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THE JEWISH CENTER

February 21, 1975
Pareshat Zakhor

"PROVIDING AN EXCUSE FOR HAMAN"

Anti-Semitism is never justified, no matter what the provocation, any more than it is right to be generally anti-Black because many muggers are black or anti-Italian because the Mafia is all Italian. Yet unquestionably, it sometimes happens that the victim of bigotry invites the venom of the bigot, and evokes and stimulates enmity.

When R. Simeon bar Yohai's students, according to the Talmud (Meg. 12a), asked him מפני מה נתחייבו שונאיהם של ישראל כליה באותו דור, "Why were the Jews of the generation (of the Purim incident) found worthy of destruction," he challenged them to offer a reason. They responded: מפני שנהנו מסעודה של אותו רשע, "because they consented to join in the great feast tended by the evil Ahaseurus," about which we read at the beginning of the Megillah. Indeed, Mordecai, according to the Midrash, warned them not to participate, שלא ליתן פתחון פה לשטן, so as not to give any excuse for Satan to accuse Israel of wrongdoing. The general idea of this passage is that man sometimes invites retribution and hatred. He too often "gives an opening to the mouth of Satan."

Of course, there is no excuse for Haman. Morally, we can never forgive a criminal of this sort. But if the victim incites him, dares him, seduces him, and then leaves himself defenseless before him, we can understand the criminal psychologically if not morally. In a word, Haman is always inexcusable, but we must never give an excuse to the Hamans of the world!

That means that we Jews must follow a two-pronged attack against anti-Semitism: First, we must battle it on moral and all other grounds -- political, economic, and social. And second, we must seek to prevent its application by avoiding any unnecessary provocations.

Let us look at several interpretations by the Rabbis of the Purim incident, and see how we too may err by providing excuses for our contemporary Hamans.

We mentioned the Talmudic passage about the whole near-tragedy being caused by the willingness of the Jews to join in the banquet of Ahaseurus. But why should sociability, especially when commanded by the king, be identified as a cause of genocide? Did not Haman himself later charge Jews with the exact reverse, blaming them for being מפוזר ומפורד בין העמים ודתיהם שונות מכל עם, that they are divided and spread amongst all the peoples and their laws differ from those of all other peoples? Why do the Rabbis blame their gregariousness and friendship, whereas Haman does the opposite?

I suggest, first, that the Rabbis may have been engaging in irony: The more Jews tried to pass as pure Persians and Medes, the more the Haman's and Ahaseuruses considered them "different!" The more they tried to blur their identities in wine and drunkenness, the more their Jewishness stood out. One thinks, I hope not unjustly, of probably the most assimilated Jews in the Western World -- the international Jewish bankers. How ironic that they are the most recent victims of international Arab anti-Semitism...

But perhaps there is also a second explanation of this Talmudic passage. Maybe their presence at סעודתו של אותו רשע, at that banquet tended by the evil king, was in itself a contributing factor in Haman's genocidal plot. I wonder how these 18,500 Jews of Shushan disported themselves at that banquet. I wonder, if we may project from the present backwards into history, whether most of these were not the nouveaux riches of a prosperous Shushanite Jewish community, who were only too willing to display all the signs of their newfound affluence and social acceptibility. And when Jews are demonstrative and ostentatious, they become more visible, more provocative, and thus more vulnerable.

Neither assimilation nor ostentation helps. On the contrary, they harm!

I know that there may be many who object to this thesis. They will charge me with being hypersensitive, inauthentically American, and unattuned to the basic pluralism of our society. They may charge me with being a "Galus-Jew." To this my answer is simple: First, the Megillah story took place in"Galus," exile. Furthermore, I propose a remarkable discovery for those who do not know it yet -- we too are in "Galus!"

There is yet another interpretation of the Rabbis that always perplexed me but that may serve to further illuminate our theme. The Yalkut makes the following comment on the first word of Haman's proposal to Ahaseurus to undertake a campaign of genocide against the Jews. Haman said: ישנו עם אחד מפוזר ומפורד בין העמים, there is one people spread about and dispersed amongst the nations. They associated the word יְשֵׁנוּ with יְשֵׁנִים, "sleeping," and thus said: ישנים מן המצוות, the Jews were asleep when it came to performing the commandments. They were alert to everything else -- to turn a quick profit, to attain new social acceptance, discover new luxuries. But when it came to performing their religious duties, they were -- asleep.

I have always been puzzled about the Rabbis who made this statement. What did they really think -- that Haman was an anti-Semite because he was upset with Jews who are not "frum" enough? That he wanted to kill the Jews because he could not bear seeing them desecrating the holy Sabbath or ignoring the law of Shaatnez?

Was Haman really such an admirer of Tefillin or Mikvah?

I suggest that when the Rabbis ascribe to Haman the argument of שכיח מן המצוות , they meant only the מצוות שבין אדם לחבירו, those commandments that relate to one's social integrity, to his ethical stature. Haman complained to Ahaseurus that the Jews of his realm were ethically corrupt and morally reprehensible. He suggested to Ahaseurus that since they were מפוזר ומפורד, spread amongst all other people, then their corruption will affect all the עמים , all the nations.

Of course, it was a lie. The Goyim do not need Jews who are שכיח מן המצוות to teach them all about corruption and thievery. Certainly in our day, when this week three of the highest officials of the last Federal Administration were sentenced to jail terms, no one needs Jews to teach him how to be a thief.

But whoever reads The New York Times, or sees television, will understand quite well what the Rabbis said, and how I interpret their statement! Between "Rabbis" in nursing homes, and lay leaders in international banking, and third-rate reverends who sign their own death warrants to collect life insurance and who are then announced over the radio as "prominent Orthodox Rabbis," and other such horror stories, I now hesitate before declaring to a stranger with the same pride that I once used to, that I am an "Orthodox Rabbi."

I cringe when those who are accused of criminal acts are hauled before investigating committees on television, and they appear there with yarmulkes and all kinds of pious phraseology invoking God as witness to their innocence. Innocent or guilty, the very appearance desecrates all, from God to the yarmulke! If I did not know literally hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of wonderful Jews -- people of piety and morality and integrity -- who wear the yarmulke not only at services but at home, as they should, and even at work; if I did not believe that the overwhelming majority of Orthodox Jews, as most Jews and most people, are decent and hard-working and honest; I would disqualify the yarmulke and declare it pasul!

At a recent meeting composed half of laymen and half of Rabbis, an acquaintance of mine who received Semikhah from Yeshiva University many years ago and thereafter went into business, achieving a great reputation as an honorable man, a fine personality, a man who devoted much time and substance to the Jewish community, announced that because of what is happening he no longer calls himself "Rabbi," even though he has been using the title all along. He was doing so not only because sporting the title itself has now been tainted with disrepute, but for a more sensible and sensitive reason: As long as a man is in business, he may unwittingly cross the border between

the legal and the legitimate -- and such possibilities always exist for one who handles money all week; but out of a sense of responsibility to the Rabbinate and the Jewish community and the Torah, not to jeapordize them by his own indiscretions, he hereafter will be know as "Mr.," not "Rabbi."

Of course, none of this should cast any aspersions, neither on Orthodox Jews as such nor Orthodox Rabbis nor Orthodox businessmen who have the title"Rabbi." All of us know many such non-practicing Rabbis,amongst us, who have made outstanding contributions to the Jewish community, to Jewish education, to Jewish organizations from the local to the international level. They add honor to the title -- even as there are full-time Rabbis who do not.

But if I were addressing a graduating class of new Rabbis today, I would -- after speaking of the special responsibility of a Rabbi going into a pulpit -- address myself to the large number of those receiving Semikhah but entering business or the professions. I would tell them: "The Semikhah you are now receiving means that you are permitted to decide questions of Halakhah and it qualifies you to occupy a pulpit should you so choose to do at any time in the future. But if you are going into business or some other profession, then I want you to know that it places on you a quadruple responsibility: The very fact that you will straddle both worlds means that you must give twice as much charity as any businessman or professional, and be twice as careful as a professional Rabbi to study Torah regularly and be active in the community! Above all, if you are going to use the title 'Rabbi,' make sure -- to use the famous Eisenhower phrase -- that you are 'as clean as a hound's tooth!' Otherwise, you may hold up to contempt all that we stand for! Bad enough that pulpit Rabbis, subject to the same temptations that afflict all flesh and blood, too frequently fail and discredit our faith and their profession. The less such opportunities the better!

"But best of all, I would advise you not to use the title 'Rabbi' if you are not going to hold a pulpit or be involved in an allied profession. Should you choose to go to medical school after receiving Semikhah, would it not be ludicrous for you to hang out your shingle as a pediatrician or an orthopedic surgeon, announcing yourself as, 'Rabbi Dr.' so-and-so? It makes no more sense, and there is no more justification, for using the rabbinic title if you become a stock-broker or a computer programmer! One 'chair' is enough for any one person -- either take the plush executive's swivel chair, or the somewhat harder כסא הרבנות . But if you still want to use the title - be exceedingly careful to reflect well on it."

Does not this recent scandal cause anti-Semitism? Someone who was present at the hearings which were televised told me that he

"felt waves" of anti- Semitism coming at him. At first I was dubious about it.

However, upon further reflection, I agreed. This is so for a very simple psychological reason. There is deeply ingrained in Christians a stereotype that they absorb from the very beginning, with their first exposure to the Gospels in Sunday schools. That is the ancient Christian anti-Semitic identification of the "Pharisees" (which means: us!) as "hypocrites" -- the bearded man who piously raises his eyes heavenward while he oppresses the widow and the orpahn; the Jew who is punctillious about all his ritual observances, but is dishonest and oppressive. This distortion is reinforced by the medieval horror stories of Jews who observed the Passover Seder while drinking the blood of Christian children. And this is further affirmed by the modern caricature of the Julius Streicher brand, supplemented by the anti-Semitic cartoons that appear from time time to time in the Arab press and the South American press, all of them picturing Jews as hook-nosed, bearded, and wearing yarmulkes, while carrying out their nefarious plots. And here, now, right on the television screen and on page one of the press, is a man reputed to be a Rabbi, a Jewish leader, wearing a yarmulke and sporting a "beard," who stands accused of so many dastardly acts -- a living relic vindicating for Christians of centuries of anti-Semitic indoctrination!

I repeat: There never is any moral excuse for anti-Semitism. The Haman who siezed on our Jewish ostentation or assimilation or immorality or corruption to plan להשמיד להרוג ולאבד את כל היהודים, to kill and destroy and undo all Jews in a genocidal catastrophe, remains a monster -- and all anti-Semitism is monstrous. But we Jews must be careful not to provide excuses for such anti-Semitism. Each Jew must remember that כל ישראל ערבים זה לזה, we are all co-responsible one for the other, whether we like it or not.

In the closing words of the Book of Esther we learn how Mordecai overcame this problem: כי מרדכי היהודי משנה למלך אחשורוש וגדול ליהודים ונצעי לרוב אחיו דורש טוב לעמו ודובר שלום לכל זרעו

"For Mordecai the Jew was next unto king Ahaseurus, and great among the Jews, and accepted of the multitude of his brethren; seeking the good of his people and speaking peace to all his seed."

Mordecai did not throw away his yarmulke and try his best to look and sound like a Persian WASP. He remained גדול ליהודים, a Gadol, a genuinely great Jew, even while he was second in command to the king himself, and travelling in the highest circles of the Persian government. With all this, he was also דורש טוב לעמו -- one who sought the welfare, the good, for his people. But the word דרש means not only to seek, but also -- to demand! Mordecai was a דורש טוב לעמו -- he demanded of his people that they act according to the highest principles of Torah, of that which is good

and is right. And in that manner he assured Shalom, as both peace and wholesomeness, for his people and their children after them:

דורש טוב לעמו ודובר שלום לכל זרעו