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Of all the names that have been given to that period of history through which we are currently living, the most appropriate and descriptive is "the age of anxiety." Indeed, it is anxiety that most accurately describes the inner life of man in our era, his unceasing tension and the whole range of psychosomatic ills which symbolize that tense inner life. Anxiety has even been incorporated into philosophy by some thinkers of the French Existentialist school. It is the mood which dominates all of modern man and is his most characteristic emotion.

What, if anything, does Judaism have to say about this phenomenon? It is true, of course, that Judaism should not be understood as an elaborate prescription for "peace of mind." We, of course, do not conceive of religion as a "need" to be filled. And yet, I do not doubt for a moment that Judaism has a definite judgment upon this, our problem. First, because Judaism is good for man, even though that is not the reason we ought to accept it. And second, it can be shown that ultimately a good part of the emotional life of man is based upon his ethics, his spiritual character, and his religious conception.

The teaching of Judaism that is most relevant to the problem of modern man's anxiety is expressed in two words: Hishtavut ha-Nefesh -- equanimity, stability, keeping upon an even psychological and spiritual keel. This attitude of Hishtavut ha-Nefesh, of the constancy of personality, is eventually based upon a religious conception -- that of faith. If a man has faith, he will not be upset either by very good news or by very bad news, he will yield neither to the temptations of affluence nor to the threat of adversity -- for the same God is the source of both opposites. If he is a

success in his endeavors and receives compliments -- he will remain largely unimpressed with his own triumph. And if he is criticized until it hurts, he will remain largely unperturbed and unshaken in his faith.

This Jewish teaching was brilliantly expounded in his comments on the beginning of our Sedra by the late Rabbi Aaron Levin,* of blessed memory, the "Reszhe Rav," who was a great scholar, a great preacher and a senator in the Polish parliament. The Torah tells us at the very beginning of our portion that Sarah lived for 127 years, and then the Bible repeats: Shenai Chayei Sarah -- these are the years of the life of Sarah. Our rabbis wondered at this repetition and Rashi, quoting our sages, remarked: Ve-kulan shavin le-tovah -- all these years were equally for the good. What Rashi here meant is explained by the "Reszhe Rav" as Hishtavut ha-Nefesh -- the lesson of stability both of mind and of soul. Sarah's life had its ups and its downs, she reached high points and very low points, there were sharp changes of fortune. In her early youth she found herself uprooted from her home, wandering from town to town and city to city following her husband. When she came to Egypt she found that she was separated from her beloved husband, abducted by an immoral Egyptian potentate. Later, she rejoiced as she and her husband attained great wealth, and finally the climax of her good fortune when God awarded her with a son in her old age, fully realizing the ambitions of a lifetime. And yet, despite these vicissitudes, Ve-kulan shavin le-tovah -- her basic character of goodness remained unchanged throughout. Her character was unaffected. She became neither arrogant as a result of her success and triumph, nor despairing and crushed by her failure. She knew and practiced the Jewish quality of Hishtavut ha-Nefesh.

Is not this a message that we moderns ought to seek out and observe in our own lives? Far too many people in our modern day and age have lost this capacity for psycho-spiritual stability. In conditions of adversity they become demoralized, confused and perplexed. They lose faith and blame their defeat upon God. And in times of prosperity, they turn arrogant, lose perspective, regard themselves as "self-made," and decide that they no longer need faith. Perhaps that is why religion suffers most during times of great stress, when circumstances are either very good or very bad. Both war and famine, and conversely economic prosperity and well being, cause attrition in the ranks of religious people. How right, then, was Rabbenu Tam, the grandson of Rashi, who wrote in his "Sefer ha-Yashar" that true character comes to the fore only in times of crisis and violent change, whether the change is to the good or to the bad. For crisis is the litmus paper of character, and change in fortune is the barometer of a man's soul.

The rabbis of the Talmud saw this quality of Hishtavut ha-Nefesh as based upon and as a symbol of the final and greatest of the three requirements of man by God as enumerated in the famous verse by the prophet, Micah: "It has been told to thee, o man, what is good and what the Lord dost require of thee -- but to do justice and to love mercy, ve-hatzneia likhet im elokekha -- to walk humbly with thy God." And commenting upon that last requirement, to walk humbly with God, the Talmud tells us: ve-hatzneia likhet im elokekha -- zeh hakhnassat kallah u-levayat ha-met. "To walk humbly" refers to the two opposite occasions of accompanying the bride to the bridal canopy and accompanying the deceased on his last trip -- the funeral. What our sages meant to tell us is that if you want to know if a man is indeed devout, if he is indeed a religious personality, if he "walks humbly with his God" -- then

test his reaction, his attitude, and his strength of character at these crucial times of either great happiness or great grief, of great joy or great tragedy. To walk humbly with God means to achieve, on the basis of a religious outlook and profound faith, the quality of Hishtavut ha-Nefesh. It means the inner stability that is retained even when life moves us back and forth across the spectrum of experience from the deep blue of misery and depression to the bright red of cheery optimism, joy and happiness. That is why at the occasion of a death, our tradition teaches us that we must mourn and weep, for otherwise, in the words of Maimonides, harei zeh akhgar -- we are merciless and hardened. But at the same time, tradition teaches us that we must not overdo our mourning, we must not prolong it more than is necessary, for otherwise, again in the words of Maimonides, harei zeh tipesh -- it is a sign of spiritual foolishness, a symbol and symptom of the lack of faith in God and a lack of hope in the future. That is why, too, at the occasion of a wedding, we break the glass, zekher le-churban -- in memory of the destruction of the temple. At sad occasions we introduce a note of optimism, and at happy occasions a sobering note reminiscent of life's harshness. In this manner, we attempt to attain Hishtavut ha-Nefesh -- of not being impressed by triumph and not being perturbed by defeat. And therefore, for the same reason, on Passover, the great holiday of liberation, we eat the Maror -- the symbol of bitterness, whilst on Tisha B'av, the day of great tragedy, we do not recite the Tachanun prayer for the Halakhah regards even this great day of tragedy as Moed -- a sort of holiday.

No wonder a great Hassidic teacher taught that every man must have two pockets; in one he must carry a note upon which is written the words of Abraham, ve-anokhi afar v'efer -- behold I am only dust and ashes, and in

So if there is anyone here this morning who has had fortune smile at him, who has achieved a degree of satisfaction and success -- let him not forget that ultimately man is only dust and ashes; let him remember to walk humbly with his God. And conversely, if there is anyone here amongst us this morning who somehow suffers silently, whose heart is wounded with grief, and whose soul bears some painful sores, who perhaps has received criticism that hurts, let him not yield to self pity or despair, let him not lose faith and submit to moodiness and especially not to the feeling of his own worthlessness. Let him remember that although he may walk "humbly", nevertheless every man and woman still walks "with thy God" -- and what greater consolation is there for any human being than to know that he has the dignity of having been created in the Image of God, and the hope that there is a God above who listens to the heartbeat of every human being as a father listens to the pleading voice of a child.

And as this is true of us as individuals, certainly ought this to be true of us as Jews. How beautifully our rabbis describe an incident which, in its inner meaning, refers to this quality of Hishtavut ha-Nefesh. רבי צוקינד היה צורף והצביון ממש, זיך אצורין, ומה ומה אסור למאן על קדש מציות, ואלו גמ' אסור לעיל גמ' אסור לעיל אסור קדש אסור (ומאן על קדש מציות)

Rabbi Akiba was preaching and found himself beset by an audience which was falling asleep -- an occurrence not strange in the life of a speaker, and an occupational risk generally anticipated by any preacher. And so he tried to awaken them and told them: How comes it that Queen Esther ruled over 127 countries? The answer is that she was the great-granddaughter of Sarah, who lived 127 years. I think our rabbis had a special message in this relation

and in this narrative. Rabbi Akiba lived at a time when his people were in danger of falling asleep. This was the era of the Hadrianic persecutions, when the Roman Empire forbade the study of Torah and the practice of Jewish observances. The people had only recently suffered the national catastrophe of the destruction of the temple and the loss of independence. And so, our ancestors at that time were about to fall asleep, to yield to despair and to hopelessness and to a feeling of their own worthlessness. At a time of this sort the great Rabbi Akiba tried to wake them up, he tried to stir them into activity, he tried to get them out of the sullen mood in which they found themselves. It was he, Rabbi Akiba, who was the patron and the organizer of the Bar Kochba, rebellion against the might of imperial Rome and so he tried to urge them into a happier frame of mind and a more activist approach by reminding them that they were the descendants of Esther, and that it was Esther who herself went through a great number of vicissitudes in her life. When she was young, very young, she was already an orphan -- reared by an uncle much older in years, lacking the warmth of maternal love and paternal concern. Then suddenly she found herself with the crown of Persia upon her head, the absolute monarch of 127 lands. Shortly thereafter she was faced with the catastrophic possibility of her own and her people's destruction by Haman, only to be saved at the last moment by an opposite edict by the king and the great triumph of Israel which resulted in the celebration of Purim. And yet, during all these extreme changes of fortune, our rabbis told us: Hi Esther: hi Esther mi-she-higiah le-malkhut, hi Esther ad she-lo higiah le-malkhut -- she remained the same Esther; the same sweet, gentle, modest young woman who was only an orphan in her uncle's home, remained with her good character when she was the Queen of Persia of 127 lands.

She did not change. She had acquired the quality of Hishtavut ha-Nefesh, of psychological, spiritual and emotional stability. And where did she get this quality from? -- Of course, from Sarah who was a model of such behavior.

Would that we, descendants of these strong and firm characters, would learn this marvelous faith. Like Sarah, like Esther, like Rabbi Akiba -- we must learn to take life in stride without at any time upsetting the applecart of character. We must never be insensitive. But we must be strong and powerful of faith. We must neither yield to wild abandon or relaxation of effort when we behold the victory and triumph of the State of Israel, nor must we submit to defeatism and pessimism as we ponder the bitter fate of Russian Jewry. We must not turn giddy with delight when some Gentile scholar or politician praises us, nor must we ever submit to chagrin and turn apologetic when some Gentile criticizes either our people or our faith.

Ashreinu mah tov chelkenu, u-mah naim goralenu, u-mah yafah yerushatenu.

Happy are we not only that our lot is tov -- good, ethical, true; but that in addition, our destiny is pleasant -- it is satisfying and makes for a healthy mind and a healthy soul, and above all -- happy are we that our heritage, the great Jewish tradition is so beautiful.