

### "ATTITUDES TO LIFE"

This Shabbat has been set aside by The Jewish Center in honor of its חברה קדישא (Hevra Kadisha), its "Holy Society," those men and women who prepare the body for its return to earth after the soul has been returned to God.

The work of the Hevra Kadisha is on the highest level of Jewish morality and nobility. Like every other superlative ethical performance, it is considered imitatio Dei, the imitation of God, the fulfillment of the commandment of

והלכת בדרכיו , "and thou shalt walk in His ways." Thus, when Moses died, it was God Himself who cared for the body and who occupied Himself with the burial of Moses:

היה מתעסק בקבורתו של משה. Therefore it behooves men to follow the example of the Creator and occupy themselves with the care of the dying and the dead.

This Shabbat in honor of Hevra Kadisha offers an occasion to examine the Jewish attitude to death. There was a time when this would have been extremely difficult from the pulpit. Once upon a time, death was effectively denied in Western society, and the unpleasant reality was disguised in many ways -- behind the antiseptic atmosphere of the well-appointed funeral parlour, under the artificial green carpets in the pretty and manicured cemeteries, behind expensive coffins, and in the inhibited emotions, where the mourners dare not shed a tear lest the defenses of all others be broken. In many ways, the attitude to death was parallel to the Victorian attitude to sexuality, with people acting as if it did not exist and could be effectively denied. Today, however, a complete turnabout has occurred. Death is not only an accepted topic for conversation amongst young people but -- again following the analogy of sex -- the frankness has been overdone to the point of hypersaturation and obsessiveness. It is said, on the basis of reports from various universities, that the study of death and dying (what is called "thanatology") is the most over-subscribed course on campuses throughout this country.

At the very outset, let it be said that life and death cannot be studied in isolation from each other. Life teaches us about death, and death teaches us about life. Both are universal concerns common to all men. It is appropriate, therefore, to quote in this regard two non-Jews who were both statesmen and sensitive spiritual thinkers, one an ancient Oriental and the other a modern Scandanavian.

Of Confucius, the ancient Chinese philosopher, we are told in The Analects that "When Tzu-lu asked about death, he was told: (by Confucius) 'you do not yet understand life; how can you understand death?'" In other words, it is life which teaches about death. And Dag Hammarskjöld wrote in his Diary, "In the last analysis, it is our conception of death which decides our answers to all the questions that life puts to us." He is telling us that it is death which teaches us about life.

Both are wise statements. Yet I prefer to both of them the words of the great Hasidic teacher, Rabbi Simcha Bunim of Pershis'cha who, when he was on his deathbed, heard his wife weeping. He turned to her and said, "Why do you weep? All my life has been given to me merely that I might learn to die."

After searching through the sources of the Jewish tradition, what may we cull from them as the general attitude of Judaism to death? I believe there are two major principles that define the limits of this attitude. First, Judaism takes a negative attitude to death. It does not regard death as liberation from the torment of life and release from existential anguish, as the welcome entrée into the bliss of heaven. It regards death as an evil. Second, Judaism advocates an accepting attitude to death. It discourages any exaggerated fear, any revulsion to the phenomenon of death.

It is negative because it considers death as the end of creative and spiritual living. Only in life can we be achievers, can we accomplish anything. But *בת פטור מן המצוות*; once a person is dead, he is released from observing the commandments, he is free of any moral obligations, and there is no longer any possibility of ethical or other creativity. The attitude of Judaism is accepting, because from an ultimate perspective *עולם הזה פרוזדור לעולם הבא*, this world is but a vestibule to the world-to-come, as the Rabbis put it. Because this world is only a means to attain the ultimate significance of the world-to-come, its temporariness and its ephemerality is bearable, and while fear may be normal, never must there be terror.

That the attitude to death is accepting is evident from David's words in the Psalms:

*גם כי אילך בגיא צלמות לא אירא רע כי אתה עמדי*  
 "though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death I shall fear no evil, for Thou art with me." The Jew knows, as the Sages taught in Avot, that *על ברחק אתה חיוב נרחק אתה מת*, you are forced to live and you are forced to die. Neither death nor life need receive our sanction, and therefore one is as natural as the other.

So very much of the Jewish law and tradition concerning death emphasizes these two elements. Thus, a human corpse is regarded as the major source of ritual impurity (אבר מן החיה), confirming Judaism's judgment that death is an evil. Yet its acceptance of death as a natural cessation of life is evident from the recitation of the צידוק הדין, the passages recited at the funeral in which the mourners justify and accept the divine decree.

Each of these elements, the negative and the accepting, strikes different notes, but they are not contradictory. Indeed, the Jewish abhorrence of death not only does not lead to fear, but it leads to a positive orientation toward life itself. Thus, the Rabbis taught us that one of the ways of achieving teshuvah (repentance) is יזכיר לו יום הכיתה, to meditate upon the day of death. When a man considers that life must come to an end, that his stay on earth is not indefinite, then he will use every day, every hour, creatively and constructively. Death thus becomes an inspiration to a fuller life. When a Hasid asked the Belzer Rebbe to teach him how to die like a Jew, the Rebbe replied, "Your request is wrong. It sounds too much like the degenerate prophet Balaam who said תמות נפשי איתך ישרים, 'let my soul die the death of the righteous.' Desire, rather, to live like a good Jew, and as a consequence you will die like a good Jew."

(This same polarity is evident in the Halakha's formulation of the laws of mourning. The Halakha prescribes a set pattern for deep mourning in the beginning and gradual alleviation leading to the complete rehabilitation of the mourner to a normal life. The Talmud, in Moed Katan, warns the mourner against going to excess in his grief, and cautions him that whoever overdoes his mourning על את אחר הוא בוכה, is preparing himself to weep over yet another death. But when this statement is codified by Maimonides in his laws of mourning (Hil. Evel 13:11), he reformulates this and places it in the context of two parameters that define all the laws of mourning:

המתקשה על את יותר מדי הרי זה טיפול, one who is extravagant in his grief is a fool; and one who does not mourn adequately for a deceased relative, fulfilling the minimum halakhic requirements, is אכזרי, merciless or pitiless. In other words, in expressing mourning, one must practice moderation and go to neither one extreme nor the other, neither to foolishness nor to heartlessness. The avoidance of "foolishness" is an expression of אמונה or faith; and the avoidance of "heartlessness" is an expression of רגל, human feeling and emotion. I believe that what Maimonides is telling us is that, from a purely religious point of view, faith should sustain a man

so that he recognizes the inevitability of death and the ascent of the soul to a better and nobler plane of existence, and therefore not mourn at all. But the consideration of the Halakhah for human emotion and tenderness requires that there be some expression of grief and bereavement. The Halakhah of mourning is a reconcillation of both demands, of metaphysical faith and of human emotions. The element of *אמונה* or emotion is the expression of the Halakhah's negative attitude to death, and its emphasis on *אמונה* or faith is a reflection its fundamental accepting attitude to death.)

Such, I believe, is the general attitude of Judaism towards the phenomenon of death. And if there is one institution that embodies it and reflects it, it is -- the Hevra Kadisha. Three things should be said about the significance and work of the Hevra Kadisha.

First, the members of the Holy Society have learned to overcome their initial squeamishness, and thus replace exaggerated fear and terror and revulsion with a healthy respect for the deceased. Their conduct is always such that it evinces respect for the body as that which was once the home of the *נשמה* (soul), of a human personality, and hence deserving of consideration and reverence.

In our Sidra, we read of the punishments predicted by the Torah in the wake of national disobedience: *והשימתי את מקדשיכם*, "and I will desolate your sanctuaries." The Talmud (Meg. 28a) records:

*אמר ר' יהודה אעפ"י שחרב אין מספידין בתוכו ואין מפשינים בתוכו חבלים... ואין עושין אותו קונדריא, שנא' והשימתי את מקדשיכם, קדושתן אף כשהן שומעין*

R. Judah said: we learn from this verse that a synagogue, even though it be in ruins, retains its original sanctity. (Just as in a synagogue which is in use, so in a synagogue that has been devastated) one may not use it as a funeral chapel, one may not use it for a secular or profane activities, one may not take a shortcut through the precincts of the synagogue (thus acting irreverently towards it). We know this because it is written, "and I shall desolate your sanctuaries." [According to the author of *רמב"ם*, the verse yields this lesson because the Torah should have written not

*והשימתי את מקדשיכם*, "and I will desolate your sanctuaries," but in the reverse order: *ואת מקדשיכם השמתי*, "and your sanctuaries I will desolate." Because the element of desolation comes first, it implies that the sanctuary retains its sanctity even after destruction.]



And what holds true for the House of God holds true for the home of the soul: אף בשרו שומעין, even after destruction and desolation and devastation, even after death, the initial sanctity still adheres to the body. Even after the body has yielded its soul to God, it still retains significance because of the sacred function which it once exercised. This is what the Hevra Kadisha expresses in practice: an acknowledgment of the body as residually sacred because of the personality, the soul, the character it once housed.

The second element in the significance of this Society reflects a negative judgment on death. By being called to this kind of work, the Hevra Kadisha recognizes the מת (the deceased) as a victim, helpless and alone, and hence evoking our pity and compassion and assistance. The work of the Hevra Kadisha is thus a rare instance of perfect and absolute altruism, what our tradition calls חסד של אמית, "true charity," for this is the only kind of beneficence where the beneficiary can never repay the benefactor. For one to participate in the work of the Hevra Kadisha is to engage in the highest kind of selfless moral activity available to us.

Finally: as we said earlier, the negative attitude of Judaism to death leads to the formulation of a positive attitude to life. Our society is mechanized and automated, one in which the loss of the sense of wholeness follows the division of function, in which different people are assigned specific and specialized functions. In this technological mass-society, the personality suffers the insult of fragmentization and atomization. Human beings as such become no more than interchangeable parts in the social machine. In a culture that suffers such successive mechanization and technological specialization, there is an insidious encouragement of depersonalization. People fail to relate to each other as human beings, with full respect for the personal worth and dignity of a fellow man. In such a society, in which relationships tend more towards the exploitative and the manipulative rather than the personal and the warm and the loving, the disposal of the dead is usually farmed out to impersonal, professional functionaries. In this kind of culture, and in these kinds of circumstances, the Hevra Kadisha remains a singular institution that takes exception to the general trend. It insists that there shall be no disposal of the dead by neglect, by turning it over to commercialized professionals. Instead, people take care of each other, they care for each other at the time when they need each other most, and friendships that existed during life transcend life itself -- thus, Judaism's recommended treatment of the dead confirming the greatest and noblest

significance of life as that which is intimate, warm, deeply personal.

Perhaps this is what the Sages meant when they made a remarkable statement (Ber. 10a): נִסְתַּכַּל דָּוִד לְיוֹם מוֹתוֹ וְרָאָה וַיִּשְׁרֹחַ, "David contemplated the day of his death, and he began to sing." What a strange reaction! One would expect that he would begin to brood, that he would turn morbid, or at least sad, that he would be depressed. Instead, David began to sing. Why? Because if such is our culture, our faith, our heritage, that death evokes from within us such nobility, such compassion, such profound understanding, then life is worth living and singing about.

No wonder that any genuine and authentic Jewish community, such as I hope ours is, reserves this intimate activity of preparing the body for burial not to specialized strangers, but to the pillars of the congregation, to those who qualify for membership in the Holy Society by being upright, pious, committed, and fully human.

For indeed, the Hevra Kadisha is not only the Holy Society, but our Honor Society: it is the spiritual Arista of our congregation.

And so we <sup>of</sup> this קהילה קדושה, this Holy Community, salute the members of the Hevra Kadisha, of the Holy Society, and together, in loyalty to our sacred tradition, join in a rousing affirmation of life from מֵלֶךְ חַי וְקַיִם, the ever-living Author of life. May He grant us, all Israel, and all the world, endless years, filled with health and happiness and, above all, the opportunity to live creatively, fully, humanly, warmly.