

"PASSING LIFE BY"

A remarkable ceremony preceeds the recital of the Kol Nidre. The rabbi is accompanied by two elders of the synagogue, constituting a Beth Din, and proclaims permission for the avaryanim, sinners, those who commit an averah, to join the congregation in prayer. The permission is granted on behalf of the yeshivah shel maalah, the heavenly court, and the yeshivah shel matah, the court here on earth.

Why is this necessary? Is not Yom Kippur specifically made so that the sinner can pray for forgiveness? And who is not a sinner in the eyes of God? Ki lo yizku b'enekha ba-din, even the angels are not pure in the eyes of the Almighty. After all, for about ten times on this day we shall be reciting the al ch^eft, the confessions for the list of sins we have committed, and we shall be saying ashamnu, bagadnu - that we have sinned, we have dealt falsely, etc... In other words, each one of us can be counted amongst the chot'im and posh'im, the true sinners. Why, then, single out that type of sinner known as an avaryan, he who commits the kind of sin called a averah, for special opprobrium? Why does he, more than the others, require special permission in order to be able to join a congregation of people who are not all the paragons of piety?

Whatever the historical reasons may be for the brief ceremony, and they are not at all clear or certain, may I commend^{to}/your attention certain contemporary implications of this proclamation.

The chotei or posheia, he who commits sins of disobedience, is involved with G-d. He may reject His Torah, he may know the law and rebel against it, he may be angry and defiant and shake his fists at Heaven; but there is still hope for this kind of person on Yom Kippur. We invite him to the synagogue - in fact, Yom Kippur is one day when we acknowledge that the synagogue is specifically made for such people.

But the avaryan, he who commits the sin called averah, he ignores G-d altogether. He is neither for or against the Torah. He just doesn't care. The word averah comes from the Hebrew word avor which has a number of meanings, amongst them the most significant being: to pass by, to go by without noticing. Therefore, we are said to commit an averah when we do not take G-d or our fellow man seriously. We are so consumed by our/^{own}petty ambitions, our trivial affairs, our little circle of woes and worries and pleasures and pains, that we never really consider the existence of religious duty or ethical obligation or moral imperative or social conscience. ^{They} simply pass ~~us~~ us by. Great, traumatic historical events convulse our world, cry out to us to discover their meaning, beg us to transform our lives - but we are avaryanim, we look right through ^mthem, life passes us by while we remain supremely and sublimely indifferent to its consequences.

And what Jewish tradition tells us is that the chotei may come in and pray to God. A rebellious Jew may enter the synagogue, wrestle with his conscience, even leave unrepentant - but at least he remains involved with G-d. Because he has a relationship with G-d, because he has a relationship with his fellow men and his community, he is invited to the synagogue on this holiest night of the year, and he does not have to apologize for his presence.

But the avaryan - if he should stumble across the threshold of the synagogue by accident or habit or because of convention - he may not come in until two courts, two Beth Dins, give him explicit sanction: the heavenly court of yeshivah shel maalah to forgive him for ignoring G-d and Torah; and the earthly court, the yeshivah shel matah, represented by the three elders of the congregation, to forgive him for ignoring synagogue and society, neighbor and community. On Yom Kippur we are willing to take our chances with the rebel and the heretic and the bumptious; but we dread the dull and indifferent and self-centered. Hence, the avaryan needs special permission, in Heaven and on earth, before the Kol Nidre may be chanted in his presence.

Is it not true that the avaryan is the most dangerous of all types?

There once was a time when young people, especially in the universities, were committed to great causes. They joined pick^eet lines, they organized mass-meetings, they attended party conventions, they even participated in riots on behalf of what they considered just causes. They did not allow the great issues of their day -- whether economic justice or social progress or racial equality or political integrity, or religious convictions -- to pass them by unaffected. They enthusiastically entered the maelstrom of life, fed by the currents of their times. Today's average college student -- with the exception of such people as join Peace Corps, or those like James Meredith who have become the heroes of progress, in our day -- seeks ^{only} ~~why~~ to be accepted by the proper college or graduate school, with the purpose of obtaining a secure position - not a pioneering job filled with risks and opportunities, with both the dangers and thrills of opening exciting, new horizons, but a job which will give him pensions, tenure, and a lack of ^o ~~tyo~~ much competition. Don't speak to this young man - or woman - of ideals or causes or issues. They are outside his narrow interests in his ~~or her~~ own self. Avor -- they simply pass by someplace in the stratosphere, unconnected with his life in any real, substantial way.

As a teacher I have that experience personally. When I meet a student who either strongly agrees with me or vociferously disagrees - I am happy, because I have engaged him; we are involved. There is a dialogue. But I am deeply distressed by the mechanical note-taker whose heart is obviously elsewhere, whose attendance is perfunctory. As a rabbi, I am delighted when people accept and agree with my sermon. I am also happy when they tell me that they disagree with this or that point. I know that at least I have reached them, that we are together involved in a search for something higher, finer, and nobler. But I am hurt by those who neither agree nor disagree, who are simply uninterested, who lie at the dead center of life and refuse to raise their head to the tremendous issues of existence. The same is true in religion: the chotei, the active sinner who

disobeys, may yet obey some day. But he who ignores - in other words, the avaryan - can never come to consider the word of G-d. The one who defies G-d is less evil than one who ^{in his indifference} doesn't even want to know of Him. The chotei is at least engaged in a dialogue with his Creator. The avaryan is silent. Whether between teacher and pupil, or husband wife, or G-d and man, or the individual Jew and his synagogue -- to "have words," even angry words, is far superior and far preferable than not to be on speaking terms altogether.

And, unfortunately, how widespread is this disease of averah! American Jews have given unprecedented amounts to charity. Yet when you study the lists of the donors, you find that they add up to only a small fraction of the total Jewish community. There are, for instance, quite a number of Synagogues of various sizes and kinds on the West Side - yet how many people are either affiliated or attend services? Some who don't may object on principle. But most simply do not care, it never even occurred to them to be interested. There are thousands upon thousands of Jews in this, the most history-making era in our thirty-five-hundred year story, who are totally unconcerned with and unaffected by the unspeakable tragedy of European Jewry, the glory and the risks of the State of Israel, the profound changes now taking place in the worldwide Jewish community. It is an exciting, thrilling, dangerous, opportunity-filled time that we live in. Yet, except for a "krechitz" here and a little applause there - most people are avaryanim: life just passes them by. And it is these who need the special heter or permission by both the heavenly court and the earthly court to pray with their fellow Jews and appear before God on this holiest day of the year.

How does one avoid averah? How do you learn to become responsive and hence responsible? How can you make a dent in this crust of indifference that surrounds the heart? Allow me to recommend to you a well known passage of our Sages: histakel bi-shloshah devarim v'i atah ba li-dei averah. Consider three things and you will escape averah. Da me-ayin bata, know where you came from; l'an ata holekh, where you are going to; and lifnei mi ata atid li-ten din ve'cheshbon,

before Whom you must ultimately render an account of your life.

The first is da me'ayin bata, know where you come from. Allow me to give an entirely different answer from the one offered by the Sages, but one that may possibly be more appropriate for this audience. Many people keep aloof from Torah and Synagogue because of a religious inferiority feeling. They suspect that they are spiritually impotent, they simply lack a religious dimension and hence are naturally unequipped for religious commitment and involvement. To those who are avaryarim because of this reason, Judaism says: "know where you come from." You issue from the people who gave the Western world to religions. Your very genes and chromosomes bear the talents of a G-d-intoxicated people. In your veins you carry the blood not only of noble saints and distinguished religious personalities, but of ordinary men and women who, when the occasion demanded it, showed they were able to rise to ~~martyr~~dom. If this is the stock you come from, then you have, even if not consciously, the talent and potentiality for a creative religious life. With that knowledge, you will not shrink from your Jewish responsibilities, and you will then avoid averah.

There is another type that ignores Judaism and the Jewish community because they want to "get places" in this country. They are young people who are so caught up in their ambition to make a mark in life, that they presumptuously ignore their fellow Jews, fearing that their Jewishness may prove cumbersome. To them the Rabbis said: consider l'an ata holekh, remember where you are going - mekom afar, rimah ve'tole'a: to the grave. When man remembers the end of all men, his ambitions are blunted, and he becomes much more chastened and considerate. In a wider sense, that question must be directed to all those who regard their Jewishness as standing in the way of their ^{and mundane} American ambitions. Remember where you are going. If you do not take along your Jewishness with you, if you abandon Torah, if you try to appear as un-Jewish as you can - then your end will be a bland assimilation, the graveyard of the spirit. Your children will not ^{they will be rootless,} know who they are, their self-identity will be blurred. Spiritual depth, deep psychological wounds, and a denial of their selves and their roots - that is the

result of averah.

But most people who ignore Torah and the Jewish community do so not because of feelings of worthlessness or ambition. They do so merely because they are busy. They are caught up in their daily affairs which oppress them and depress them and keep them running in ~~/~~ vicious circles. The routine of getting up in the morning, a quick breakfast, off to dull work throughout the day in an attempt to make a living, returning home, rushing out for a busy social life or to the television set... or, for the wife, the same day-in, day-out, year-in, year-out routine of shopping, buying, returning, preparing the household for the family -- we are so taken up with the trivial details of making a living and actually living, that it never occurs to us to think of the higher demands of existence, of something transcendent and more enduring. We are too taken up with the din ve'cheshbon, the business of every-day existence. And so to us the Jewish tradition cries out: remember lifnei mi ata atid li-ten div ve'cheshbon, before Whom you must ultimately give the true din ve'cheshbon, the real accounting. In the long stretch of a man's life, his daily affairs sink into insignificance, and he must answer ultimate questions. Well, how are we going to do that if we continue in the way of averah?

The world today is torn between the forces of decency, faith, religion, and those diametrically opposed to it. When the day comes that we stand before the heavenly court and we are asked: what did you do about it? - will we be able to offer the excuse that we were busy with our every day affairs? Do such excuses count, do they matter? We live in an era of great events: what have we done in an attempt to help Israel prosper? -- to save the remnants of those Jews now being driven out of the Asian and African countries? -- to help establish the sovereignty of Torah in America? -- to advance Jewish education amongst our children? -- to stem the tide of intermarriage? Shall we answer that we were too involved in the stock market? - or shopping? ^{or} -/the newest fashions?

My dear friends, on this holiest night of the year, I plead with all of you to banish this plague of averah forever. G-d calls out to ~~the~~ you tonight: remember

Me in the way you eat, with Kashruth; remember Me in what you want, through prayer; remember Me in the way you work, through the observance of the Sabbath; remember Me in your dealings with your fellow men through the observance of Jewish ethics. The synagogue calls out to you: come closer to us, be with us not only three times a year but constantly; educate your children, educate yourself by coming to our study programs. We want you to feel that this is your synagogue. We want the synagogue to enter into you even as you enter into the synagogue. We want you to participate with us in every-which-way in our attempt to shape the destiny of our people in this country and throughout the world. We want you to identify with us, to be with us, to participate and involve your families with us. Break out of the vicious cycle of your petty din ve'cheshbon, so that you may engage both G-d and fellow man. Do not pass the great issues of life by because you were "busy" with things which, in the long run, will appear so trivial and insignificant.

Tonight, as is our annual custom, we call upon you to contribute to the upkeep of this, your House of G-d. The fact of your giving, and the amount of your giving, will be an indication of how deeply you want to be involved in our program, in our ideals, in our way of life. Those who remain silent and who fail to practice Jewish generosity are guilty of averah. Those who proudly announce that they will assist this synagogue in continuing its activities, they have broken through the shell of indifference. They have justified the permissiveness of the yeshivah shel maalah and the yeshivah shel matah. They have shown that they are on this Judgment Day, prepared to render a higher and nobler and greater din ve'cheshbon to their Creator.

Let me leave you with this one story of a real event that occurred to a colleague of mine that will perhaps summarize what I have been saying.

This rabbi was returning from a funeral of a man whom he knew well. He was sitting in the car next to the man's son - a young, upcoming, successful businessman. He noticed that the young man was unusually distressed and grieved even

more than he had expected. "Is there anything special bothering you?" asked the rabbi of the young man. After a few moments hesitation, the young man answered, "Yes, rabbi. There is something very special. I shall never/forgive myself. Ten minutes before father died, he picked up the telephone and tried desperately to reach me. He wanted to speak to me because he knew that his life was ebbing. He wanted to have his last words with me, his only son. And so he tried and tried and tried... But... the line was busy..."

Our Heavenly Father calls us today, my friends. He is trying desperately to reach us as the last moments of the year ebb away. Will your line be busy? Will you be taken with idle chatter, idle thoughts, idle excuses - or will you pick up the phone, connect yourself^{ves} to Almighty G-d, our Heavenly Father, and speak to Him...?

Put down, I plead with you, the telephone of weekdayishness, of every-day din ve'cheshbon, of "busy-ness," of averah. Don't let the line be busy. Instead, let us listen for a Higher Voice. Your Father is calling. Let us answer - and let us respond with love and with generosity.