

"RECOUNTING AND RELIVING"

Passover, with its warm and enchanting pleasantness, is a balm for modern man's sore spirit.

We so painfully lack that which Passover has to offer us: the element of warmth, rootedness, and meaningfulness. We live in huge, cold cities, populated by faceless crowds, characterized by a harsh anonymity and a grinding conformity. Our labors are harried but perfunctory. Our relationship to our work is distant and tentative; the same function could be performed by anyone else. With automation, our lives and our occupations threaten to become even more mechanical. Man, in modern day and modern society, has become alienated, replaceable, and disposable; he feels unneeded, remote, and cold. The whole of society encourages this frigid impersonality which snuffs out the human spark within us, making us unfeeling towards our neighbors, incapable of experiencing, to the depths, a friend's sorrow and happiness; and even immune to our own personal joys and pains.

The answer of Passover to this impersonality and alienation can be defined in clearer terms on the basis of a brilliant insight provided for us by the late Rabbi Ze'ev Soloveitchik (known as "Reb Velvele Brisker,") ל"צא. This Gaon asks: when we recite the Hallel all year, we preface it with a Berakhah, in which we bless God, King of the world, Who has sanctified us with His

commandments, וצונו לקרא את ההלל, and commanded us to read the Hallel; yet, when we recite the same Hallel at the Seder, we do not recite the blessing before it. Why not?

His answer comes in the form of a conceptual dichotomy characteristic of his method in Halakhah: There are, he says, two types of Hallel. One of them is in the category of קריאה (keriah), reading or proclaiming. We solemnly declare the praises of God. The second type of Hallel is that of שירה (shirah), the praise of God as a poem, or a song. We sing the praises of the Almighty.

The difference between Hallel as keriah and as shirah lies in this, that keriah or "reading" the Hallel means that we speak as outsiders to the event which occasions our praise. We thank God for something that occurred to our ancestors; we speak about others. Hallel as shirah, means that we speak as insiders; we "sing" God's praises, for we acknowledge Him from our own personal experience. The Hallel of keriah is historical; that of shirah is biographical. Keriah is a recounting of God's miracles; shirah -- a reliving of His providence.

Now, keriah is genuinely meant, but because it is impersonal, it would not occur to us to offer this Hallel were we not commanded to do so. We read the Hallel only because God commanded us to do so. Hence, we recite the blessing of וצונו לקרא את ההלל, "and He commanded us to read the Hallel." Hallel as shirah however, is a profound and transforming personal experience. The song of praise emerges from itself, it is self-motivated. We would offer

our rapturous thanks to the Almighty even had He not commanded us to do so. Therefore there is no call for this blessing; we engage in Hallel not because it is a Mitzvah, but because we are inwardly impelled to do so.

All year long when we recite the Hallel because of some miracle that occurred, such as on Sukkot or Hanukkah, it is the Hallel of keriah, for we recount the miracles God performed for our ancestors at some time in the distant historical past. Therefore, we recite the Berakhah before the reading of the Hallel. On the Seder night, however, we engage not in a recounting of past miracles, but in a reliving and reenactment of the drama of the Exodus. For this, indeed, is one of the central statements of the Haggadah: כָּל דּוֹר וָדוֹר חַיִּיב אִדָּם לִרְאוֹת אֶת עֲצֻמוֹ כְּאִילוֹ הוּא

יֵצֵא מִמִּצְרַיִם, in every generation a man must see himself as if he himself, personally, left Egypt. The Hallel of the Seder, therefore, is no impersonal keriah; it is a deeply intimate and personal experience of shirah. Hence, it is not necessary to recite the Berakhah before this kind of Hallel.

How very important it is for us to recapture this sense of shirah, of deeper personal relationships and feelings! For the whole temper of modern life pushes us towards a keriah rather than towards a shirah interpretation of life. We find it so hard to reach into other people's hearts; we are afraid, perhaps, of getting hurt. So we dissociate, we disengage from any real and warm human relationships and experiences. We restrain ourselves from developing an empathetic relationship. We are dainty when

we should be shaken. We may sometimes be animate, when in truth we should be intimate.

Consider how modern society severs instead of enhancing deep personal relationships. From the moment a child is born, as a mere infant, he is fed the milk of a cow, rather than that of a human mother! He is put to bed by a sitter, cared for by a maid, taught by a teacher, and his leisure hours are entrusted to a camp councillor. True, the parents gladly are willing to pay for all this. But it remains, at best, a keriah-relationship: formal, conventional, impersonal. Such parents deny their own selves to their children; and in such a life there can be no shirah.

We teach our children the principle of Tzedakah. They will ultimately learn how to write out a check, quite impersonally, to a faceless organization. But they never see a poor man. I suspect that if we brought home a poor, bedraggled, unesthetic looking beggar into our homes, our children would be either fascinated or horrified; but they would not know how to relate to him as a human being.

In a similar manner, we teach our children the principle of the brotherhood of all men -- but only in the abstract. It is a keriah teaching. At most, in a surge of idealism, they will fly down South and engage in a civil rights march. Yet, they, and their children after them, grow up in gilded ghettos where the major relationship between themselves and those of another race is that of employer to maid or butler or employee.

Thus too, the matter of loyalty to the State of Israel. We all want to teach our children to support the U.J.A. But is this a personal relationship to Israel? What would be the reaction of most parents here this morning if their children would announce that they are taking all their talk about Israel quite seriously -- and have decided to go on aliyah, personally to settle in Israel -- for good? Imagine that situation, and determine for yourself whether your own feelings about Israel are those of keriah or shirah.

No wonder that when moderns grow up their marriages are so often in trouble. As children they have never learned the meaning of deep personal relationships. Hence, they find it difficult to "open up" to a husband or to a wife. They are suspicious, and each one fears that the other one will not reciprocate, and may even take advantage of him or her. We never "let our guards down"; so there is no personal commitment. There is keriah but not shirah. Domestic life becomes a formal and contractual relation, marriage ~~becomes~~ a contest, and home, an arena.

Even funerals in contemporary life have been robbed of the elements of intimacy. Not only do we not know how to love, we have forgotten how to grieve. Fortunately, in the past year or two, some of the vulgar practices to which we have become heir have been held up to public scorn in a number of books which have become quite popular. Yet such cheap practices and un-Jewish

customs still prevail amongst large numbers of Jews. With all kinds of silly artifacts and artificial ceremonies, we try to disguise the fact of death and create the illusion that we are not at a cemetery but at a country club. We are afraid to commit our deepest personal feelings even in mourning. How rare it is to find a tear shed or to hear a sob at a "modern" funeral! We imagine that this severe restraint is a show of personal heroism, when instead it borders more on psychological cruelty. We are ashamed to show genuine emotions, embarrassed by a display of tears or grief, we present the "stiff upper lip" characteristic of modern impersonality.

Naturally, therefore, this shallowness of emotion and heart is reflected in the enfeeblement of religious feelings too. Religion no longer becomes a great song surging, from within, up to the Almighty. Instead, as in so many of our contemporary Temples, religion is reduced to keriah, to "readings" -- half bored, and half awed. . . And when that happens, our mitzvot lacks passion, our Shabbat lacks love, our Seder lacks life. And worst of all, our services, our "davening," degenerates. In the vulgarest instance, the services are scarred by conversation centered about lashon hara and the discussion either of a neighbor's hat or another neighbor's dealings in the stock market; and, at best, there is a reign of silence -- cold, antiseptic, deathly. Thus the service becomes heartless and mindless and soulless.

A story is told of one of the great leaders of the Musar movement, Rabbi Zvi Kovner, who became ill during the Sukkot holidays, and a doctor was called in to examine him. The physician's verdict was that the Rabbi was suffering from a bronchial infection. "I believe," said the doctor, "that you must have caught cold when you immersed yourself in the cold mikvah on the day before Yom Kippur."

"No," answered the Rabbi, "one does not become sick from immersing in a cold mikvah. I believe, rather, that my illness stems from another cold experience: my Neilah prayers were terribly cold this Yom Kippur, and it is from that that I probably caught cold and have become sick . . ."

Indeed so! If the prayers are remote, if the lips move but the heart remains unmoved, if the words tumble out but the soul does not tremble within, if we have keriah but not shirah, -- then the soul catches the death of a cold!

Indeed, the whole nature of the Jewish commitment can be described either as keriah: formal, conventional, impersonal -- or shirah: intensely real, loving, passionate, lively, and meaningful. If it be one of keriah, then our loyalty to Judaism is genuine but it is just one amongst many such loyalties, and in that case it is dispensible under pressure. If, however, our commitment is one of shirah, then it will retain its power and its freshness against all challenges.



What brings this to mind is an issue of overriding importance in American public life. Just as education in general is the life-blood of this country, so Jewish education is the life-blood of the American Jewish community. But the most important part of Jewish education, the Yeshivot or Day Schools, are usually insolvent and in a state of perpetual crisis. The President and the Congress have proposed and passed an education bill which will extend the benefits of American wealth in the form of greater and better education, to all children of this country. As such, there will be indirect and fringe benefits to the students of parochial schools as well, assistance being given not to the religious program but only to the secular aspects of the curriculum.

Now, honorable men can honestly differ as to whether this is good policy for this country. Yet, two things are clear. First, our Jewish Day Schools desperately need this kind of assistance if they are to survive. Second, even if this bill is not the best policy -- and I personally believe that it is -- nevertheless, the republic will survive it.

Given these facts, one would expect Jewish leaders and organizations whose loyalty to Judaism is real and unimpeachable, either to support the President and the Congress or, if opposed, to weigh their words very very carefully. Yet, to our everlasting humiliation, the very first group that has announced that it will challenge the legality of this new law is a Jewish one -- the American Jewish Congress! So we find a great Jewish organization,



supported by communal funds of the Jewish community, rushing not to support and enhance Jewish education, but to challenge the right of the government to help it. It has achieved a great coup: it beat out the Civil Liberties Union in challenging the government. But in the process it surrendered a bit of its Jewish soul and identity. This over-zealousness makes no friends for the Jews; it merely confirms the equation that lies inarticulate in the bottom of the hearts of so many non-Jews, that Jews equal agnostics, equal atheists, equal leftists, equal Communists. More significantly, this precipitous and impetuous action proves that the leadership of this organization has conceded its spiritual bankruptcy; its Jewish commitment is attenuated and enfeebled and hollow. No matter how much such people proclaim their Jewishness, keriah, their actions bespeak no shirah; there is nothing to make us sing. Would that their zeal for the future and the destiny of five and a half million Jews in the United States were one-half as great as their zeal for proving their questionable interpretations of fine points in constitutional law! No one demands that all national Jewish organizations achieve unanimity. But surely matters of such moment are sufficiently crucial for the future of Judaism for great Jewish organizations to exercise more patience, more discretion, and more deliberation.

In sum, the character of Hallel in the Seder as shirah rather than keriah has wide consequences. It bids us open ourselves to deeper, more intimate, and more binding human relationships. It reminds us to attend to children, to husband and wife,

and to friends, in a manner that is more involved, more engaging, more enduring, and more concerned. It challenges us to make our observance of the mitzvot, and particularly prayer, warmer and livelier, deeper and more intense. It inspires in us a commitment to Judaism that is more personal, more significant, and more determined.

Indeed the whole of the Seder shows the direction of this development from the impersonal to the personal, from the historical to the biographical, from recounting to reliving. Thus the central portion of the Haggadah explains each of the major symbols: the Pesah, the Matzah, the Maror. Each of these is defined in a manner more historical than personal. Thus, the reason for the Passover sacrifice is: שפסח הקב"ה על בתי -- God passed over our ancestors' homes in Egypt. We eat Matzah: -- שלא הספיק בצקם של אבותינו להחמיץ because the dough of our ancestors did not have time to ferment. And we eat the Maror: , על שום שמררו המצרים אל חיי אבותינו במצרים because the Egyptians embittered the lives of our ancestors in Egypt. All the Holiday seems to be a historical recollection. However, immediately thereafter we join the personal to the historical. We recite the בכל דור ודור in which we declare that we too are participants in the Exodus story: לא את אבותינו -- the redemption was not only of our ancestors, but of ourselves as well. Hence, immediately before the Hallel we raise our cups and declare לפיכך אנחנו חייבים להודות . . . למי שעשה לאבותינו ולנו -- את כל הנסים האלה.

therefore we are obligated to praise and thank Almighty God who performed all these miracles both for our ancestors and for us! And in anticipation of the great Hallel of this Passover Seder, -- ונאמר לפניו שירה חדשה הללויה, we shall recite before God a new shirah, a new song. No longer are we historians; now we are participants. Our praise is not keriah but shirah. We are ourselves involved with the great experience of redemption.

May that be our call this Passover, this year, and throughout our lives. May we learn to pierce the harsh facade of impersonality of modern life with the warm rays of a Jewish heart and soul. -- ונאמר לפניו שירה חדשה הללויה may we, and all Israel, and indeed all the world, recite before our Father in heaven a new shirah, a new song, singing of the redemption of all men and all mankind: Halleluyeh, praise ye the Lord!