

The land of Babylonia, what is today Iraq, from the Third to the Tenth or Eleventh Century of the Common Era, was the cradle of the great Oral Law of our people. During that time and in that particular place flourished the great Babylonian academies of Sura and Pumbedita, in which the Talmud was expounded and committed to writing, and in which the great Geonim, chiefs of the Yeshivot or academies, flourished and wrote. During this great and creative era of Jewish life, it was the custom to deliver lectures in Jewish law and thought on many specified occasions. Thus, on Sabbaths and holidays, lectures were delivered to the general public. During the weekdays, more profound and technical lectures were delivered to the scholars and students who gathered in the academies. But there was one lecture which was most outstanding of all those that were delivered during the year. This special occasion was distinguished by the fact that the Resh Galuta, Exilarch, the man who was the political chief of Babylonian Jewry, a sort of King of the Jews in exile, would himself, personally, deliver the lecture in front of the assembled people and in the presence of the Geonim and all the distinguished officials of Babylonian Jewry. This occasion, so prominent because of the personal participation of the Resh Galuta, was called the Rigla di-Resh Galuta, the Holiday of the Exilarch. And the Sabbath so chosen for this distinction of the special public lecture was Shabbat Lekh Lekha.

Why was it this particular Saturday, on which this particular portion was read, that was chosen as the Rigla di-Resh Galuta? The answer comes from an ancient and revered book in the Jewish tradition which gives us a profound insight into the Jewish conception of history. In the "Tana di-bei Eliyahu" we are told that the six thousand years of human history, is divided into three cycles of two thousand years each. The first is called

Tohu, Chaos, because during these two thousand years the spirit has not yet crystalized in the world, and the spiritual life of man is chaotic. The second cycle of two thousand years is called Torah, for during this time man begins to show receptivity to the word of God, and God himself becomes more accessible to mankind. The last two thousand years, during which we now live, is called Mashiach, or the days of the Messiah. During these days the forces of Torah and Tohu battle for supremacy, spirit and chaos are locked in a death grip, and upon the outcome depends the redemption of the history of mankind. Mashiach, or Messiah, will come when the struggle between Torah and Tohu is decided by the triumph of Torah.

When do these periods begin and end? Tohu begins, of course, with creation, at which time the world was Tohu va-Vohu, chaotic and void. The period of Mashiach ends at the end of the entire six thousand year period. But how about Torah? Here we are told that the great two thousand year cycle of Torah begins from the time that Abraham and Sarah leave Charan until the time of the founding of the great Babylonian academies by Rav in the Third Century of the Common Era. This is the period of the flowering of Torah, both written and oral, and the great development of Bible and Mishnah. Therefore, it is on this Sabbath that the Resh Galuta, the chief of Babylonian Jewry which was founded by Rav as the culmination and climax of two thousand years of Torah, preached on the special occasion of Lekh Lekha, when at the beginning of the Sedra we read of Abraham and Sarah leaving Charan, the beginning of the era of Torah.

What is of particular relevance to us, is why our tradition shows the seemingly insignificant incident of a man and his wife leaving the town of Charan and moving to a different town, as signifying the beginning of the

great two millennia of Torah. And the answer lies in the four words with which the Torah described this moving. Ve-ha-nefesh asher asu be-charan -- literally, this means, that Abraham and Sarah took with them not only their possessions, but also the "people" they had acquired in Charan, that is, the servants they had there gotten for themselves. However, tradition ascribes a much deeper meaning to that verse. And it tells us: Avraham megayer anashim, ve-Sarah megayeret nashim, that Abraham and Sarah had converted the souls of their fellow men in Charan to the belief in one God. Our tradition takes the word, nefesh, literally -- the soul. In other words, the era of Torah begins and the era of Tohu, or chaos, is brought to an end, only when the Abrahams and Sarahs are not satisfied with their private, prophetic visions, with their own obedience in Jewishness but are ready to leave the restricted circles of their own families in order to convince others, all of mankind, and to win the souls of their fellow men back to the one God. Ve-ha-nefesh asher asu be-charan -- when committed Jews strive for the winning of the soul of others, that is the beginning of Torah.

Friends, we live in the era of Mashiach -- the era in which the forces of Tohu and Torah are locked in a fateful struggle for supremacy in the world at large, within the Jewish community over the world, and in the hearts of individual men and women. Whether it will be Torah or Tohu which will prove triumphant -- depends upon us. It depends upon whether we shall emulate Abraham, and strive to set greater horizons about our religious visions, or whether we will be satisfied with our own observance, our own devoutness, our own piety, whilst ignoring all the rest of Israel and all the rest of mankind.

To put it more clearly: If the forces of Torah are to emerge victorious over the forces of chaos, we must decide to emulate only Abraham and not Noah.



For the question has been asked: Why was not Noah destined to become the father of the Jewish people. Is it not said about him, Noach ish tzaddik, tamim hayah be-dorotav -- that Noah was a pious man, righteous in his generation? And the answer is: Yes, he was pious and devout -- but only for himself and for his own small family. For when God informed him that he had found his contemporaries to be a degenerate and degrading lot, and that He would destroy them all in one great flood, Noah did not see fit to attempt to change the character of his contemporaries, but rather he built himself a little Ark and decided to ignore the rest of mankind whilst isolating himself in that tevah. Noah was pious all right but with a selfish piety. He was willing to isolate himself from all his fellow men, even if it required him surrounding himself with animals for a lengthy period. But how different was Abraham. He lived in Charan, about which our rabbis say that it was a place of charon -af -- a place of people at which the anger of God was kindled for they too were degenerates and people of moral depravity. Yet we nowhere read that Abraham and Sarah retired to a tevah, that they were willing to escape their religious responsibility toward their fellow men and lock themselves up in an Ark whilst condemning the rest of mankind to the waters of the deluge. Instead: Avraham megayer anashim, ve-Sarah megayeret nashim. Abraham and Sarah worked feverishly to win back the souls of men to their higher destiny and loftier station.

Ultimately, the willingness of a man to strive, to win back the nefesh of his fellow man, depends upon the strength of his own faith, the confidence he has that his convictions are true, that there is a God in the world, and that his neighbors have the spiritual capacity to be reawakened and to be responsive to the Lord of All Creation. Abraham became a megayer, a man

who strived to convince others of the correctness of his convictions, because he himself was ve-he'emin ba-shem -- a true and firm believer in God. And so he was willing to pit his confidence against the chaos of the pagan world. Noah, however, was no such strong person in his convictions. About Noah we read mi-ketanei emanah hayah -- he was small of faith, and therefore just interested in himself, satisfied with a world of Tohu, satisfied that all mankind remain enveloped in the dim twilight of chaos. In such a world there can be no Torah.

On this Shabbat Lekh Lakha, when we read of the beginning of the period of Torah, the Sabbath on which our ancestors in Babylonia celebrated the occasion because they read in the Torah of how the father of our people ushered in the dawn of Torah for mankind because they had sufficient confidence to reach out for the souls of others, on this Sabbath, we who are committed Orthodox Jews must determine that it is not enough to survive in self-contained little enclaves of observant Jews whilst neglecting the rest of Israel. Instead, we too must set as our goal ve-ha-nefesh asher asu be-charon -- the winning back of the souls of Israel to Torah. Never mind the problem of converting the Gentiles -- the question of whether we should actively proselytize amongst non-Jews is strictly academic, a moot and irrelevant question for our times. Our first problem must be how to convert those Jews who are still so terribly distant from the faintest inkling of what Torah requires of them. And this conversion of our fellow Jews, this winning back of their souls, requires that we strike out with a missionary spirit for the nefesh of modern Israel. Lest we do so, we stand accused of being what in Yiddish is known as a Tzaddick in Pelz -- a pious man in a fur coat. The great Chassidic teacher of Kotzk explained this as follows. If a man is cold there are two ways in which he can warm himself up. One way is to put on a pelz -- a fur coat, and thus

keep himself warm. But in that manner, only he benefits from the warmth, while the rest of the people about him remain cold. The second way is -- to build a fire, in which manner both he and everyone else will share in the warmth. A pious man who keeps his piety to himself, and does not allow anyone else to benefit from the spiritual warmth which he strives for, is a lower form of righteousness -- a Tzaddik in Pelz. The higher form of Tzaddik is the one who is willing to build a fire and share his piety and his convictions with his fellow men. Abraham built a fire in the world. Noah was a Tzaddik in Pelz. We Orthodox Jews in the modern world dare not follow Noah. Our entire historic destiny calls upon us to assert ourselves as proud children of Abraham.

It is in this connection that I beg your indulgence to speak for a few moments about the recent elections in the State of Israel. There is no doubt that the religious parties are of great importance. We would have wished that they had gained more adherents. We are happy that they at least retained their previous strength. There can be no doubt in the mind of any objective religious person that they are performing a significant function in the State of Israel. They are safeguarding the Sabbath, rabbinic supervision over divorce and marriage, and they are holding the line on the whole problem of Jewish identity. Yet in all honesty, we must acknowledge from the bottom of our hearts that what will bring modern Israelis back to God and assure the triumph of Torah over Tohu across the length and breadth of the land is not electoral campaigns but spiritual activity, not winning elections but winning souls. And somehow, deep within us the worm of doubt begins to turn and ask: "Is it not possible that despite all the positive good accomplished by religious political parties, that more damage is done to the cause of Torah by overemphasizing the identity and the affinity between religion and politics?" "Is it not possible that when religion begins to enclose itself in little political enclaves, that it

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thereby fails in its mission to reach out and win over the souls of the uncommitted majority?" We live in a critical age -- in an age when Torah and Tohu are pitched against each other in a fateful battle. At a time of this sort if we want Torah to win, we cannot afford to cuddle in the pelz of political warmth and security. We must build fires across the land, ignite the dead wood in the souls of lost Jews, kindle the light of Torah in alienated souls, spread warmth and the enlightenment of Torah in every Jewish heart. We must realize that Torah cannot triumph unless Orthodox Jews are willing to go down even into the most leftist Kibbutzim, to engage in an encounter of dialogue, even with young Marxists and young socialists; unless we are willing to write in a modern Hebrew idiom, to publish newspapers, magazines, books and periodicals that are on themes relevant to the lives of its citizens; unless we are willing to win people back by example and persuasion, to show them the true face of Orthodoxy, that we are not -- as our enemies claim -- reactionary. And how difficult it is for us to win over the souls of uncommitted Israelis, if this year alone some 1500 students were turned down by the Yeshivot of Israel because of lack of faith and lack of funds. Imagine if only a small fraction of the over one million pounds spent on the campaign by the religious parties were to be designated for the use of building new Yeshivot -- let us say, ten to twenty from Gan to Beersheba and even down into the southernmost reaches of the Negev. Is it not true that then there might not be a reason or a need for religious political parties? Or, if a fraction of this money were spent upon the great project of Yarchie Kallah -- serious adult education for all laymen -- as envisioned by the great head of the Yeshiva of Ponevezh. This is what we mean by ve-ha-nefesh asher asu be-charan -- by winning back Jewish souls. If we want Mashiach in an age of strife between Torah and Tohu -- we must decide immediately to emulate father Abraham. It is not absolutely necessary to sit

in the pelz, in that governmental Noah's Ark called the Cabinet. It is far more important that we build fires across the land and attract souls lost in the chaos of modern Charon. Our goal must be not votes but souls, not seats in the Knesset, but souls in the Bet ha-Knesset.

And what holds true for Israeli Jewry holds true for American Jewry. We must determine that our major objective should not be merely to maintain our political and economic and social integrity and inviolability by spending more and more on defense work and on battling anti-semitism. Far more important is to go out after the nefesh, the souls of American Jews, by more and more education, on all levels -- from elementary to post-graduate and adult.

And what holds true for American Jewry holds true for each and every individual Jew. Within each of us Torah and Tohu strive for supremacy. Within each of us the spirit and the void are locked in a death grip. The fateful outcome of this struggle depends upon our confidence and our own convictions that the Torah is a Torah of truth; our faith in the Ribbono shel Olam, our trust in the spiritual capacity of our fellow Jews.

If we have that confidence, in sufficient measure to address ourselves to the hearts and minds and souls of others, then we will, like Abraham of old, have contributed to the ascendancy of Torah and the ushering in of yemot ha-Mashiach, an age of universal justice, world peace, and everlasting blessedness.