

THE BRIGHT SIDE

The Midrash teaches us a reason for the age-old custom, followed rather universally until a couple of generations ago, that children who were ready to study the Torah began with this third Book of Moses, Vayikra (Leviticus). Why so? And the answer is: וְלֹא תִינוּקוֹת שֶׁהֵם טְהוֹרִים וְיֹתֻצִים בְּקִרְבָּנוֹת שֶׁהֵם טְהוֹרִים, "Let children who are innocent and pure study the laws of sacrifices, which bring purity upon Israel."

This year, so far, has been one of difficulty and anxiety and even humiliation for Jews generally, and for Orthodox Jews especially. Many clouds have passed over our horizons.

But now, that we start the Book of Vayikra, it is time for a new beginning, both ethically and psychologically -- a new start for both our morals and our morale. It is time for perspective: to see the taharah (purity) in Jewish life, to re-discover the bright side of our situation.

I know that the pessimists will argue that no matter what I mention this morning, the good news is so little compared to the bad. Perhaps so. But let me remind them that the word ויקרא itself, the first word in the Book, is written in the Torah with אֵלֶף, a small Alef, a diminutive letter -- as if to tell us that the taharah in life may be tiny, but even a little purity transforms much impurity; one ray of light can dissipate all kinds of darkness.

All it takes is: a Korban, just a bit of self-sacrifice, an אֵלֶף of selflessness and generosity and love.

Indeed, I am often amazed at the phenomenon of self-sacrifice in ordinary people -- men and women who, in this hedonistic, pleasure-drunk society, still care, still are willing to give without necessarily taking in return.

At the same time, I am even more amazed at people who find it possible to survive a whole day without once doing a selfless act or thinking an unselfish thought. I am astounded at those who act as if it is the purpose of life to stuff their bellies, satisfy their transient and passing passions, ammass all the money they can, puff up their egos -- knowing full well that in the end they will burst soundlessly like an over-ripe bubble, unmissed and unwarned.

So, when I am depressed because some Jews are selfish and so sully our image, I think of others who are genuinely generous.

When the Jewish horizon seems darkened by clouds conjured up by some, I consider the bright side as exemplified by the taharah of others.

I think, for instance, of retired people who do not choose to waste their remaining years in egocentric self-indulgence, in unproductive travelling from one resort to another, whiling away their time in card-playing, concerned only with themselves; but who bear the yoke of the Jewish community, of Torah and Israel with the energy of men and women half their age.

I consider wealthy young men, who could be playboys, but who instead devote their time and substance to philanthropy and communal leadership.

For every Rabbi who brings his title and the Torah into disrepute, there are a hundred, nay a thousand!, other Rabbis in pulpits throughout the country who labor faithfully for Torah. There are people who are Musmakhim, ordained Rabbis, who did not enter the Rabbinate, but are successful in other careers, and who have no official obligation to the community, yet give of their time and talent to the synagogue and the community and make a significant contribution to הרבצת התורה.

When I am annoyed with the world I think of young women who do volunteer work for community and synagogue with utter devotion, although they have every excuse not to: the brains for higher education, the verve for career, children old enough not to need constant attention, and friends sufficiently "liberated" to engage in sophistic rhetoric and sneer at peers who work for charity...

A source of great encouragement for me is the number of day-school children, students of Yeshivot, who regularly visit old-age homes, hospitals, homes for retarded children, and other such, learning in their youth what it is to give, and give generously and with care and concern.

The entire portion dealing with sacrifices is introduced, in our Sidra, with the following verse: אדם כי יקריב מכם קרבן
ל' מן הבמה מן הבקר יאן הצאן תקריבו את קרבנכם
"If one amongst you desires to offer an offering to the Lord, from the cattle and from the herds and from the flock shall you offer up your offering" (Lev. 1:2).

The great Hasidic teacher, known as the "אורח ישראל", R. Abraham Joshua Heschel of Apt, said that this verse should be divided into two. The latter half says that if you bring a sacrifice from the cattle or herd or flock, then it is קרבנכם, your sacrifice. But the first half tells us that if you bring a

sacrifice not from what you possess, not from mere property, but מִכֶּם יְקַרְבֵּן אִישׁ, if one amongst you offers a sacrifice מִכֶּם, from yourself, your very heart and soul, then the offering is not merely "your sacrifice," but קִרְבָּן, "an offering to the Lord," it is a divine offering. To sacrifice means to give not only what you have, but what you are.

The bright side is incomplete without those who give not only their substance and gifts and labor, but מִכֶּם, their very selves.

I wonder how many of us know and appreciate the extent to which מִצְוַת חַסְדִּים ("acts of kindness") is practiced, modestly and quietly, in places like Boro Park and Williamsburg. I know one man in Boro Park who had to retire very early in life because of serious illness. He happens to be a Yemenite Jew. He has decided to devote his life to other sick people. And so he spends sixteen, seventeen, eighteen hours a day visiting hospitals throughout Brooklyn. And should he find a patient who is needy or lonely, he immediately establishes himself as that person's helper and guide.

There are Jews and Jewesses all over the Jewish community, and our own Jewish Center included, who give their time with reverent care to the Hebra Kadisha, the proper care of the dead, a thankless task which is a חֶסֶד שֶׁל אֱמֶת, a "true kindness."

There is, for instance, a lady in this neighborhood who, despite certain real physical obstacles, devotes her life to the ethical task of מַלְבִּישׁ עֲרוּמִים, of clothing the poor and the stranger and the needy -- certainly a divine activity!

A קִרְבָּן is offered by the young man who recalls the verse of the Torah: כִּי אַתֶּם יֹדְעִים אֶת נַפְשׁ הַגֵּר, "for you know the soul of the stranger"; he is possessed of a Jewish historical memory, he knows what it is to be a refugee in a foreign land, and therefore when he finds himself in a neighborhood inundated by new refugees, he is willing to neglect self and career because he feels himself summoned by communal crisis and human need to rise to heroic action -- without publicity and without profits.

True sacrifice? Look at the Jewish teachers, in day schools and Talmud Torahs, who are the most overworked and under-paid segment in our society; who have the brains to know that they are being exploited, but the heart to continue anyway. They perform מִכֶּם יְקַרְבֵּן אִישׁ, they offer a sacrifice of themselves.

When Jewish newspapers tell us the story, as they did this

week, of wild Hasidic extremists who have no better way to entertain themselves on Purim than by burning the Israeli flag in public, and hanging an effigy of the Lubavitcher Rebbe -- whom they accuse of being overly Zionist! -- it is good to know that they are not representatives of all others, that the overwhelming majority of Hasidim are gentle, decent, hard-working, respectful, and civilized folk; that Lubavitcher Hasidim themselves whow and practice love and not hate, that they perform a Kiddush Hashem by their work and elicit admiration from many diverse circles for their work, even if not always for their policies and politics.

How many of us know, for instance, of a genuine American-born Hasidic Rebbe in Boro Park -- a Rebbe with all the appurtenances of Hasidic leadership, and yet with a flawless New York accent -- whose specialty is sick people. He explains that his grandfather was reputed to be a wonder-Rabbi, who could heal the sick merely with his blessing and with a kvittel.

Since he cannot perform the same miracle, he wants to do it על פי דרך ה' וטבע, by natural means. Ans so this Rebbe has a battery of telephones in front of him and is in contact with hundreds of patients, most of them indigent, recommending them to many many doctors in many specialties throughout the country. He probably knows more physicians, and their specialties and competence, than the secretary of the A.M.A.! He is a man who has saved the lives, quite literally, of hundreds of people. He faces many heavy financial burdens, and will permit one to give charity to a synagogue or a school with which he is associated. But never will he take a penny for himself! It is told that a wealthy man whose life he saved by directing him to the proper physician, gave him a check of \$10,000, which he promptly tore up to shreds. Even if I assumed that the story is legendary -- the very existence of the story speaks volumes!

So there is a bright side, a seed of taharah, a creative ferment of קדוּשָׁה, of a Godly self-offering.

In this period, when we Orthodox Jews have had our image marred by so much bad publicity, where we seem to have justified all the prejudices and vindicated all the vindictive cynicism against us, it is good to know that this is not the whole story. Permit me to draw your attention to a recent article which appeared in the Israeli press by Israel's most distinguished humorist, Ephraim Kishon. Kishon is far from a religious man. He has often aimed his shafts with deadly effect against religious parties, religious personalities, and religious institutions. But this most recent article is one of the most encouraging I have ever read. It is dedicated to the " כפא דמרוג ", "The Knitted Skullcap," symbol of Israel's young Orthodox Jews. The following are but a few paragraphs from this splendid article:

The first sign came from abroad, back in the six-and-half fat years. The Israeli traveller discovered, much to his satisfaction, that world Jewry lavished praise and sympathy on the Jewish State in its days of glory, and many even went so far as to call themselves Zionists. To be precise, the parents were Zionists, the children weren't. When they, the children, were Zionists as well, you didn't even have to scratch them to find a religious family. Those are the ones who study Hebrew as a matter of principle, who send their kinds to Jerusalem out of a 2,000-year-old urge -- in the lean years as well as in the fat...

Embarrassing as it may be, you feel as if this anachronism of eating kosher and keeping the Sabbath automatically guaranteed a true love for Zion that doesn't depend on Zion's winning a war...

You look about you, in the dark cinema and ask yourself where this new youth has come from, whence this shrill coarseness which you'd never have met with just a few years ago. You look, and you try to find an explanation, you positively pray for an excuse, and you wonder what kind of youth this is that riots for the sake of rioting.

And you find they've only one thing in common: they do not wear the knitted skullcap. Not ever.

Not in the cinema, nor anywhere else. In a society that is slowly becoming faceless, the young faces under the tiny skullcaps remain unchanged: good, clean faces. There's still room for courtesy under those caps, there's seriousness, there is love of one's country still. And quietness.

Anyone who lectures to young people at schools or university clubs will soon know from the level of questions they ask that he's talking to religious youth. They behave differently, ask and answer differently.

They do not toy with the notion of leaving this country and it isn't a joking matter to them. They do not have short memories and long hair...

We breathe easier at the sight of the knitted skull cap. Tell you the truth. Whenever we see pleasant faces around us we look for the skullcaps behind them...

Anyway, the humorist cheerfully admits his mistake. It's too late for him by now to become a religious man

himself... But he readily admits that what to him are outdated ideas have produced the better Israelis; that the stuffy inflexibility of religious parents has brought forth a better youth; that the kosher kitchen has turned out to be a firmer spiritual base than the bastions of reason and progress. In fact, we can hardly imagine a State of Israel without that religious faith which personally we do not share.

I have quoted a Midrash and the Apter Rebbe on the Sidra, and a humorist on the subject in general. Permit me to conclude with my own interpretation of those four first words, **אדם זקן** 'אדם זקן'. My explanation is: only one who is ready to give of himself, **אדם**, can be considered an **אדם**-- a real man, a genuine human being, an authentic mentsch.