

"THE ENSTRANGED": OUR WAR ON POVERTY"

One of the key verses in this morning's Sidra reads:

כי ימוך אחיך עמך, ומכר מאחוזתו, ובא גואלו הקרוב אליך וגאל  
את ממכר אחיו

"if your brother becomes poor, and sells some of his possessions, then shall his nearest relative come and redeem that which his brother has sold."

This verse may be read on three levels. First, there is the obvious, literal meaning of the verse which is halakhic, or legal. If a man is reduced to such poverty that he feels he must sell his ancestral land, then his nearest relative must repurchase it for him, so that the land will remain within the tribe and family, and not be left to strangers.

A second level is the moral one. It speaks in general of responsibility to one's family. It reminds us that no matter how ambivalent the feelings of relatives are to each other, nevertheless, in the long run, one's closest relatives are one's best friends. Parents and children, brothers and sisters, may harbor their private resentments, but in the final analysis and in times of crisis it is one's relatives to whom one turns, and rightly so.

Finally, the same verse can be read on a more fundamental, spiritual level. It has wider Jewish implications and it is these upon which I propose to elaborate this morning.

This spiritual interpretation was given by one of the giants of the early Hasidic movement, R. Elimelech of Lizensk, the author of "נועם אלימלך". He derives this novel insight by playing on two words on our verse. The Hebrew word מכר he interprets not literally as, "and he shall sell," but in the sense of התמכר, "and he shall become estranged." And the word אחוזה refers, he says, not to one's ancestral or real estate, but rather to one's ancestral spiritual heritage. Thus, the verse reads as follows: if your brother becomes reduced to such extreme spiritual poverty, that he is estranged from the heritage of his fathers, he feels distant and cut off from the sacred traditions of Israel, then we, his fellow Jews, who are his closest relatives, must become his redeemer; we must redeem the "heritage" for our brothers who are "estranged" and hence find themselves religiously impoverished. This is our "war on poverty."

The principle R. Elimelech of Lizensk finds in this verse seems true enough; in fact it would even appear to be a truism. Apparently it is but a restatement of the ancient Jewish principles of כל ישראל ערבים זה לזה, that all Israelites are responsible one for the other. It is a well known theme in Judaism, and one that accounts for the cohesion of the House of Israel.

Yet, today that principle is not at all self-evident. It must be enunciated and articulated in many forms and fashions, for we Jews of the twentieth century have failed to abide by it. This failure has come about for two reasons.

First, we Jews of the Western world suffer from a fundamental misunderstanding. We have misinterpreted a doctrine that is a cornerstone of Western civilization and American democracy. That doctrine is, that "religion is a matter of the individual conscience."

Indeed, that statement constitutes an immortal contribution to the history of mankind. We Jews, who have through the ages been the perennial victims of religious bigotry and oppression, have become the greatest beneficiaries of this doctrine. Both Jews and Judaism gladly assent to that proposition. The Halakhah approves it; it rules out any כפייה, any coercion, on matters of נאמן, of conscience or belief. All Jews can agree with this theme as it was recently restated, in homey fashion, by the President of a mid-Western university: Religion is like a toothbrush -- every man should have one and use it regularly, but should not try to force it on anybody else!

However, we have made an error in carrying this idea beyond its proper borders. We have erred in assuming that because we ought not to use coercion, therefore we ought not to have concern with the religious life of our neighbors; because we ought not to force anyone to faith therefore we ought not to care about the spiritual environment in which we live. Some people carry this to an extreme which, to any sensible and mature human being, seems ludicrous: they declare, in a mood of pious liberalism, "I shall let my child choose his own religion!" As if the child, by virtue

of his blissful ignorance, can manufacture a viable religion which has taken the rest of civilization several millenia to formulate!

The reaction against religious oppression, therefore, often drives us to the opposite extreme, to a complete disclaimer of responsibility for the spiritual condition of our fellow men. And so we declare, "I am not God's messenger, not His שליח." Yet that is one of the most un-Jewish statements possible. For every human being, by virtue of his being created in "the image of God," is automatically a messenger of God. And every Jew, by virtue of his being a member of a people that met God on Mt. Sinai, is automatically an ambassador of Judaism both to his fellow Jews and to all of mankind.

A second reason for this abdication of the function of religious responsibility is due to the nature of Orthodox Judaism in our own times. For we Orthodox Jews have turned too insular, too isolationist. Because of the attrition of the last two centuries, and because of the various forms of "Judaism" that are indeed destructive of Torah, we have turned defensive. We have largely withdrawn into ourselves because of the fact that so many alien and baneful values, crassly materialistic and dangerously immoral, daily impinge and intrude upon our lives and homes and schools by ever more effective means of mass communication. Television and advertising in general, force upon the attention of

our children and ourselves ideals of behavior and modes of conduct which are repugnant to all we stand for and have cherished through the ages. Our reaction has been to fight such influences by withdrawing. As a result, all too often we have given the impression, both in Israel and in America, of oscillating between unconcern for other Jews and coercion of those who are not of our persuasion. We seem to vacillate between isolation and reaction.

Both these impressions are false; and to the very limited extent that they may be true, we must totally disabuse ourselves of them. But the image persists, and we have done precious little to disprove the contentions of our opponents. We must therefore undertake to create, by example, a new image. We must learn to be aggressive without being offensive; we must be not ingrown, but outgoing. We must redirect our energies from licking our wounds and fighting back to reaching the masses of uncommitted Jews, many of whom do not even know what an Orthodox Jew is.

וְגָאֵל אֶת מַמְכַּר אֲחֵינוּ -- we must redeem the heritage of Judaism for our brothers who have sold it all too cheaply. This is the task and the obligation that God and destiny place upon us who consider ourselves Orthodox. Our duty is to redeem; for those who will not redeem, are themselves condemned to remain unredeemed!

How shall we redeem this Jewish heritage for our poor, enstranged bretheren?

First, by education. It may be revealing to some people to learn that our far-flung and wide-spread network of day schools does not cater exclusively to children of Orthodox parents. Large numbers of them come from homes which are totally ignorant of Judaism. By supporting our day schools -- almost any one of them! -- we are in a sense reaching out in a most positive and constructive way into the hearts and homes of uncommitted Jews. We do so again by providing for the education of those who are not in day schools but beyond the age of Bar-Mitzvah, as we in the Center do in sponsoring the Manhattan Hebrew High School. We do it through such organizations such as Yavneh, which reaches out for young people on the campuses of this country. We ought to do so through other means, making use of the latest communications technology in order to reach ever-wider masses of Jews who are completely ignorant of all that the tradition of Judaism stands for.

Second, we must express our spiritual co-responsibility for our fellow Jews by concern for the welfare of all Jews, and not only their spiritual well-being. Orthodoxy must never become a specialist of the spirit exclusively. If we wish to exert an influence in religion, we must identify ourselves with the totality of our people. It was the great founder of the Musar movement Rabbi Israel Salanter, who said that every man's first concern should be his own spiritual health, and the material welfare of his neighbor. His second concern ought to be his



own material health and his neighbor's spiritual state. Only by taking a very genuine and authentic concern in every Jew, and in the collectivity of all Jews, by cherishing the totality of Israel, we will be able to bring about the desired spiritual renaissance.

Third, the way to exercise such an influence is by example. The Orthodox Jew must lead an exemplary moral and ethical life. The more we are identified with traditional Judaism, the more our reputation as Orthodox Jews, the greater the obligations upon us. Even a superficial perusal of the first parts of Maimonides' Code of Jewish Law, the Mishneh Torah, will convince us that the more one is identified as a religious Jew, the greater his responsibilities. When any other kind of Jew transgresses a law, it is merely accounted a transgression of that particular law. When an Orthodox Jew, however, especially one who is somewhat learned, violates the same law, he is at the same time guilty of a far greater sin known as חילול השם, the desecration of God's Name. For, in itself, his lack of ethics or morals reflects upon the entirety of the Jewish tradition, upon God's very Name! Conversely, when we observe the highest ethical ideals, we have performed קידוש השם the sanctification of God's Name.

All this holds true not only for chosen leaders of Orthodoxy or for impersonal organizations or schools, but for

every single individual in this synagogue and in every other. Every Jew, no matter what his level of observance, must establish contacts with other Jews and attempt to exercise the benign influence of his own faith upon all others. Let none of us fall back upon the excuse that we are not sufficiently observant ourselves. Just as when it comes to philanthropy, a man cannot excuse himself from the obligation to share what he has with others on the grounds that he is not the wealthiest man in the community, so one need not be a perfect saint in order to respond to the challenge of exercising a spiritual influence upon others. We must, indeed, "talk religion" with our fellow Jews; provided, of course, that we inform ourselves first of all that we should know.

This, then is the act of redemption which our Sidra calls upon us to perform. If we do it, and if we do it properly, then we will have fulfilled not only the normal interpretation but also the special Hasidic insight into the principle which we mentioned earlier: כל ישראל ערבים זה לזה. Normally this means, "all Israelites are responsible one for the other." The Hasidic addition is to read the word ערבים as meaning not only "responsible," but also "sweet!" If we will show our spiritual responsibility for our fellow Jews, then indeed we shall be sweet to our fellow Jews: "All Israelites must be sweet one to another."



Having done that, having discharged our responsibility and shown ourselves sweet and gracious to every fellow Jew, we will have redeemed the enstranged heritage for our bretheren.

And then, in return, Almighty God will redeem us: אבן

לציון גואל. May indeed the Redeemer come to Zion.

Amen.