

"SO HELP ME GOD"

Our Sidra of this morning opens with the commandment to the Kohen that he not defile himself by contact with the corpse of any person save his closest relatives. These include: father, mother, son, daughter, brother, and unmarried sister. Before these, however, appears one category which presents a problem. The Torah expresses this as she'ero ha-karov elav, which most English translations render as, "his kin who is nearest to him." This would indicate that this expression is but an introduction to the detailed list of relatives that follows. However, our tradition had declared that she'ero zu ishto, the word she'er refers to one's wife who, therefore, is the first instance of a relative to whom a Kohen may, indeed must, defile himself in order to accord her her last honor.

The question, however, is: why did the Torah not say directly and explicitly that the Kohen may defile himself for his wife? Why this peculiar idiom? And if indeed she'er does mean a wife, why is it in the masculine form (ha-karov elav)?

The answer offered by "Keli Yakar" -- and anticipated by RaSHBaM in his commentary to the Talmud -- is rather prosaic; in fact, so prosaic as to be almost banal. Yet, it says something to us of great significance. She'er means a wife because, he tells us, the word originally means -- food, as in the Biblical expression she'erah kesutah v'onatah.

But why does the Torah use the word she'er for wife, when it

means food? And the answer that is offered is, because it is she who prepares her husband's food for him!

What a disappointing and pedestrian answer! But what he means is clearly more than the reduction of the role of the wife to chief cook and bottle washer. On the contrary, the reference to a man's she'er, his wife, as ha-karov elav, as one who is close to him, indicates that the wife's occupation as she'er somehow attains a significance that makes her exceedingly close to her husband, closer than any two beings can otherwise be to each other.

In support of this answer, the "Keli Yakar" quotes a remarkable passage in the Talmud in which we are told that R. Jose met (in a mystical vision) the prophet Elijah. R. Jose presented to the prophet some of the problems that were bothering him. He said to the prophet: in the Torah it is written e'eseh lo ezer ke'negdo, that God, noticing the loneliness of Adam, said, "I shall make for him a helpmeet for him." Now, ba-meh ishah oz'rato shel adam -- in what way is a wife a help for her husband? A strange question, but a question nonetheless. To this the prophet answered: Adam mevi hittin, hittin kosess? Pishtan, pishtan lovesh? When the husband comes home from the field and brings with him wheat, can he eat the wheat as it is? Does he not require the service of his wife in threshing it, grinding it, baking it, and thus making it fit and palatable for him? Or, he comes home laden with flax. Is it possible

for him to wear the flax as it is, without his wife weaving it into a proper garment for him? Thus, by means of her assistance, me'irah enav u-maamidato al raglav -- she brings light to his eyes and puts him on his feet. Thus, the function of a wife, in the material sense, is to take the raw material provided for her by her husband and make it palatable and usable for him and her family.

One wonders: for such an interpretation of the function of a wife we need the prophet Elijah? But if we look a bit deeper, we find that we have here indeed an insight of rare wisdom. For, in order truly to be a me'irah enav u-maamidato al raglav, one who enlightens the eyes and places a man on his feet in stability, she must take not only the raw material that her husband gives her, but the raw material that her husband is, and transform every great potential within him, every advantageous possibility that he possesses, into a creative reality. That is why the wife is called she'er. For just as nutritionally she converts the wheat into bread, just as her fingers weave the flax into clothing, so psychologically she must draw out all hidden talents from her husband, she must bring out the best in him. When she has done that, in this larger sense, then indeed she is me'irah enav u-maamidato al raglav.

This, then, is the true meaning of ezer, a helpmeet. A me'irah enav u-maamidato al raglav is not a servant, or an assistant, or simply an extra pair of hands. A me'irah enav u-maamidato al raglav is a catalyst of human development and progress, one who can

creatively elicit from the deepest resources of a person that which is valuable, constructive, and enduring. Such an individual is an artist whose medium is the human personality, one who helps to release untapped human energy or, in the language of the Kabbalah, an agent of the emergence min ha-he'elam el ha-galuy, of that which is hidden to that which is revealed.

Hence, the true wife is the kind of she'er who is ha-karov elay, who is indeed close to her husband, closer than words can describe, because she is a veritable ezer ke'negdo, a helpmeet for him. Just as she takes the raw food and transforms it into a palatable delicacy, so she is even closer in that she takes the raw potentialities that he brings to her -- and no living, dynamic human being is ever complete and perfect -- and encourages the emergence of his underdeveloped abilities. In that sense, especially with younger couples, the wife is a civilizing agent for her husband, even as he is an educator for his wife. Each is a she'er for the other, bringing out the best in the other. And for the husband, if he is to succeed in life, his wife must remain she'ero ha-karov elay, for her act is creative not in the culinary but in the cultural sense; she is a she'er not only as a restaurateur of the home, but as a restorer of the heart; not only as a cook in the kitchen, but as a conjuror who can locate qualities of character in the raw clay of personality.

The same holds true, although perhaps to a lesser extent, for

any devoted relative or teacher or friend -- not the least of which is mother. It is truly a creative role of mother to bring out the best in her children. (I admit to hesitation in speaking about mother on this erev Mother's Day, for fear of dignifying a crass commercial gimmick from the pulpit.) The role of such a person, no matter what the relationship, is to teach not in the sense of informing, but in the sense of molding and shaping and directing the inner life so that it emerges more developed and more finely oriented.

What is true for individuals holds true for communities as well. Thus, the relationship of Israel to the United States is, or ought to be, that of husband and wife, that of me'irah enav u-maamidato al raglav. On this Sabbath before Israel's Independence Day, we of course are concerned about her military security and economic well-being. But over and beyond that, we must each help bring out the best in the other, each must assist the other in focalizing its major concerns and directing its energies creatively instead of squandering them diffusely. Israel must help American Jewry to survive with its moral concern for other Jewries intact, and not to imagine that it is sufficient to be complete Americans of Jewish persuasion. And American Jewry must help Israel realize the purpose of its existence, which is much more than being just another Levantine state, by placing demands on its spiritual reservoirs and demanding a certain quality of life itself.

As in marriage, this creative agency of helping to bring out the best is usually through sweet reasonableness and encouragement; but sometimes, it works also through criticism and reproach and rebuke. Sometimes, indeed, the best way to be ezer is by being ke'negdo, over against a mate; so, each of us -- Israel and American Jewry -- must not be hypersensitive to criticism. It is quite alright to be ke'negdo, provided the purpose is always to be ezer. Only thus can we be towards each other me'irah enav u-maadmidato al raglav, enlightening and stabilizing.

But most of all the greatest ezer is -- God Himself. Thus we read in the Psalms (Chap. 121) words which are known to us through the Prayerbook, especially now that they have been set to a beautiful melody: shir la-maalot, esa einai el he-harim me'ayin yavo ezri, ezri me'im ha-Shem oseh shamayim va-aretz. "A song of ascent, I lift up mine eyes to the hills, from whence shall my help come? My help cometh from the Lord Who maketh heaven and earth." The greatest ezer is God Himself.

Our Rabbis in the Midrash on this psalm pointed out that unlike the other psalms in this section, this one^{is} introduced by the words shir la-maalot rather than shir ha-maalot -- this is a song for the purpose of steps; that is, this song is that which assists the righteous man in rising up the steps from his own soul to the divine Throne of Glory. This psalm tells us how to bring out the best in our ourselves, ascending the ladder of the spirit.

God, Torah, and faith provide for us a sense of purposefulness which enables us to harness all our energy towards one goal, like a magnet acting on a disoriented group of iron molecules, focusing all of them in one direction; or like a laser beam, which, by causing all the light rays to go in one direction, gives us a tool of unprecedented power.

Moreover, the Midrash saw in this psalm about ezer a historical reference of great tenderness and pathos. They say that it was uttered for the first time by our father Jacob, and the word should be read not harim but horim, not mountains but parents. When Jacob was about to meet his beloved Rachel, he thought of the time that his father first met his mother. Esa einai el he-harim (or horim) means, I lift up mine eyes and recall the time that my parents first met. How different were their circumstances! When they met, Isaac had sent Eliazer as his servant or ambassador bearing carloads of gifts and jewels and gems for his wife Rebecca. They began life with all the economic advantages that any young couple could ever want. And here I am, coming to my beloved Rachel as a fugitive from a hateful brother, fleeing for my life, in tatters, hungry and tired with not a penny to my name. Me'ayin yavo ezri, from whence shall my help come?

And his answer came: Ezri me'im ha-Shem, my help, my she'er, comes from the Lord oseh shamayim va-aretz, Who maketh heaven and

earth. God Who fashioned an ordered world out of the primordial chaos, the tohu va-vohu, He will do the same for my own life. It is He Who will be my ezer by bringing out the best in me and allowing this best emerging from the depths of my heart and soul to overcome my infirmities and my poverty and the harshness of life about me. Indeed, Isaac and Rebecca started out life with a great deal of wealth; yet they were not altogether happy. Somehow their relationships were not quite smooth, they often failed to communicate with each other. Whereas Jacob and Rachel, despite the difficulties that beset them in the beginning, despite the harshness of their few years together and the tragedy which brought early death to Rachel, managed to attain a life which was blessed with love and affection. The quality of their relationship was sublime; many decades after her death, Jacob was to remember with warm affection the immortal bonds that held them together. No doubt the quality of their relationship was largely the result of the fact that they had to struggle during their early years, that he had to work seven years and seven years again in order to win the hand of his beloved wife, and that in this mutual struggle together each was an ezer for the other, each one brought out the best in the other.

This too was the way in which God proved to be an ezer to Jacob. He taught Jacob how to bring out the best in himself and in his wife. Indeed, the greatest gift from God is not outright blessing, but an indirect blessing in which God teaches us how to

approach the raw material of life and fashion something of enduring value. We read ezri me'im ha-Shem, "My help is -- literally -- with the Lord," not me'et ha-Shem, "from the Lord." God does not usually answer our prayers by sending us miraculous deliverance or depositing a fortune at our doorstep. Instead, the experience of being with God, of entrusting our confidence in Him, of being aware of His presence at all times, gives us the strength to reorient our lives, to redirect all our energies, to refocus all our desires towards Him. This was the way in which Jacob's prayer was answered and his ezer came to him from the God Who was the creator of heaven and earth. Even as he prayed to God, saying, "as You helped my parents, so help me, O God," and his prayer was answered when God proved to be his ezer, by bringing out the best in him; so may our prayers be answered.

We too pray for the divine ezer. Our hope is that He will grant us that same assistance whereby, as a result, we shall be the beneficiaries of me'irah enav u-maamidato al raglav -- of the enlightenment of our eyes and stability for our feet.