

"A PREVIOUS ENGAGEMENT"

One of the most significant phrases in modern life is:

"I have a previous engagement." Countless people have been saved from tedious meetings, wearisome conventions, and boring speeches by that pleasant, precious, and most effective device, "I have a previous engagement." It is the kind of disclaimer and escape that is never a complete untruth, and which allows both parties to retreat gracefully and graciously from what otherwise might be an embarrassing encounter.

Yet that same phrase is no doubt the most overworked and abused excuse in the lexicon of our times. Who knows how many worthy endeavors have been frustrated and lofty enterprises undermined because people lamely pleaded: "I have a previous engagement." It is painful to the point of being tragic when this phrase is bandied about by Jews as a means of avoiding their Judaism; when it is misused by those of our co-religionists who wish thereby to circumvent the moral and spiritual obligations that Torah places upon all of us. We stifle our own spirits when, with an air of injured innocence, we dismiss Torah and Mitzvot by waving the magic wand: "I am so sorry, I have a previous engagement."

The teaching of Shavuot is, in a manner of speaking, that no Jew may accept a previous engagement before coming to Torah; or, better, that Torah constitutes the "previous engagement" of every Jew! This primacy of Torah, this acceptance of it as our prime

commitment and first allegiance, is of the essence of our faith. It is not enough to love Judaism, to support it, even to practice it. It must be our primary allegiance, our priority, our pre-commitment.

The famed Rabbi of Gur, in his "Sefat Emet", saw a reflection of this teaching in the very name we give this holiday. The name Shavuot stands for "weeks," because the holiday always falls seven weeks after Passover. But, by a slight change of one vowel, the Rabbi of Gur reads not "Shavuot," weeks, but "Shevuot," oaths. It is a festival when we recall an ancient shevuah, an ancient vow that made us the covenanted people that we are.

He explains the nature of this oath by referring to an interesting discussion in the Talmud. The Talmud declares that an oath that is superfluous is invalid. For instance, if I swear to rest every afternoon, that is a valid oath. If afterwards I again make the same vow, then the second time I am considered to have pronounced an invalid oath -- for I am already under oath to rest, and therefore the second oath is superfluous. Similarly, the Talmud declares, if a man swears to perform a mitzvah such as to fast on Yom Kippur or to make the Kiddush on Shabbat, that oath is invalid. The reason is, every Jew is mushba ve'omed me'har sinai, already under prior oath from the time of revelation of Sinai to observe all the necessary mitzvot. Hence, any new oath to observe a mitzvah is unnecessary and invalid.

This, then, is what Shavuot or "Shevuot" tells us: that each of us is mushba ve'omed me'har sinai. We are born under prior oath, we come into this world already endowed with a previous engagement. Our spirits and loyalties and allegiances are already engaged. We may accept any assignment or duties, provided that they do not conflict with the teachings of Torah. We can be businessmen or society people, scientists or philosophers, sportsmen or athletes -- on the sole condition that these endeavors do not in any way contradict our fealty to our faith, our loyalty to the Almighty. For that is our previous engagement: we are mushba ve'omed me'har sinai.

Indeed, we may take that word "engagement" quite literally in its domestic or marital sense. We are engaged or affianced to the Almighty! When we read in the Torah that Torah tzivah lanu Mosheh morashah kehillat Yaakov, that Moses gave us the Torah an inheritance (morashah) for the congregation of Jacob, the Rabbis declared that one should read not only morashah, inheritance, but also me'orasah, engaged or betrothed. Israel and God are, as it were, an engaged couple! And just as bride and groom, husband and wife, know that each has first claim on the affections and devotions of the other, so Israel's first loyalty and first love is to God; He and His Torah are our previous "engagement." No wonder we speak of marital "vows" and of "pledging" our troth. The vows we took at Sinai are of the most intimate kind; our previous "engagement" is more than a casual encounter -- it is of the intense, delicate, and

profound sort.

The survival of Jews and Judaism in this country has become a favorite topic of conversation. Lecturers speak about it and magazines write about it. Will the American Jews vanish, Heaven forbid? The answer, it is true, depends on many factors: education, intermarriage, the synagogue, birth rates, the effect of Israel. But these in turn turn on the more fundamental question: what is our first loyalty? How seriously do we take our dedication to Judaism? For Judaism, if it is to be meaningful, cannot be taken in small doses like a diet supplement. It may not be conceived of as an injection, a kind of medicine to take in moments when our soul is ill, even if we follow the usual legend on the medicine bottle, "shake well before using." Either Judaism means everything to us, or it will mean nothing to us. If the Torah is going to be a "real" thing for us, then we must realize that from the moment of birth, nay, from the moment of conception, each of us is mushba ve'omed me'har sinai -- under prior oath. By virtue of being born Jewish, we are born into a previous engagement with Judaism.

The Prophet declares: ani hu rishon v'ani hu aharon. The Almighty cries out, "I am the first, and I am the last." A Hasidic interpretation, filled with humor and sarcasm and profound perception, reads that verse not as a proclamation, but as a complaint, as a lament. The Almighty regretfully protests that there are times that He is the First, and there are times that He is the Last. What happens when recession threatens and a man feels that business is

not going too well? He begins to cut back his expenses, to trim his budget. And what is the first thing that suffers? -- charity, philanthropy, the synagogue, education! "I am the first" ... And when a man finds himself in trouble, in crisis, he turns to all kinds of people to help him. He goes to a doctor, then to a bigger doctor, then to a specialist, then to a world famous expert. And, finally, if that too does not help, as a last resort, he turns to God in prayer. "I am the last" . . .

This is precisely what happens when Judaism is not our previous engagement. What Shavuot demands of us is that religion become utterly serious for us, not the first thing to turn from and the last thing to turn to. For the test of the authentic Jew is: what is his prior commitment? All the various activities in which we are engaged, from entertainment and luxury to pursuit of profit and fashion, are not necessarily unjustifiable. But the question is: which takes priority in our lives? In case of a conflict, which comes first? Which do we hold to be superior, and which is the judge of the other values? This, and this alone, is how we can determine whether we are being truly Jewish.

A marvelous restatement of the same theme, in a manner worth remembering, is given to us by the author of "Benei Yisaskhor" based upon an insight provided by the famous R. Loewe, the "Maharal of Prague." It is remarkable, for one thing, that Shavuot is the only holiday mentioned in the Torah for which no clear date -- precise month and day -- is given. We are merely told that it is

to be celebrated seven weeks after the Passover. Secondly, the study of Torah is one of those few mitzvot for which no specific time has been set aside. Would it not have been better had we been told to study Torah during specific times of the day and night? Finally, the verse in the Books of Joshua which inform us of the fact that Torah study has no set time, reads: ve'hagita bo yomam va'lailah" and you shall meditate in it by day and by night." But according to the Jewish system, night preceeds day; should not, then, the verse have read, "by night and by day," instead of yomam va-lailah? They answer that Torah is different, because Torah is le'maalah min ha-zeman -- beyond time. Torah is not subsumed under the usual temporal categories. Torah, according to the Talmud, was created a long time before the world, and will continue to exist after the world is gone. Because Torah transcends time, therefore, no enterprise, no endeavor, no value can be placed before it. That which is above time is before all else; none may plead "I have a previous engagement" when it comes to timeless Torah.

This means that if we take our Judaism seriously it must be the ultimate value to which everything else must yield and to which it must lead. It means that religion cannot be seen merely as a tool for the survival of a nation, or as part of a civilization, or an aspect of a culture, or a psychological crutch. If indeed Torah has the prior oath of all of Israel, that means that all values must bend to it. Therefore, for instance, the State of Israel must serve to enhance that ancient oath we took at Sinai.



One need not protest his loyalty to the State of Israel and his conviction of its vast and enormous historical importance in order to approve wholeheartedly what a distinguished Ambassador of the State of Israel said in this synagogue several days ago: that the State of Israel is not an end in itself but only a means, a means to ga'ulah, to redemption. And I will go one step further: what, in turn, is the purpose of geulah? -- that too is a means, and its ultimate goal is that freedom which allows Jews to be true to themselves by living an exquisitely moral life with Torah, and thus fulfilling our historic mission of teaching the word of God to all mankind.

It is more than just a happy coincidence that we recite Yizkor on Shavuot, the festival of mushba ve'omed me'har sinai. On this day when we remember parents and grandparents, we realize that we have not been created new, but we are, rather, a link in a long and venerable chain. This chain is one that goes back to the beginnings of our people. Each link, each generation has the sacred function of transmitting to the next that shevuah, that holy vow, first taken by our great-grandparents at Mt. Sinai.

Yizkor is then, not only a sentimental recollection; it is also an inspiring reminder of the vows we exchanged with Almighty God at the foot of that desert mountain. It is a challenge to recapture that exciting sense of commitment as we look back through the dim recesses of the corridors of history to that bright moment when God and Israel pledged their troth to each other; when He vowed that He would be our God, and we swore that we will be His people.

All else is secondary to that, for God is our previous engagement, even as we continue to cherish the hope that we will always be -- His first love.