

A-205

QUESTIONS THAT MUST BE LIVED

1. This holiday of Passover might rightly be called "The Festival of Questions." All the ceremonials of the Seder are performed with an eye to provoking questions from our children. The Hagaddah is in answer to the Four Questions asked by the youngest child. The famous "Four Sons" are distinguished from each other by the nature of the questions they pose. The hymn "Echad Mi Yodeia" is in the form of a series of questions. A Festival of Questions indeed!

And questions certainly are of the utmost importance. We sometimes seem to forget that the right answers can come only in response to the right questions. The whole of that magnificent structure of Greek philosophy was constructed on the foundation of Socrates' method, which was one of sharp questioning. Scientists tell us that the most valuable scientific discovery is not one that gives all the answers but one that raises the proper questions. That is how science progresses from one milestone to another. R. Yochanan, the Talmud tells us, mourned the untimely death of his colleague and brother-in-law, Resh Lakish, not because Resh Lakish was able to prove what was said by others, but because he had a genius for asking questions- the right questions.

Perhaps this offers a cue to understanding and diagnosing the ills of contemporary Jewish life. We are like the fourth son in the famous passage of the Hagaddah. Remember that he is not characterized as the "Eino Shoeil", he who doesn't ask, but as "Eino Yodeia Li'shol", he who does not know how or what to ask.

It is told of the eminent scholar and sage, R. Zvi Hirsh Berliner, that he once accepted a call to the pulpit in the modern German city of Mannheim. The Rabbi came from East Europe, where even in the smallest hamlet one could find a great number of profound scholars and people of noble piety. Mannheim, however, was poor in both scholars and saints. When it came to Shabbos Ha'gadol, the day when, traditionally, the Rabbi would deliver one of his two annual sermons, Rabbi Berliner kept silent and did not preach. When asked why, he explained that the source for this tradition was that "Shoalin ve'dorshin shloshim yom kodem ha'chag", that 30 days before Passover the people ask their "shaylos", their questions, and the Rabbi preaches on the questions. And so, he continued, since in Mannheim no one seems to have any "shaylos", any questions, then I too am relieved of my responsibility, of "dorshin", preaching.

2. Well, then, what are the questions we must learn? The MAH NISHTANAH is the series of four questions which a child asks. What about the mature adult, he who would live a rich, meaningful, spiritual Jewish life? Here too there are four questions - but they must not only be verbalized. They must be lived. They must be asked by every fibre of our being; we must experience them to our innermost core, and our entire being must partake of those questions. They are questions that must be lived if we are to attain the spiritual insights, the religious maturity and the wholeness of life which can be ours, if we ask properly.
3. First is the question of amazement and wonder. It is a question which must come from an unwillingness to accept the grandeur of life as routine. It is a question which must grow from within us when we expose our souls to the unusual in the usual, the miraculous in the commonplace, the supernatural in the natural, the overwhelming wonder in the ordinary and prosaic, the tantalizing mystery in all that what we have come to accept as evident and obvious.

That question was first phrased by Moses and the Israelites when, having crossed the Red Sea and having been delivered of a massacre by the Egyptians, they turned to G-d in a chorus of amazed voices, singing, MI CHAMOCHA BA'EILIM HA'SHEM - who is like unto Thee among the mighty, O Lord?

(continued from page 1 #2): And these three questions for adults were formulated by R.Gamaliel who, as we read in the Hagaddah, maintained that they are the core of the whole Seder, and that without them we have not fulfilled our religious obligations on Passover. KOL SHE'LO AMAR....CHOVASSO. And these questions of the mature and responsible individual are ones which the entire Passover incident makes us aware of more acutely, but which should be asked by us every day of the year. And they must not be asked in the usual formula that so many moderns ask their "Kashios": "Rabbi, why can't I?" Rather, they must be on the form of "G-d, how can I?" They are challenges to ourselves, questions which beg answers by our deeds, our ways of life. They are questions that must be lived.

3. One of these is: MATZAH ZU SHE'ANU OCHLIN AL SHUM MAH? - Why do we eat this Matzah? Those who know Hebrew well will recognize that the root for the word MATZAH ~~is~~ means "to fight", as in the verse SHNEI ANASHIM IVRIM NITZIM... And with this understanding of the original root of the word - - and there is a logical connection, too, for people fight others for their bread, just as MILCHAMAH is related to LECHEM - - our question becomes: G-d, why must there always be war? Why can't people learn to live in peace? Why is it that this world is filled with so much dissension and discord, so much strife and struggle? Why cannot the greatest war ever fought in history just evaporate after its conclusion instead of freezing into permanent hostility, into a "cold war"? Why must young lives ever be sacrificed on the altars of greed and hate? Why must an Israel, which so speaks and seeks peace, be swaddled in bloodshed, nursed in battle and weaned in war? Why must union and management join blows with such enmity and hostility so that until very recently both parties and especially the laborers at Westinghouse lost so very much, some of them all their life's savings? Why, we ask, must homes be broken by strife, and why must discord erupt to destroy the domestic peace which could be the share of all? MATZAH ZU AL SHUM MAH? - to what purpose is all this? And how can I do something about it?

That is more than a challenge to G-d. That is a challenge to ourselves. What can we do to establish peace in the small circles in which we travel? MATZAH ZU SHE'ANU OCHLIN, the Matzoh we eat, the scraps we get into, the battling we do almost every day, how are we to guard against these personal feuds as well as convince whole governments to sue for peace? And to answer that we must go to R.Gamaliel's answer. And we find many reasons for MATZAH, for warfare. One is KI GORSHU MITZRAYIM, nations fall prey to inflammatory jingoism, and they exile others. Another is VE'GAM TZEIDAH LO ASSU LANEM, lack of food, the economic factor in warfare as its cause. But predominant note in this passage is something else: VELO YACHLU LE'HISMAHMEIHA - they couldn't wait. There was no time for the dough to rise, and so it remained Matzoh. In the metaphoric sense the same is true. Impatience and quick temper is one of the chief causes of all contention, whether international or personal. I dare say that a historian could substantiate that that is true for a great number of historical crises. And any one with experience will tell you the same of personal relations. Britain was impatient with an archbishop in Cyprus. Who knows how much blood will be shed because of this act! Imagine if our government had followed the policy of those reactionaries who were and are advocating war with Russia at the least provocation - impatience would have born catastrophe. Who knows how often in the past unconsidered, impatient and precipitate action has caused wars which might otherwise have been averted. And oh how often do these small cases of quick temper and impatience detonate an explosion of a home which might otherwise have flourished in peace. What can we do then? - be patient. One of the cardinal principles of Judaism is V'HALACHTA BI'DRACHAV - imitate G-d. And G-d is ERECH APAYIM, patient and long-suffering.

4. A second question is: MARROR ZU SHE'ANU OCHLIN AL SHUM MAH? Why are people so often embittered? Why so much resentment? Why are people not satisfied with their lot? Why must Israelis be embittered at Arabs? Why should Negroes feel bitter at the south? Is there any value to all this MARROR? Is that what G-d wants in His world? And what can be done about it?

Here again let us look at the answer R.Gamaliel quotes. It is AVODAH KASHAH - hard and harsh work. But that, assuredly, is not a reason for bitterness. What then? - UVCHOL AVODAH BA'SADEH, it was because of the work in the fields, outside work, work that

had been imposed upon them without their consent and against their will, it was degrading slavery and their resentment against and its immorality welled up in their breasts - that was the MARROR our ancestors experienced in Egypt.

There is of course a childish, immature and unproductive kind of MARROR - it is the bitterness and resentment of selfish, pampered people who must have things their own way. But when this MARROR is the result of a powerful protest against injustice, when it is the inner expression of indignation against AVODAH SHE'BASADEH, against degradation imposed forcibly from without, then that MARROR is one of the most valuable things in the world. The late Chief Rabbi of Israel, Rabbi Kook, calls this bitterness OSS HA'CHEIRUS HA'PNIMIS SHELANU, SHE'HI MUCHRACHAS LA'TZEIS EL HA'POEIL LEFI ETZEM TIVEINU SHE'NATN BANU ADON KOL HA'MMASIM, that bitterness and resentment is the authoritative sign of our inner will to freedom which by our very nature seeks expression in real life and which was implanted in us by the Almighty. So that this kind of MARROR is a gift of the Divine, that which assures us that we will not accommodate ourselves to injustice and indecency and unrighteousness. The slave who is content with his lot is a degraded shell of a human being. The slave who is bitter because he detests the whole idea of slavery, he is a human in the fullest sense, one created in the image of G-d and one endowed with an inner nobleness, an inner spark. Jews were bitter after the last war. And that MARROR, when brought out from potential to real, led them to found the State of Israel. Negroes are bitter at the conditions imposed upon them in the South. The expression of that MARROR, despite its violent overtones, will cleanse this country of ours of one of its greatest blemishes of downright immorality. That kind of MARROR is mature and valuable and desirable. That kind of bitterness can sweeten life. And so when we ask, as we must, MARROR ZU AL SHUM MAH, the answer is that it comes from righteous resentment of AVODAH SHE'BASADEH, of enforced degradation, and when you ask "what can I do about it?", the answer is, as Rabbi Kook maintains, develop it!

5. Now these first two questions, those concerning MATZAH and MARROR, strife and bitterness, are comparatively easy to ask. We see, without difficulty, the tragic condition of the world about us. We are so painfully aware of our own difficulties and wants. To complain does not require great wisdom. One needn't be a philosopher to be a pessimist. How much more difficult to ask the third question, how much more wisdom is required to perceive that we are heir to so much goodness in life! And that is embodied in the phrase of R. Gamaliel, PESACH ...AL SHUM MAH? - why the Passover Sacrifice? Both the Jerusalem Aramaic translator and Rashi point out that the word PESACH originally means mercy and goodness - UPASACHTI-VECHAMALTI. Why O G-d, asks the intelligent, enlightened and wise person, why are You so good to me? Why do I deserve all Your favor and kindness?

Occasionally we ought to take a step back and take a good long look at ourselves. Then we will notice that those things we complain about are really so small and insignificant, and by and large we are a blessed people who have so very much to be thankful for. We make a sufficient living. Think of the millions who are starving. We have good children. Think of the brokenhearted parents of juvenile delinquents who are in serious trouble. We have enough to eat, enough to wear, enough shelter. Think of the Jews of Morocco and their miserable existence in the degrading "mellahs". And that which is so very important: our health. We have our sight - how wonderful! We have use of our limbs - how fortunate we are! Our minds are not tortured - how really blessed we are! And - we can speak our minds. In Russia today, in the provinces, hardly a synagogue exists in a country which was once the greatest center of Jewish life in all the world. There is one exception - the synagogue in Moscow, which the Communists keep as their "show-case" for Western visitors, in order to impress them with the "freedom of religion" in Russia. The synagogue is comparatively well attended. But - a writer in the most recent issue of "Orthodox Jewish Life" points out - at every service 4 MVD men are present to check on the Rabbi's sermon and record the names of those attending. G-d Almighty, PESACH AL SHUM MAH - how can I be deserving of so much goodness, how can I thank you that there is no secret police to check and censor my sermons! And you too, my friends, must ask that happy question - PESACH... how can we thank G-d that when we come to Kodimoh there is no one to enter our names on the list of "enemies of the state"! And Life itself - shouldn't we constantly thank G-d for that, and wonder that He has mercifully granted it to us?

Just think: it was the fathers or grandfathers of most of us who emigrated to this country while so many of their brothers and sisters remained in Europe. Most of their children and grandchildren - our cousins- are unfortunately no longer here, massacred in the greatest holocaust in human history. We, because of a fortunate quirk of circumstance, are thriving and flourishing and happy. How easily it might have been reversed! O G-d, PESACH AL SHUM MAH, how good and merciful and kind You have been to us!

And if we ask, "How can we continue to deserve this PESACH, this mercy of G-d?" The answer is again available in the passage quoted by R. Gamaliel, in the very last words of that paragraph: VA'YIKOD HA'AM VA'YISHTACHU, the people bowed down and worshipped - that is, bow your heads before this G-d of Goodness, accept upon yourselves the duties and obligations He has imposed upon you, and understanding how fortunate you really are, do not complain that that Torah with its obligations and duties is too heavy a load and that it is too strenuous to bow before G-d; and finally, "worship" - come with us, be with us, make shul-going not only a rare experience, but a weekly event and even a daily one.

6. These then are the three questions which we must ask, and live. VE'ILU HEIN, and they are, PESACH, MATZOH, MARROR. Let us ask and attempt to answer the questions of MATZAH and MARROR, and may G-d, in turn, provide us with everlasting PESACH, with eternal mercy and goodness as we bow in acknowledgement and worship in gratitude.