

"BARUKH HASHEM"

This is a great and historic day in the life of our nation and of our entire civilization. Tonight at 7 P.M., the longest, angriest, most divisive, most sickening war of American history will officially come to an end. There is little exultation and no element of triumph in our national reaction to this event -- just a sense of deep, inner relief for the end of this war in which there emerged no winners, and all were losers.

How shall we, as Jews, react to these good tidings from Indochina? There are only two words adequate to express our Jewish reaction: Barukh Hashem, "thank God."

Indeed, whenever we announce or hear good news, whether it be of international scope or personal interest, the reaction of the Jew is: Barukh Hashem, "praised be the Lord," or "thank God." What is the source of this very Jewish expression? The answer is: a goy! The first one to utter these words was a Midianite. Thus we read today

וַיֹּאמֶר יִתְרוֹ מִדְיָן הַכֹּהֵן מִצְרַיִם אֶל מֹשֶׁה וְאֶל אֲרָאָה בְּנוֹתָיו וְאֶת כָּל־אֶחָיו הַמִּדְיָאִים וְאֶת מִלְכָּם וְאֶת כָּל־אֶחָיו הַמִּדְיָאִים וְאֶת מִלְכָּם וְאֶת כָּל־אֶחָיו הַמִּדְיָאִים וְאֶת מִלְכָּם

Jethro said to Moses, his son-in-law: "praised be the Lord who saved you this day from the hand of Egypt and the hand of Pharaoh." The Talmud comments on this remark by Jethro:

וְיִתְרוֹ מִדְיָן הַכֹּהֵן מִצְרַיִם אֶל מֹשֶׁה וְאֶת אֲרָאָה בְּנוֹתָיו וְאֶת כָּל־אֶחָיו הַמִּדְיָאִים וְאֶת מִלְכָּם וְאֶת כָּל־אֶחָיו הַמִּדְיָאִים וְאֶת מִלְכָּם וְאֶת כָּל־אֶחָיו הַמִּדְיָאִים וְאֶת מִלְכָּם

it is a shame, a disgrace, for Moses and six hundred thousand Israelites that not one of them thought of saying the words barukh hashem until Jethro taught them to do so.

Now that is a strange remark indeed. Do the Rabbis really have the right to fault Moses and the Israelites in such harsh language -- "shame, disgrace" -- for not having originated the expression barukh hashem? After all, the concept behind the words is that of gratitude, and תודה (thankfulness) is a basic principle of Judaism. The word "Jew," as I have often pointed out, essentially means "thank God," because Yehudah (Judah, Judea) derives from Leah's remark upon the birth of Judah, וְעַתָּה אֶתְּהַלְלֶנּוּ לַיהוָה, "this time I shall thank the Lord." The first thing the Jew says upon arising is וְאֵלֹהֵינוּ יְהוָה, I thank God. And Saadia, a thousand years ago, maintained that if he were to reconstruct all of Judaism on the basis of reason alone, his first and most enduring principle would be: gratitude. In that case, how can the Talmud fault Moses and the Israelites for being ungrateful?

The answer is, I submit, that gratitude was not at all in question. Alongside with gratitude there is another basic Jewish quality and that is -- realism, a pragmatic and practical approach to the world and its problems. The Jew's practicality has revealed itself not only in his penchant for science and for business, but also in the manner he has made his way through history. And Moses too, for all his prophetic gifts, was an eminently practical man. Consider his position when he met his father-in-law Jethro. He knew that the victories he had achieved so far, such as the exodus from Egypt and the crossing of the Red Sea and the fight against Amalek, were all wrought by God in a miraculous and supernatural fashion. His own people, by themselves, were in effect nothing but a collection of slaves, disparate tribes whom he had taken out of slavery, but he had not yet succeeded in taking the slavery out of them. They were weak, demoralized, they lacked courage and fortitude. Here he was, leading this heterogeneous group of disheartened men and women into a cruel desert, facing implacable enemies, and without enough to eat or drink. From a rational and realistic point of view, he had every right and even duty to be pessimistic, and one cannot blame him had he fallen into despair. How can anyone have confidence in himself and his people under such conditions?

So while Moses was certainly grateful to the Almighty for the past, he was correctly pessimistic about the future.

Into this context came Jethro, and when he said barukh hashem, "praised be the Lord," he did not mean to teach Moses gratitude. What he did mean to say was that Moses must learn from the past and must carry the lesson of confidence from the past into the future. Moses, he was saying to him, you have had problems before, and you overcame them. Never mind that it required the intervention of God -- so does all of life! You have survived the exodus and the crossing of the Red Sea and the fight against Amalek and the hundred and one problems that have unceasingly plagued you. You have overcome them. So, barukh hashem -- this is not meant merely as a pious expression, but as a confidence-inspiring message for the future: the Lord be praised. He who has helped you till now will help you to continue into the future. Look at the past and the present, and from it you will derive confidence for the future.

That is what Jethro taught Moses, and through him, all of Israel for all generations to come. Gratitude for the past must be transformed into confidence in the future.

This lesson of Jethro has become assimilated into the Jewish national character. But the Rabbis expanded and elaborated this idea and made something even greater out of it. For them, barukh hashem was not only a concept applied to, or a value contingent upon, good news, but bad news as well. A famous text in the Mishnah states:

אדם חייב לברך את ה' על כל דבר הטוב והרע  
 a man must bless the Lord for bad news as well as for good news. Just as upon hearing good news one must recite a blessing (whether barukh hashem or hallel), so upon hearing bad news, whether of death or disaster or of loss of any kind, he must recite a blessing (barukh hashem). This Mishnah has caused one wit to say that the expression barukh hashem is a Jewish version of the Fifth Amendment -- just as when a defendant "takes the Fifth," we do not know if he is innocent or guilty, so when a Jew answers barukh hashem to a query about his state of health, we do not know if he is well or ill...

What did the Rabbis mean by this statement? I do not believe that they meant to expatiate on the virtue of suffering, nor do I believe that they implied the theological concept of the negative quality of evil, that it is metaphysically merely the absence of the good. I believe they meant that suffering is a given; into every life there must come woe and worrying and sadness and tribulation. The challenge to man, to the Jew, is what he is going to do with that suffering. He is expected by the Almighty to redeem it, not to allow it to go to waste; to use the suffering in order to broaden his horizons, to learn sympathy for other sufferers as well. The curse must become a blessing, the malediction must become a benediction.

And so, Jethro taught us that for good news we say barukh hashem and learn to trust in the future; and the Rabbis taught us that even if we are beset by suffering and bad news, then too we must say barukh hashem and learn to use it in order to create a better and happier future.

Thus it is that Jewish character must be an <sup>amalgam</sup> of realism and optimism, based upon something we learned originally from a Gentile.

I just returned a day ago from Israel. I cannot bring you any exciting, good news about its religious problems. The country is sharply divided over these issues. There are still large numbers of Israelis who are devoid of any Jewish feelings. In the religious community itself, the split over the Chief Rabbinate is exceedingly painful and conducive to an abysmal <sup>עלון</sup>, a desecration of the divine Name. I shall not now comment critically or analytically on this particular controversy. Suffice it to say that the government circles have done no great favor to

the new Chief Rabbi by giving the impression that with a wave of the hand he will permit everything and anything, as if he were a one-man Israeli version of the Central Conference of American Rabbis, the Reform Rabbi par excellence of Israel. That is nonsense, and an injustice to Rabbi Goren. There has been far too much comment by these circles, far too much discussion, far too many false hopes that have been raised. On the other side, we have been treated to an escalation of rhetoric that is incredible in any civilized society. One would imagine from all that was said, that the new Chief Rabbi is a kind of anti-halakhic demon. Yet it is unfortunately not a new phenomenon in the history of Israeli Jewry. These are largely the same people who embittered the life of Rabbi Herzog, of blessed memory, and who heaped woe and worry and anguish upon the sainted Rabbi Kook. Those very circles who always maintained that they do not recognize the Chief Rabbinate, even when Rabbis Kook and Herzog were at its head, now have the amusing and absurd temerity to announce that henceforth they will no longer recognize the halakhic decisions of the new Chief Rabbi.

And yet, despite all this turmoil and divisiveness, I say: barukh hashem! Thank God. Thank God that we have a Jewish country in which Jews can disagree as loudly as they want. Thank God that religion and Torah are taken so seriously that there are those that defend it or attack it with overstatement. Thank God that we have an Israel in which such controversies can take place, instead of another version of the Diaspora in which religion and Torah are simply bypassed altogether.

A friend of mine, a brilliant Israeli diplomat, said a wise thing. Israel is a most miraculous state. Consider how, in its twenty five years, it satisfies almost no one. Religious Jews are certainly not satisfied that Israel is the fulfillment of all our visions. Walk along Dizengoff St. in Tel Aviv on Friday night, or watch the movies and public transportation in Haifa or Givatayim on Shabbat, or have your Sabbath sleep disturbed on Saturday afternoons near the sports stadium in Jerusalem, and you will know the Messiah has not come. The secular Jew too, in turn, is very unhappy with Israel. For him, its religious legislation is an annoyance and an irksome vestige. Reform Jews and secularist Jews are convinced that Israel is imperfect so long as it is what they consider a theocratic state. Politically and economically the same thing holds true. People who come from democratic countries maintain that Israel is an example of an impossibly inept socialist bureaucracy. And old time socialists bemoan the passing of people like Gordon and ask how this country can be truly idealistic if it allows Arabs to perform menial tasks and Jews to become the same kind of people they were in the Diaspora. So,



no one is satisfied with Israel -- spiritually, religiously, politically, economically. And yet -- it is Israel. Our Israel! It grows, it develops -- barukh hashem!

Such must be our Jewish attitude, which we learned from Jethro. We must learn to be thankful, sanguine, and hopeful, to accept challenges and difficulties, even frustrations. We must learn to say barukh hashem, and to appreciate that it would be disgraceful -- חלילה ! -- to act otherwise.

So, let us pray that we shall be able to say these words not on חלילה but on חלילה, not on bad news which must inevitably come into every life, but always and overwhelmingly for happy and good and cheeful news. Barukh Hashem!