

"WISHING THE WORLD A SPEEDY RECOVERY"

I had a dream last night: I was leafing through the New York Times in the late 1900's, when my eyes chanced upon the following item in the obituary column:

WORLD, THIS. Passed away yesterday morning, after long illness. Death came quietly instead of by nuclear explosion. No survivors, no mourners. Services will be conducted in Heaven by a relieved Creator.

It requires no dream, no nightmare, but a hard-headed and analytic realism to look at the world and conclude that it is sick and moribund, a candidate for the obituary columns of the cosmos.

Here are some quick examples of dreadful symptoms: the USSR, a superpower of hundreds of millions of people, is afraid to let a hundred thousand Jews out, and decides to risk its economic and technological future by cracking down on a hand-full of ideological dissenters.

African nations self-righteously condemn white countries as imperialists and colonialists, and proceed to destroy neighboring (black) tribes with genocidal relish.

The United States is mortally wounded by Watergate. Its normal, healthy sexual inhibitions have withered up and vanished. Its clergymen having already excused every sexual deviancy as acceptable in the name of "love," its psychiatrists now declare that homosexuality is no longer an illness -- as if proclamation can change the nature of perversity. The whole country is being "liberated" to death.

Israel is undergoing an erosion of its government and experiencing major political malaise. The first Jewish Commonwealth in over two thousand years, brought into being by the teachings, traditions, and aspirations of a people nourished for millenia by Judaism, feigns ignorance of "who is a Jew." Religious Jews are torn apart by internal dissension. The Neturei Karta delivers itself of an anti-Zionist diatribe not in a Jewish journal, but on the pages of the New York Times -- on the weekend of Yom Ha'atzmaut.

So the world is indeed sick, and we must wish it a speedy recovery. It is desperately in need of a refuah shelemah.

And yet, despite my lack of expertise in either political or medicinal science, I venture that there is a basic difference between Israel and most of the rest of the world in the nature and etiology of their respective illnesses.

I can best describe this difference in terms of the two Sidras which we read this morning. Both tell of organic conditions which lead to the state of טומאה or impurity, and which require the process of טהרה (purification) and the offering of sacrifices.

The difference is that the first Sidra, "אשה כי תזרע", tells of the anguish of childbirth, and the procedure that a mother must go through after delivering a baby. It is what in Yiddish is called, charmingly, א געזונטער קרענק, a "healthy illness." Whereas the second Sidra, "מצורע", speaks of leprosy, of plague, of the pathological. The Rabbis said, with a full measure of justice, מצורע הרי הוא כמת, a leper is as one who has died.

The first Sidra, תולדות, thus speaks of birth pains; the second, מצורע, speaks of death pangs. תולדות treats of the instability of growth; מצורע, of the stench of decay.

To my mind, Israel's malaise is that of תולדות, while the rest of the world is caught up in the predicament of the מצורע, the leper.

Of course, I know that I am oversimplifying. But permit me to explain.

We American Jews are sorely distressed at events in Israel on this, its 26th anniversary. But it is time that we stopped looking at Israel like incurable romantics. It is time for us to be realistic. Israel's internal wrangling, its self-doubts, its purging of old leadership, its profound uneasiness -- all this is a catharsis which will yet bring out the best in Israeli society: a new sense of caring, of concern, of participation. We have reason to hope that Israel will reemerge with renewed faith, with high resolve, with rediscovered patriotism.

Out of all this there will take place rebirth, not only of a new Israeli leadership, but perhaps a new Israeli society -- one less prone to lose the idealism of early Zionism in favor of imported Americanism, less arrogant, more attuned to the Jewish history and culture and faith of the 3500 years before 1948, and with more trust in its new generation.

I know that the battles and the arguments are disconcerting. But it was an American President, James Madison, who taught us that democracies always show off their internal controversies, and are all the stronger for it.

In the last book of the Torah (Bd. 21) we read:

וְעַל פִּיהֶם יִהְיֶה בַל רֵב וְכָל נֹגֵעַ -

"by them (the priests) shall be decided every controversy and every plague." The Rabbis asked: וְכִי מֵה עֵינִן רִיבִים אֶצֶל נֹגְעִים ?
What is the relation of controversy to plague?

The question is right. And the answer is that they sometimes seem alike -- they both appear as illnesses, as sicknesses, as weaknesses. But there is a vast difference between them. The arguments and infighting can be part of the difficult process of coming to great decisions; plague and leprosy are debilitating. Israel today is in the category of כָּל רֵב; whereas the world, or most of it, is beset by וְכָל נֹגֵעַ.

Consider what the world did this week. After the brutal and sadistic assault by three Palestinian terrorists who killed 18 innocent people, mostly women and children, in Kiryat Shemona, and injured 18 more, the Israeli responded by a raid in Southern Lebanon. They warned the inhabitants of the houses to leave and then blew up the houses. No one was killed, except for one possible casualty which was completely accidental.

This week the Security Council met. It condemned Israel by name, by a vote of 13-0. It did not mention the Palestinian guerillas or their atrocities.

These 13 countries have proved themselves to be lepers! I know: there is a matter of oil, of economics, of energy, of politics. I do not expect countries to keep moral issues paramount in their policies or diplomacy. But is there no limit to this hypocrisy? Can they be so morally obtuse that they cannot bring themselves to condemn the murder of little children?

The Rabbis listed those sins of society for which the plague of leprosy (**נגעים**) is visited upon it. Amongst others, they listed: **מוציא שם רע** (slander), **לשון הרע** (gossip), **גסות הרוח** (vulgarity and insensitivity), **משלוח מלחמה** (causing strife amongst others), **ענינים רמות** (supercilliousness), **לשון שקר** (falsehood), **לב חושב מחשבות און** (hearts which think evil thoughts), **רגלים מהירים לרע** (feet which hasten to do evil).

Do you recognize these qualities? They are a veritable Security Council of evil traits!

And yet the Biblical perscription was reversed this week. The Torah commands the **מצורע**, the leper, to perform a **שלוח המחנות**, to be sent away and cast out of the community. But in the United Nations this week, it was Israel's Ambassador Tekoah who walked out, while the others remained where they were, in this international leper's colony!

I recognize that my rhetoric may be strong, that I am overlooking important subtleties and fine distinctions, that politics is a finely honed procedure. I know that many non-Jews and even some marginal Jews are astounded at **our** intensity in **our** commitment to Israel. I myself certainly do not intend that Jews must ignore or neglect the rest of the world. The world is too small for that, and I think we are too sophisticated for that.

But I unabashedly admit that I subscribe to the thesis of Rabbi Yehudah Halevi that **לב האומות**, "Israel is the heart of the nations!"

By that I mean, and Halevi meant, that without Israel the world will cease to exist -- or cease exist as a civilized community; that Israel by itself can no more exist than a heart can pump without the rest of the body; that Israel's existence is meant to serve the rest of the world and give it life; that Israel, like the heart, is a sensitive organ, which registers every pain and every joy, every disillusionment and every fulfillment that is experienced by all the rest of mankind.

Because I believe in God and in the Covenant and in the meaningfulness of life and world and history, to and for all people, I believe that Israel is the **לב האומות**, "the heart of the nations."

And therefore when I get the feeling that many world leaders and academic theoreticians consider Israel a "headache," I respond by warning them that it is not so: Israel is really your heartache!

Israel's Independence Day follows Yom Hashoah, Holocaust Day, by exactly one week. It is a warning to the world: the Holocaust was a major heart-attack for civilization. It is a warning to the world: you can't afford another coronary. For the sake of the world itself, we Jews of the Diaspora are determined that we will not let Israel down!

And because I believe that Israel is the heart of the nations, I have hope for all of them. Because Israel is now undergoing creative agonies (those of משה בן תור), while so much of the rest of the world is in various stages of decay (מצור), I believe that a healthy heart will save the rest of the mankind.

The moral sickness of the international community arouses in me more pity and sympathy than does the political and social malaise of Israel.

I feel for the world, even in my revulsion at its offensive disease.

And it is in order to avoid the nightmare of its effective demise that I wish it a "speedy recovery," and pray
מי שברך את אבותינו אברהם יצחק ויעקב הוא ברוך את החולה כל העולם כולו, רבואת הנפש ורפואת הגוף

May He who blessed the forefathers of Israel bless the patient -- the entire world !!-and grant it a complete recovery, of both body and soul, morally and politically and economically.

May Israel, too, experience healing of its self and its soul, as it goes through the creative agonies of rebirth as described in תורה, bringing health and recovery to a world that has become a leper, a מצור.

This month Iyyar (אייר), the month which the State of Israel was established, is a month that we must pray for health of all the world.

For so it is written in some of the holy books, that the Hebrew word אייר forms the initial letters of that great phrase from the Book of Exodus: אני ה' רופאך
"I am the Lord who heals thee."