

Guest Sermon, Cong. Oheb Zedek

I am pleased and honored to be able to occupy this morning the pulpit of my distinguished colleague, Rabbi Theodore Adams, one of the most eminent rabbinic leaders in our city. I also regard it as a distinct privilege to be able to participate in services in a synagogue with such a proud history. I am sure you join me in hoping and praying for the complete and speedy recovery of my honored colleague and your beloved rabbi. Perhaps the most appropriate prayer is a verse from the Psalms which we recite every Wednesday: im amarti matah ragli, hasdekha ha-Shem yisadeni; "when I said that my foot has slipped, then Your kindness, O Lord, supports me." May the kindness of the Lord be the only crutch your rabbi will need and the only support he will <sup>have to</sup> receive for many many years to come.

This Sabbath is known as Shabbat Ha-gadol, "the great Sabbath". Many reasons have been offered in our tradition for this distinctive name. Permit me to mention to you one which I regard as possessing special insight. Rabbi Jacob, author of the Turim, maintains that it is called by this name le'fe she'naaseh bo nes gadol, because a great miracle, nes gadol, was performed on this day; the Hebrews who were yet slaves in Egypt dared to slaughter the lamb (regarded as the deity of the Egyptians) in defiance of their taskmasters, ve'lo hayu rash<sup>a</sup> in lo-mar la-hem davar -- and the Egyptians were not able to protest or rebuke them.

Shabbat Ha-gadol, in other words, celebrates the remarkable courage and the heroic conviction of the Children of Israel who reached new heights of fearlessness in their dedication to the Almighty. The nes gadol was not only a "great miracle", but also a "miracle of greatness" -- Jews, heretofore diffident slaves, were able to take such risks for their beliefs, for their God!

Perhaps it is best to see this act of bravery and dedication in a larger context. All of the Bible, and all of Judaism, is the story of the dialogue between God and man. This dialogue can be approached from two aspects; it consists of two parts, depending upon who initiates the conversation. The Kabbalah speaks of itaruta di-le'elah, "the arousal from above", and itaruta di-le'tata, "the arousal from below". In the first place, it is God who, from above, addresses man; in the second case, it is man who, from below, seeks out his Creator. Ultimate bliss occurs when the "arouser" is answered, when God seeks out man and man responds or when man searches for God and God makes Himself accessible. Tragedy results when God calls out to man and receives no answer from his stony heart, or when man storms the gates of Heaven and receives no reaction from above.

The two months of Tishri and Nisan, coming at opposite times of the year, represent different facets of this great human-divine dialogue. Each of these months contains both elements of which we spoke, but each bears a different emphasis.

Tishri begins with Rosh Ha-shanah and is followed by the "Ten Days of Penitence". This period is one of itaruta

di-le'tata, where the dialogue begins with man's initiative. The Jew rises early in the morning for his Selihot prayers, he prays with greater conviction and intensity, he gives more charity than usual. Especially characteristic of this period is teshuvah, repentance, the great and all-encompassing search by man for God. But the climax of Tishri comes on Yom Kippur; this is the day, par excellence, of itaruta de-le'elah, the appearance by God from above as He seeks out man. For just as the theme of teshuvah reflects man's initiative, so the theme of Yom Kippur, which is kapparah (atonement or forgiveness), is an expression of God's address to man. On Tishri, therefore, we have both elements; but the first, man's gesture to God, is only the introduction to the climatic response of God to man on Yom Kippur.

Nisan too shows both elements. The holidays of this month begin with this day, Shabbat Ha-gadol, which as we have mentioned represents the bravery and fearlessness of the Jew in his loyalty to God: it is the itaruta di-le'tata. This leads to Passover in which we celebrate the historic exodus from Egypt, the time that God alone, with no assistance, performed the miracle of redemption: this is the itaruta di-le'elah, the initiative from above. But the climax of the whole story comes with the splitting of the Red Sea. And here, contrary to our usual impressions, the greatest part of the story is the heroism of man -- specifically one man: Nachshon ben Aminadav, the prince of the tribe of Judah who was willing to abandon his life by stepping into the Red Sea, and through

this act of heroism brought on the miracle of the splitting of the sea. This is the itaruta di-le'tata in its highest form.

Thus, each of the two seasons contains both elements, but the emphasis in each is different. In Tishri we stress God's address to man, whereas in Nisan we emphasize man's approach to God.

Two terms may be used to differentiate between these two elements in the great human-divine dialogue. For the itaruta di-le'elah, the action by God towards man, our tradition uses the word nora, "awe", or "awesome". Where, however, <sup>it is</sup> man who begins this conversation, the itaruta di-le'tata, there our tradition uses gadol, "great". Indeed, it is a minor, a child, who reacts, whereas a gadol, a major or full-grown and mature man, acts -- without always waiting for the invitation from someone other than himself.

Hence, we find, that Tishri is distinguished by holidays that have become known as yamin noraim, which literally means, "the awesome days". Thus, on these days we recite the words, u-ve'khen ten pahdekha, we ask God to reveal His "fear" or "awesomeness". We turn to God and we declare, kadosh ata ve'nora shemekha, "holy art Thou, and awesome is Thy Name". When it is God who makes His presence known to man, then man becomes conscious of overpowering awe; a mere mortal, he shrivels into insignificance, as the presence of God overwhelms his intellect and reduces his reason to nothingness. The central concept of Yom Kippur, which speaks of God addressing man, is mehilah, forgiveness. Is this not an irrational

concept? Is it not unreasonable to say that one can undo the past? That is why the Greeks always spoke of fate, of the past inexorably determining the future, and were never able to understand the concept of repentance and forgiveness, of mehilah, God forgives, and this act indeed overwhelms man's puny intellect.

Nisan, however, is the season of gadol. It is during this time that we recall Jewish history which begins with Abraham. It is he who was told by the Almighty: ve'eskha le'goy gadol, "And I will make thee into a great nation" - or, rather, a nation of greatness. We repeat, in the Haggadah, the promise of God to Abraham that after our enslavement we shall leave Egypt bi'rekhush gadol, with great treasures -- or, rather, the treasure of gadlut, greatness. At the height of our exuberance at the Seder we thank God for His redemption, for all His love that He has shown us, for taking us out of the house of slavery, me'afelah le'or gadol, from darkness to great light -- or, rather, to the light of greatness, the illumination and enlightenment in which we can achieve gadlut.

Where man initiates the conversation with God, where mere mortals seek out the presence of the Infinite, that is an act of gadlut, genuine greatness. It requires the ability to overcome one's inertia in order to seek out God, and then -- even more -- the ability to overcome the frustration of often seeking Him and not finding Him. If one is a katan, the opposite of gadol, if one has a diminutive heart

and petty soul, then his disappointment will come quickly and he will declare, in the words of that blasphemous slogan that has gained currency in our pagan society, that "God is dead."

What does it mean to be a gadol? It means that in the midst of a society which in effect does not believe in God and which loudly trumpets its agnosticism, that despite the jeers and the ridicule and the mockery, we shall affirm our undying belief and cry out: ani maamin, "I believe!"

To be a gadol, means that we must, like our ancestors in Egypt before us, have the courage of our convictions to show our contempt for the contemporary pagan deities. Even as they slaughtered the god of the Egyptians, so must we be prepared to eschew with single-minded sincerity the modern idols of status and sex and science. Like our ancestors, we must have the courage to become iconoclasts! To be a gadol today means that in the midst of a disintegrating Jewish community, which has managed in our day to reap the foul harvest of decades of assimilation, we must be ready to marshall all the forces of authentic Yiddishkeit, we must be ready to fight to the depth and risk every unpopularity in order to perpetuate all that we hold dear and precious. It means that even when all the great secular organizations in our community are willing to assemble their mighty forces in order to frustrate the will of the Congress as long as they can manage to keep assistance away from our yeshivot and Day Schools, that we shall have no fear and use



whatever means we have at our command to foster and advance Jewish education. It means that even while organizing the sources and strength of those loyal to Judaism, we shall not ignore the community at large, even those very ones who seek to frustrate our ends, and we shall not abandon one single Jewish soul, for every Jew is precious to us. This is gadlut.

To be a gadol means to be able to overcome the greatest of all enemies -- oneself. It means the ability to vanquish our own smallness, to still our inner appetites, to silence the raging desires within us for more and more, to succeed in restraining our insatiable thirst for more power and more status. It is the ability to say to our own selves: dayenu, enough!

Both of these elements are important for us -- the itaruta di-le'elah and the itaruta di-le'tata, the symbols of Tishri and of Nisan. No wonder that our Rabbis recorded two opinions: one that the redemption of the future will take place in Tishri, and the other that it will take place in Nisan. Both are true!

When things go our way, we tend to become overconfident. That is why some Jews in Israel have deluded themselves into thinking that the State exists today only as a result of their own power and ability. As a result, they have developed a curious atheistic theology in which they maintain that Torah and mitzvot were meant only for the Jews of the Diaspora and that emancipated and liberated and independent citizens of a free state do not need it. At a time of this sort, more than

at any other time, we need the concept of nora, the awareness that it is God who transcends and overwhelms man. At such times, we must teach ourselves over and over again that man's accomplishments are not his own but his Creator's.

At other times we are ~~overwhelmed and~~ overcome by our difficulties, depressed by despair and deadening disappointments, we feel foiled by our frequent frustrations and the futility of all efforts. At a time of this sort, Shabbat Ha-gadol flings at us the great challenge to achieve the nes gadol; it is a summons to greatness. It reminds us that we are the goy gadol, the people of greatness, who have since the beginning of our history shown an inclination to the exercise of itaruta di-le'tata. Shabbat Ha-gadol implores us to remember that it is we who must build the synagogues, we who must construct the new yeshivot, we who must win ever more Jewish hearts to the great cause of Torah, and therefore we who will be privileged to be redeemed once again me'afelah le'or gadol, from darkness to great light and to the light of greatness.

Our vision encompasses both elements: the theme of nora, the awesomeness of Tishri, the itaruta di-le'elah, in which God initiates the dialogue with man even as a father teaches his son slowly and gradually; and the theme of gadol, the symbol of Nisan's greatness, the exercise of itaruta di-le'tata, in which man begins on the adventure of seeking out his God, even as sometimes it is the son who undertakes the journey of finding his father.



It is this vision which is given to us in those sublime and eloquent words with which we concluded today's Haftorah: Hineh ani sholeiah la-khem et Eliyahu ha-navi lifnei bo yom ha-shem -- Behold I shall send to you the prophet Elijah, the harbinger of the Messiah, before that great day of the Lord, the day of redemption. This shall be the day that is ha-gadol ve'ha-nora, both gadol and nora, great and awesome, reflecting the two themes of which we spoke. For this indeed is the day on which both the divine Father and his human sons will return to each other, each from his own starting point: ve'heshiv lev avot al banim ve'lev banim al avotam, "and He will cause the hearts of the fathers to return to the children, and the hearts of the children to their fathers." Amen.