

"NO FAULT THEOLOGY"

Psychologists tell us, and common experience confirms this, that our use of language frequently betrays our fears, our biases, our hidden sensitivities.

For example, last Saturday my sermon dealt with the theme of death and dying. In the middle of my talk, I suddenly realized that I was elaborately avoiding mention of the words "death" and "dying." Instead, I was using circumlocutions and epithets such as "demise," "departure," "passing on," "the end of life" -- all kinds of substitutes and disguises, verbal evasions and semantic masks, which are part of the self-defense against the superstition that most of us share, namely, that pronouncing a word creates a reality or at least brings it closer.

All this set me thinking and moved me on to a bit of self-analysis. I discovered one thing which is rather important: when I address groups other than Orthodox groups such as at The Center or Yeshiva University, audiences which are secular and non-Orthodox and generally possessed of intellectual pretensions, I tend to use such terms as "anti-social," "disintegrative," "of questionable ethics," "violative of accepted norms of conduct," "counterproductive to survivalist values"... All of this, when what I really meant to say was: "sin!"

Why all these verbal acrobatics? Because subconsciously I am defensive. I know that it is a sign of "liberal" sophistication that sin no longer exists. Since the turn of the century, a new code of morality and a new social philosophy have combined to erode our attitude to wrong-doing. "Bad," "wicked," "evil," "immoral," and "sinful," are all old-fashioned, quaint, archaic, and atavistic. They play approximately the same role in sophisticated society today, that obscenities once did in polite societies...

The sociologists have given us cultural relativism. The philosophers have taught us about value-free human behavior. The ethicists have preached to us the doctrine of situational morality. The psychologists have warned us of danger to the psyche of excessive guilt. Educationists and political scientists have repeatedly told us that values are a personal matter.

And so, we ordinary people have concluded that values don't exist; if they do, it all depends on the circumstances; and even then, it is always a personal opinion. Hence, the battle-cry of the liberated pseudo-intellectual: "Never be judgmental!"

The situation is so pervasive that even teachers of religion, who should have at least some courage, are afraid to speak out about sin, or even to articulate the word. After all, we rabbis and religious teachers too have to be "with it"... Hence, my unconscious attempts to use verbal disguises and substitutes for "sin."

The distinguished psychologist, social thinker, and philosopher, Dr. Karl Meninger, in his latest book, Whatever Became of Sin?, has termed this new sinless religious orientation, "No-Fault Theology" -- equivalent to the no-fault casualty insurance! It is a theology which is afraid to speak of fault or sin.

Most certainly, Dr. Meninger is right. A "no-fault theology" is one comprised of a God who does not blame, a faith that does not judge, and a scale of values that enshrines ~~therapy~~ ^{therapy} ~~mental health~~ in place of holiness, peace-of-mind instead of righteousness, indulgence rather than restraint.

And so we have our present sad state of affairs: a grab-bag of "dirty tricks" and corrupt politics, in which the typical Watergate excuse is, "everybody is doing it" -- or, in a variation, "everybody has been doing it all along"; of exhibitionistic sexual depravity whose advocates angrily demand, "who are you to judge?"; of crimes of violence in the streets, from mugging to murders, for which we persistently blame society and the conditions that it imposes, and thus subtly or not so subtly absolve individual criminals of all guilt, blame, and sin. We are such passionate partisans of a good idea -- that society must rid itself the economic and social injustices that breed crime -- that we have abused it beyond all recognition. It is now society which is guilty, and the criminal who is innocent. And usually, the victim is recognized as part of society, and therefore more at fault than the one who attacks him...

A distinguished American thinker, Vermont Royster ("The Public Morality: Afterthoughts on Watergate," American Scholar, Spring 1974) has written the following:

Somewhere along the line there has been an erosion of our sense of right and wrong; that is, we have lost our belief that certain actions are wrong simply because they are wrong, whether or not they violate civil statutes. The preachment has been that morality is relative, that ethics depend upon the

situation. It is not wrong to steal, to commit adultery, to bear false witness, in and of themselves -- it all depends. If bearing false witness results in convicting a man who is in fact guilty, then is not justice done in the end? If crime is done from sincere motives or with good provocation, should we not absolve it? It is not that we do not live up to professed moral values; the latter-day concept is that there are no fixed, permanent moral values for anyone to profess.

Were I a theologian I would say that we have lost our sense of sin, that we no longer believe in the existence of evil. If some men pour gasoline on a woman passing by, we must not judge the act evil, however much we deplore it. We must consider what life circumstances led to this behavior and the worthiness of the social protest their act proclaims.

Indeed, of late there has been a tendency to dismiss crime as merely the political gesture of radicalized victims of our unjust society. Hence, politically, psychologically, and theologically, we have banished sin.

But this is a pernicious doctrine. Because there is sin, immorality, evil. Merely banishing the word does not undo the fact. The late Professor Robert Oppenheimer, father of the A-bomb, said that, "in a very real sense, we [the atomic physicists] have come to know sin." And the whole contemporary world which gave birth to the Holocaust, conceived it in sin -- and its denials and protestations of innocence are hypocritical.

I hope that Meninger is right when he finds signs that the word "sin" is returning to public acceptance. Why is it so important that this be so? Because if one knows that he can sin, there is an assumption of responsibility. People who never sin are people who are irresponsible. One ^{who} has abandoned the idea that he counts in the world, never [^]sins. Conversely, one who can fall into sin, is one who knows that the individual is not insignificant, that his efforts are not futile, that he can do

something about his life and his destiny.

Why do I mention such matters on this lovely festival of Sukkot? Because I find the idea that we have been discussing implicit in a Midrash on Sukkot that is deceptively charming. On the verse, "and you shall take for yourselves on the first day" of the festival the Lulav and Etrog, Midrash Tanhuma (Emor, 22) says the following:

(כב) וּלְקַחְתֶּם לָכֶם בַּיּוֹם הָרִאשׁוֹן. וְכִי רִאשׁוֹן הוּא וְהָלֹא מִ"ו יוֹם הוּא וְאֵת אִמְרַת בַּיּוֹם הָרִאשׁוֹן. אֵלֹא רִאשׁוֹן הוּא לְחֻשְׁבוֹן עוֹנוֹת. רַבִּי מִנְי וְרַבִּי יְהוֹשֻעַ דְּסַבְנִין בִּשְׁם רַבִּי לוי אֵת מִלֵּה"ב לַמְּדִינָה שֶׁהִיָּתָה חַיִּיבָת לְיוֹסֵף דְּמֶלֶךְ וְהָיָה הַמֶּלֶךְ מְשַׁלֵּחַ לְנִבְוֹתָהּ. וְלֹא הָיְתָה נֹתֶנֶת שְׂחִיָּה שְׂמֵר גְּדוּלָּה. כִּי פֶעַם הָרִאשׁוֹן וּפְעַם שֵׁנִי הָיָה מְשַׁלֵּחַ לְנִבְוֹתָהּ וְלֹא הָיוּ נֹתֵנִין מִה עֲשֵׂה הַמֶּלֶךְ אִמְרַת דְּבִנֵּי פִלְמָרְיָן שְׁלוֹ עֲמֵרוֹ וְגַלְדָּה עֲלֵיהֶם. עַד שֶׁהָן הוֹדִיכִין כְּמוֹ עֲשֵׂי כִילִין שִׁמְעוּ בְּנֵי הַמְּדִינָה מִה עָשׂוּ. הִתְחִילוּ גְדוּלֵי הַמְּדִינָה יוֹצֵאִין לִפְנֵימִי שֶׁל מֶלֶךְ. אִמְרַת לָהֶם מִי אַתָּם. אָמְרוּ לוֹ בְּנֵי הַמְּדִינָה פְּלוֹנִית אֲנִי שֶׁשְּׁלַחְתָּ לְנִבְוֹתֵינוּ. אִמְרַת לָהֶם. וְמִה אַתָּם מְבַקְשִׁין. אִמְרוּ לוֹ בְּבִקְשָׁה מֶמֶךְ עֲשֵׂה עִמָּנוּ חֶסֶד שְׂאִין לָנוּ מִה לִיתֵן אִמְרַת לָהֶם בְּשִׁבְלִיכֶם אֲנִי מְנִיחַ לָכֶם מַחְצָה. עַד שֶׁהָיָה בְּרִיּוֹנֵי הַמְּדִינָה אֵף הֵן קִרְמוּ אוֹתוֹ כְּמוֹה' מִלִּין. אִמְרַת לָהֶם וְמִי אַתָּם. אִמְרוּ לוֹ בְּנֵי הַמְּדִינָה פְּלוֹנִית שֶׁשְּׁלַחְתָּ לְנִבְוֹת וְאִין לָנוּ כֹּחַ לַעֲשׂוֹת אֵלֹא בְּבִקְשָׁה מֶמֶךְ שֶׁתִּרְחַם עֲלֵינוּ. אִמְרַת לָהֶם כִּבְר הַנְּתִיבִי מַחְצָה וּבְשִׁבְלִיכֶם אֲנִי מְנִיחַ מַחְצָה עַל מַחְצָה. עַד שֶׁהָיָה כֹּהֵל יִצְאֹו כָּל בְּנֵי הַמְּדִינָה אֵלָיו גְּדוּלִים וְקִטְנִים. אִמְרַת לָהֶם מִה אַתָּם מְבַקְשִׁים. אִמְרוּ לוֹ אֲדוֹנֵנוּ הַמֶּלֶךְ אִין לָנוּ כֹּחַ לִיתֵן מִה שְׂאֵנוּ חַיִּיבִים לָךְ. אִמְרַת לָהֶם כִּבְר הַנְּתִיבִי מַחְצָה וּמַחְצָה עַל מַחְצָה וּבְשִׁבְלִיכֶם אֲנִי מְנִיחַ הַכֹּל. אֵלֹא מִכָּאן וְאִיךָ רִאשׁוֹן חֻשְׁבוֹן הוּא. הַמֶּלֶךְ וְהַמֶּלֶךְ מִלְכֵי הַמְּלָכִים הִקְבִּ"ה יִתְבָּרַךְ וְיִתְבָּרַךְ שְׁמוֹ בְּנֵי הַמְּדִינָה אֵלֹו יִשְׂרָאֵל שֶׁהֵם מְסַגְלִין עוֹנוֹת כָּל יְמֵי הַשָּׁנָה מִה הִקְבִּ"ה עוֹשֶׂה אוֹמֵר לָהֶם עָשׂוּ תְּשׁוּבָה מִרְ"ה. וְהֵם נִכְנָסִין וְכֹאִין בִּי"ה וּמִתְעַנִּין בּוֹ וְעוֹשִׂין תְּשׁוּבָה וְהִקְבִּ"ה מוֹחֵל לָהֶם. וְכֵן הֵם עוֹשִׂין עֵרֶב רָ"ה גְדוּלֵי הָרֹדֶף מִתְעַנִּין וְהִקְבִּ"ה מוֹחֵל לָהֶם שְׁלֹשׁ מַעֲוֹתֵיהֶם. וּמִרְאֵשׁ הַשָּׁנָה וְעַד יוֹם הַכְּפוּרִים יִחְדְּרִים מִתְעַנִּים וְהִקְבִּ"ה מוֹחֵל שְׁלֹשׁ מַעֲוֹתֵיהֶם. וּבַיּוֹם הַכְּפוּרִים כָּל יִשְׂרָאֵל מִתְעַנִּין וּמְבַקְשִׁין רַחֲמִים אֲנָשִׁים וְנָשִׁים וְטָף וְהִקְבִּ"ה מוֹחֵל לָהֶם אֵת הַכֵּץ דְּכָתִיב (וַיִּקְרָא מוֹ) כִּי בַיּוֹם הַזֶּה יִכְפֹּר עֲלֵיכֶם וְגו'. מִה יִשְׂרָאֵל עוֹשִׂין נִמְלִין לְדַבְּרֵיהֶן בִּי"ט רִאשׁוֹן שֶׁל חֹג וּמַהֲלִים וּמִקְלָסִים לִפְנֵי הִקְבִּ"ה וְהִקְבִּ"ה מִתְרַצָּה לָהֶם וּמוֹחֵל לָהֶם וְאוֹמֵר לָהֶם הִרִי וְיִתְרַחֵם לָכֶם אֵת כָּל עֲוֹנוֹתֵיכֶם הָרִאשׁוֹנוֹת. אֲבָל מִעֲבֹשֵׁי הוּא רִאשׁוֹן חֻשְׁבוֹן. לִכְךָ כָּתִיב וּלְקַחְתֶּם לָכֶם בַּיּוֹם הָרִאשׁוֹן חֻשְׁבוֹן עוֹנוֹת

Why does it say, "the first day?" Should it not say, "on the fifteenth day" (that is, the 15th day of the month of Tishri)? However, that means on the first day of the calculation of sins.

To what may this be compared? To a province which owed a large tax bill to the king, who kept on sending demands that it be paid. The province did not pay, because the amount was very large. So the king sent messages to sue for the money once and twice, and they did not give it. What did the king do? He said to the members of his palace, "rise, and let us go against them." When they were about ten miles on their journey, the people of the province heard about it. What did they do? The most eminent members of the province went out to greet the king. When he saw them, he said to

them, "who are you?" They answered, "we are citizens of the province to which you sent demands that it pay." Said he to them, "and what do you request?" And they said, "we beg of you, exercise kindness and compassion towards us, for we do not have enough to give you." Said he to them, "for your sake, I will waive half of the amount." When they left, and the king's procession had advanced another five miles, the middle class of the province sent a delegation to greet the king. He said to them, "and who are you?" They answered, "we are from the province to which you have sent a demand that it pay; and we do not have the strength to abide by your command, but we beg of you to have pity on us." Said he to them, "I have already waived half, but in your honor I will waive half of what remains." Shortly thereafter, the entire population of the province, both great and small, came out to greet the king. Said he to them, "what do you wish?" Said they to him, "Our Lord the king, we do not have the power to give what we owe you." Said he to them, "I have already waived half, and half of the remainder, but for your sake I will forgo the entire amount. However, from now on begins a new account."

The king (in the parable) is the King of Kings, the Holy One, blessed He; the citizens of the province are Israel, who accumulate sins all the days of the year. What does the Holy One do? He says to them, "start repenting, beginning with Rosh Hashanah." On the eve of Rosh Hashanah, the most eminent people of the generation fast and repent, and the Holy One forgives a third of our sins. From Rosh Hashanah to Yom Kippur, (middle level) individuals fast and repent, and the Holy One forgives another third of the sins. But on Yom Kippur, all of Israel -- men, women, and children -- fast and beg

mercy, and the Holy One forgives us all our sins.... What does Israel do? They take their lulavim on the first day of Sukkot and pray and extol the Holy One, and the Holy One is pleased with them and forgives them and He says to them, "behold, I have forgiven you all your sins; but from now on, there begins a new account."

Therefore it is written, "and you shall take for yourselves the first day" -- the first day for the new account (or: calculation) of sins.

Now that is unquestionably a beautiful Midrash, because of the very simplicity of the parable itself. However, it has always bothered me. Why does it refer to ליל חמשה עשר and account or calculation of sins; why not simply ליל חמשה עשר, the first day that sins count? Furthermore, I have always been disturbed by one question: if the king is truly gracious, why does he not declare that no more taxes will be levied in the future, as well as dismissing the back taxes? Finally, I have always felt annoyed at the way this Midrash stigmatizes such a happy and beautiful holiday as Sukkot with the burden of being ליל חמשה עשר, the first day for the account of sins! Why wish this on Sukkot? And why wait the five days between Yom Kippur and Sukkot to declare specifically Sukkot as the first day of the new account of sins?

But in the light of what we said earlier, I believe that we may understand the true intent of the Midrash. What the Midrash is saying in this parable is precisely a commentary and an insight on the question of sin.

The king dare not forgo any future taxes, because citizens who pay no taxes have no sense of responsibility, and then the king is no king and the state is no state and the citizens are no citizens! Similarly, humans without duty and responsibility, a God who does not demand, a religion that does not give a bad conscience, a society that does not summon -- are all meaningless.

That is why the Midrash uses the term ליל חמשה עשר the "account of sins." The Midrash is not interested in individual sins, few or many. Its primary concern is the concept of sin as a major element in the human psyche and in the divine-human encounter. God can forgive sins and does, even as the king forgoes taxes. But the ליל חמשה עשר, the "account," the knowledge that even with a clean slate for the past, man remains responsible for his actions -- that remains both viable and pertinent.

And it is specifically Sukkot, precisely this festival of *וְיָנִים* (beauty and majesty), this *יָנִים* (the time of our happiness), that is appropriate to emphasize *אין פלגין פלגין*, the importance of the concept of sin! For unless you acknowledge the existence of sin, there is no responsibility. Unless you recognize and avoid the reality of the ugly, there is nothing that is beautiful. Unless you identify and battle the ignoble, there is nothing that is noble or valuable in life. Unless you know that something can go wrong, there is nothing that is right.

The contemporary world has largely banished the concept of the word "sin," as a reaction to a Puritan obsession with sin and guilt. Unquestionably, the over-emphasis on sin and guilt were damaging not only from a mental-health point of view, but even from a purely spiritual point of view. But the error of our contemporary world lay in the liberal over-reaction to this excessive severity, in an ideological and psychological over-kill which destroyed the idea of sin, and with it the feeling of personal responsibility and moral accountability.

Hence, the beauty of the pattern evident in the Midrash. There is no insistence upon crushing guilt. The king responds to the request of his subjects and waives the taxes. The divine King, on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, pardons the sins of his creatures. If there were no such dismissal of the taxes -- no pardon of sins -- the citizens would rebel, the subjects would pay no more taxes; man would then throw off all concepts of right and wrong, good and evil, moral and immoral, *אין פלגין פלגין*, as the only way of retaining his sanity and mental balance.

But the king, who canceled the bill, did not forgo future taxes. The divine King forgives on Yom Kippur, but he does not give carte blanche to man's sinful nature.

Sukkot initiates *אין פלגין פלגין*, the new account of sins.

Thus, Sukkot is for the Midrash the symbol of Judaism's middle road between obsessive guilt, crushing blame, and dooming sin on the one hand, and, on the other, amoral relativism, the end of all values, and massive ir-responsibility.

No wonder the Midrash concludes with the comment that Israel's response is to take the lulav, symbol of Sukkot, and praise the Holy One!

"Happy are we! How good is our lot, how pleasant our destiny, how beautiful our heritage!"