

"ALL THE WORLD'S A WEDDING"

ve'ishti , In a remarkable passage in the Talmud (Eruvin 54a) we find the Amora Samuel counselling his younger contemporary Rav Yehudah, hatof ve'ekhol, hatof d'alma d'azlinan mineih ke'hilula dami -- "hurry and eat, hurry and drink, for the world we are leaving is like a wedding." What an unusual simile: all the world's a wedding!

What did the Talmud mean by that? According to some commentaries (Rashi and others), Samuel offered some sage and brooding advice: enjoy yourself with legitimate pleasures as long as you can because life is all too short, like a huppah which is put up and then quickly put away again; the wedding party doesn't last forever. There is, of course, much wisdom in that remark. Some of us tend to put off enjoying life's bounties, we begrudge ourselves G-d's gifts to us. We keep on saving for a rainy day so intensely that we fail to enjoy today's sunshine. What the Talmud means, then, is that what the Torah permits us to benefit from ought to be accepted cheerfully and happily. It is good Jewish doctrine.

There is, however, a Hasidic interpretation of this Talmudic dictum that is somewhat different, and that illuminates not only an obscure passage in the Talmud, but an obscure aspect of our passage through life. All the world's a wedding. At a wedding, there is much going on: food is eaten, drink is imbibed, cigars are smoked, toasts are exchanged, there is dancing to music and camaraderie and posing for photographers and admiring floral arrangements.... a great deal of motion and activity. All of it is enjoyable and exciting. However, all of this is meaningful only if there is a groom and a bride, and if he says to her harei at mekudeshet li. If there should be no harei at, if there should be no act of marriage, then all the rest makes no sense; it is a matter of going through grotesque, empty motions. Then the guests have come in vain, the eating is gluttony, the comradeship is irrelevant, the toasting is a meaningless

gesture, the dancing is weird. With the harei at, everything makes sense; without it, nothing does.

So it is with life itself. It is filled with all kinds of diverse activities of every description. We work, make money, spend it, socialize, build families, join groups, experience joy and sadness. Does all this make sense? Does it have any meaning? The answer is: the world is ke'hilula dami, like a wedding. If we are conscious, throughout all these activities, of the ultimate purpose, of the goal, then that purpose unifies all our deeds and gives them meaning and inspiration. Without that purpose, we merely go through motions that are incoherent, dull, and utterly insignificant.

And what is that ultimate purpose? It is --- the same as in a wedding --- a marriage formula. Like the formula expressed by groom to bride, harei at mekudeshet li, "you are hereby married li, to me, "so the Almighty has betrothed the people of Israel with the word li, to Me: in the words of Hosea, v'erastikh li le'olam, I betroth you to Me forever! The wedding of G-d and Israel, the intensely close and loyal relationship that finds its fulfillment through Torah and the Jewish way of Mitzvot, this is the purpose of all life. And if that purpose exists for us consciously, then all else we do somehow fits into the picture of a meaningful life. Without it, we have a life that is like a wedding party without a bride and a groom, without a wedding.

It is no exaggeration to say that especially we of the 20th century stand in great need of this teaching that alma..ke'hilula dami, that life is worth living only if it makes sense, that it makes sense only if there is a purpose, and that the purpose is loyalty to God, the wedding of our talents and substance and destiny with the will of God as taught in Torah. For we moderns have developed with unsurpassed excellence the perfection of means -- science, the exploitation of nature, is a highly refined skill; business, commerce, and trade are complicated arts; communication and transportation are effected with consummate speed. We know how to do ⁺things like never before. The trouble is,

we do not always know why we are doing them. We have an elaborate technocracy in which we are so intoxicated with means that are efficient, that we have forgotten ^{that are significant} the ends. Never before have we been able to go so fast; never before have we been so unsure of where it is we want to go in such a hurry. Indeed, all the world's a wedding! - - and in our ever-smaller world of this century we have elaborate caterers, fabulous photographers, the most gifted musicians --- and we have neglected to inquire whether a wedding is taking place. The Groom is absent, and the harei at mekudeshet li and the v'erastikh li le'olam are nowheres heard. And if there is no God, no Torah, no mitzvot, then all our efficiency, all our wealth, all our achievements, all our activities, are like the macabre gyrations of an intoxicated guest who dances alone in a darkened hall where the wedding has been called off. That is what Torah means for us --- not just "religion" in the customary sense, but that which binds all the rest of existence together ^{into} ~~with~~ a meaningful whole, and makes all the rest of life worth living.

What holds true for all of life generally is especially relevant to Jews as a people and to Israel as a sovereign state. From the very beginning, as Saadia taught, we have been a nation only by virtue of the Torah; we were given a Torah before we were given a homeland. Unlike other nations, we have been elected to be more than a natural group. We have been given a supernatural ^{that of} vocation: the kingdom of priests and the holy nation. God is our hatan, we His kallah. If we remember that, then our nationhood and peoplehood, our long adventure through history and our struggle to return to our home, all are graced with abiding meaningfulness. But if there is no li, if Israel will ignore God and Torah, then our peoplehood is a fossil, our nation and all its apparatus is hollow, our history a bitter joke.

It is this teaching which is implicit in this morning's Sidra. God uses four synonyms in informing Moses that He will redeem our people from slavery in Egypt -- and it is to commemorate these arba leshonot shel geulah that we drink, on Passover, the four cups of wine, the arba kosot. The first three refer to our

physical and political liberation: ve'hotzeti (I shall take you out), ve'hitzalti (I shall save you), and ve'gaalti (I shall redeem you). The fourth and climactic one is of a different nature. The Zohar (ad loc.) refers to it as shabha de'kula, as the greatest of all. That is: ve'lakhti etkhem li le'am ve'hayiti lakhem le'Elokim, I shall take you for Me as a people and I will be for you a God. One of the commentators (Keli Yakar) rightly points out that the word lakhti is often used in the Bible to mean not only taking in the usual sense, but in the marital sense, to "take" a wife --- and notice too the word li! After saving you, bringing you out of Egypt, and redeeming you, says the Almighty, I will take you or marry you as my people! The Torah is our ketubah, and the mitzvot our acts of love and duty. That is why the Jerusalem Talmud applies to the fourth cup, the one equivalent to ve'lakhti etkhem li, the verse kos yeshuot esa u-ve'shem Ha-Shem ekra, I will lift up the cup of salvation and call upon the Name of the Lord ---- for the purpose of yeshuah, the purpose and goal and aim of freedom and independence is: to call upon God, to live the life of Torah. No wonder that it is this fourth cup, the one symbolizing the spiritual destiny of Israel, that occasions, at the Seder table, the reading of Hallel ha-Gadol, the greatest and most beautiful praise (see Ketav Sofer).

The Halakhah too supports this point, that of Israel's Torah loyalty as the purpose for which it was redeemed. It tells us that between the first three cups -- tokens of the first three synonyms, the symbols of political emancipation --- and the fourth -- representing Israel's communion with God --- one may not drink any wine, shema yishtaker ve'yishan velo yigmor et ha-hallel, he may become intoxicated, fall asleep, and thus forget to recite the Hallel. Indeed, it is possible to become so intoxicated with the trappings of statehood, with the mundane problems of preserving freedom and security and a stable economy, that we forget the Hallel, we completely lose sight of the fact that all ^{this} ~~that~~ is preliminary to the main goal: the fourth cup, the Hallel, the ve'lakhti etkhem li, the marriage of Israel's destiny to God's Torah. And

when that is forgotten, then all the rest is without meaning. For alma...
ke'hilula dami, all the world's a wedding; and Israel certainly is.

That is why Orthodox Jews and even not-so-Orthodox Jews are engaged in a wide attempt to give our beloved State of Israel the stamp of authentic Jewish character. Our endeavor is not merely to obtain "rights" for observant Jews -- for such rights are not violated ^{(will be,} if there for instance, only one truly kosher dining room aboard the liner Shalom. Certainly we Orthodox Jews have more opportunity to observe our Torah in Israel than anywhere else in the world. Nor do we want to dictate to others how to live. That is an absurd and cruel charge; were it true we would insist on legislating kosher kitchens and Sabbath observance in every citizen's private home. We would be the first to oppose that. What we do want is to keep the collective character of the State of Israel Jewish. We want to see Israel's soul emerge as well as its body prosper. We want to offer it the fourth cup. We want to make sure that its tremendous and historic achievements on the battle-field and in immigration, in diplomacy and in finances, in industry and in science, are not disjointed, incoherent, and meaningless. We want to make sure that the feasting and the dancing culminate in the li, in the consecration of our people to its prophetic mission, its spiritual destiny. A remnant of our people experienced the ve'hitzalti. We were saved from the tyrant's gas ovens. Then the D.P.s lived through ve'hotzeti -- they were taken out of the accursed, bloody continent to the blessed Land of Promise. There we fought a bitter war, in 1948, and we were granted ve'gaalti, redemption from the aggressor's evil designs. Let us not stop now, only a few steps before the huppah. Now is the time for ve'lakhti, for the betrothal of Israel as a whole to the Almighty. If we succeed in granting Israel this authentic Jewish spiritual quality, then the whole enterprise called the State of Israel will be not a short-lived episode in the long story of the Jewish people (and there were other such before it), but a great and brilliant beginning of the geulah shelema.

In every aspect of life let us remember that lesson -- that all the world's a wedding, that our activities and achievements are meaningful and enduring only if they are geared to an ultimate purpose, that of dedication to Torah, the betrothal of God and Israel.

If we will do that, then all life will assume new perspective and proper proportion. And then the result will be -- like that of a wedding -- the attainment of true simhah or joy. For happiness can never be found by looking for it or brooding over it. It is an elusive prey. It simply does not exist by itself as a separate entity. George Bernard Shaw once said that "the secret of being miserable is to have leisure to bother about whether you are happy or not." Happiness is the result of a full and meaningful and purposeful life. When all of life is harmonious then, like a marriage which is harmonious, there will be simhah. Where there is the li, the consecration of man as the purpose of life, there all else assumes dignity, peace -- and joy.

Hatof ve'ekhol, hatof ve'ishti, let us eat and drink and in every way enjoy the bounty of God's goodness to us -- but let us never forget that alma...
ke'hilula dami, that all the world's a wedding.