanity, on the margin between Shabbat and hol, between the sacred and the profane; he is never exclusively in any one camp.

That is the nature of man -- a mystery.

And that is the nature of the consolation we offer today. In this era of psychological sophistication, when the inner workings of the human psyche have been revealed as never before, we know at least this: that our deepest feelings towards those closest to us are ambivalent. Love and hate are comingled, even as light and dark are mixed in the dusk. This in itself tells us something: we must never be extravagant in assessing those who are closest to us. While they live -- we should love them more. And when they are gone -- we should not go to extremes in our mourning. That is why the Rabbis set aside only specific and limited periods for avelut.

The loss that has been experienced, and which brings us together here at this time, is great and grievous. Gustav Stern was a good man, a charitable man, a man whose passing will be deeply mourned. But in mourning him we pay him greater tribute if we refuse to be extravagant and fall into the extreme of "פיראפ אין יחל", of exaggerated adulation and worship. The greatest tribute we can pay to him is to say that he, as a human, was the embodiment of divine mystery and that that divine mystery has now been taken from us -- that is what we shall miss, and it is his memory that we shall honor.