

"NATURE AND HISTORY"

There are two universal categories of thought that are especially significant in Jewish religious consciousness: Nature and History.

By Nature I mean the whole complex of things that follow the eternal laws of the physical world in space. By History I refer to the flow of events in time, that which gives people the memory of the past, meaning in the present, and defines for them a vision of a destiny in the future.

In the realm of Nature there is rigidity and sameness; once the world was created, all natural laws were fixed and one has no choice but to live within the framework of these laws. History, however, is unpredictable; men are free to shape their own future by exercising their free will.

In Nature every object is the same as every other object; one fate befalls them all. There is no distinction in value between the mind of the genius and the bark of the tree, between the heart of a saint and the digestive system of a worm. In History, however, values play a key role. Some ideas are greater than others, some people better than others, some objects holier than others. It is History which contains these specifically human moments; it is that which makes man unique. Here we find the spiritual element.

That both are important for Judaism can be amply illustrated. The Shabbat, for example, is celebrated -- as we proclaim in our Kiddush -- as a memorial for two events: זכר למעשה בראשית, the fact of the creation of Nature by God; and זכר ליציאת מצרים, the historical event of the exodus from Egypt.

Similarly, each of the great holidays has both a natural and historical dimension. Passover, Sukkot, and Shavuot are all harvest festivals; they emphasize man's religious reliance upon God, and his gratitude to Him, for the bounty of nature He has bestowed upon him. At the same time, each of the festivals celebrates a specific historic event: the crossing of the Red Sea, the protection offered to our ancestors in the desert, and the revelation on Mount Sinai.

The two blessings we recite before the Shema are similarly divided according to this pattern. The first blessing, both in the morning and the evening, praises God as the Master of Nature; He is המעריב ערבים, the One who brings on the eventide with the stars and the moon, and He is also the יוצר המאורות, the One who creates the sun in the daytime. The second blessing, the one immediately preceeding the Shema, speaks of הבורח בעמו ישראל באהבה, God who expressed His love for Israel by choosing Israel: in other words, by the act of revelation of מתן תורה, God entered into the stream of History and irrevocably altered the course of human events.

Furthermore, we find the elements of Nature and History even in the very Names we apply to God. The holiest of these, the Name of Four Letters (Tetragrammaton, or what we call in Hebrew השם,

or in English "the Lord") represents God <sup>as</sup> ~~and~~ the Lord of history, as in the verse וַיֵּרֶד ה' עַל הָר סִינַי, "and the Lord went down upon Mount Sinai." This is God in His personal aspect, as he relates to man and his history and destiny. The other is the name אלקים, or, in English, "God." This Name refers to the Almighty as the Creator, as the Master of all the powers and forces that go into the cosmos, as in the verse בְּרֵאשִׁית בָּרָא אֱלֹקִים אֶת הַשָּׁמַיִם וְאֶת הָאָרֶץ, "in the beginning God created heaven and earth." The author of the Tanya aptly remarks, אלקים -- the Name אלקים is numerically equal to "nature."

Both concepts, therefore, are necessary. We are incomplete if we lack either one. If we live only in Nature without a consciousness of History, we become no more than efficient animals. We lose our uniqueness, we abdicate our destiny and thus our humanity. This spells the destruction of the life of the spirit. It robs us of our memory and it destroys our vision of the future.

To live only in History without Nature is also wrong, if not impossible. One becomes, quite literary, "unnatural." To ignore the demands of Nature means that one is doomed to a life that is unreal, unrooted. One then suffers from an exaggerated spiritualism, which in religion is often represented by asceticism, a self-abnegation in which one deprives the body of its legitimate needs because of a wrong and mistaken notion that one thereby elevates the spirit.

Both, therefore, are vital for man if he is to rise to the full stature of his humanity. At the very beginning of creation we were told וַיֵּצֵר ה' אֱלֹקִים אֶת הָאָדָם "and the Lord God created man" -- note the use of both Names; עָפָר מִן הָאָדָמָה, "dust from

the earth" -- man as a completely natural being; and then, ויפח  
נשמה , "He blew into his nostrils the נשמה , the  
soul or breath of life" -- a spirit, a consciousness of time and  
of destiny.

(Life and death too may be viewed through these bifocals  
of Nature and History. What is death if not the victory of Nature  
over History, <sup>the</sup> and inexorable triumph of natural law bringing bio-  
logical existence to an end, snuffing out human life with its highly  
individual history, its unique biography, its secret strivings and  
intimate loves and hates?

(And what is the consolation that Judaism offers for those  
who have survived the dead? They are two in number: first, the  
assurance that History continues in some manner unvanquished by  
Nature. This is the principle of immortality, and the assertion  
of עולם הבא , a world of the spirit where consciousness continues  
undaunted and unvictimized by the inevitable attrition of natural  
laws. And second, the comforting knowledge that the Nature into  
which the body dissolves, this too is the work of God. One returns  
to the bosom of his Maker by means of rejoining Nature. That is why  
the traditional greeting extended to the mourners, המקום ינחם אותך  
"may the Almighty console you amongst all other mourners of Zion  
and Jerusalem," uses the Talmud's special name for God: המקום,  
which literally means "the space." Space is the arena of Nature,  
even as Time is that of History; המקום, therefore, refers to God  
as <sup>the</sup> Master of Nature. That is the consolation offered to the  
mourners: the Nature into which the deceased has been absorbed,  
that too is of God.)

Granted, then, that both are important, even vital; is there however, a competition or tension between them? And if there is, does Judaism give preference to one over the other?

The answer is yes: there is a tension, there is a competition, and Judaism does have a preference -- and that preference is for History over Nature. The sanctity of the former, קדושת הזמן, is superior to that of the latter, קדושת המקום.

This difference in value is peculiarly evident in the last part of this morning's Sidra. We are offered by the Torah a variety of seemingly unrelated laws, which include the following: פדיון הבן, the commandment that the first-born male be redeemed by the father; the law of בכורות, which implies the same for one's livestock; the commandment of זכר ליציאת מצרים, constantly to remember the exodus from Egypt; and the command to refrain from חמץ and to eat מצה on the week of Passover.

What do these various laws have in common? I believe that all of them stress the significance of History over that of Nature.

The exodus of our people from Egypt represented a singular triumph of History over Nature. By Nature alone, our ancestors should have remained slaves in Egypt, sharing the fate of other slave nations of that era. By the inner logic of events, pre-determined by the massive and impersonal forces of society and circumstances, we should naturally have disappeared, vanished into the anonymity of oblivion. But something happened: history was made. God entered the stream of human events, He took out a "nation from within a nation," and effected a reversal of the natural course. A slave people was dragged reluctantly from the flesh-pots

of degradation to the sublime summits of Sinai. History outwitted Nature. "A memory of the exodus from Egypt" -- זכר יציאת מצרים !

How appropriate, therefore, is the law concerning חמץ and מצה on the Passover, that festival which celebrates the exodus! חמץ symbolizes Nature, for it is prepared by a process which follows an uninterrupted, natural course of events. It follows naturally that when you mix flour and water and yeast and apply heat, that the dough should rise, and as a result of the leavening bread is baked. מצה, however, represents the disruption of Nature in favor of History. The process is cut short. The bread-baking is stopped prematurely, even as the Almighty took Israel out of Egypt בחפזון, suddenly, in a manner unforeseen by human eyes. מצה is a symbol of the divine impinging upon the world, of History outmaneuvering Nature. It teaches that Israel must not become subservient to the forces of Nature; it must transcend them by the development of individuality and uniqueness, by personality and soul, by rising to a high, pre-ordained historic purpose.

The same idea is inherent in the institution of the redemption of the first-born, פדיון הבן. The child to be redeemed is completely a product of Nature. Interestingly, the mother-child relationship is a profoundly natural one; it bespeaks a deep, intimate, immediate biological relationship. The father-child relationship, however, is more remote, less natural, more abstract, less evident and certain. This relationship is more one of authority and ultimate origins, and hence more spiritual in quality. Thus we speak of אבינו שבשמים "our Father in Heaven." Now, the child to be redeemed is not the first-born of the father, but specifically פטר רחם, the first-born to the mother, and hence one who, in his unredeemed state,



represents most strikingly the natural; a relationship that is emphasized by the equation of the human first-born to animal first-lings; -- **באדם ובהמה לי הוא** --, the same law of redemption refers to humans and to animals. And who is it who does the redeeming? -- the father, who represents that which is beyond nature, the historical. It is he who redeems the child from his bonds to Nature by releasing him from the shackles of the everyday, and by responding to the command of **קדש לי**, of sanctity and holiness, by sublimating and transcending the natural, by overcoming initial limitations, by reaching beyond the environment and the purely natural milieu. From the status of a **פטר רחם**, in which man is but an animal, the child reaches the stage of **קדש** through the redeeming act of the father, who represents the whole of Jewish history.

There was a time in Jewish life when we overdid the emphasis of History over Nature. This took place in the 2,000 years of our exile, when we were herded into ghettos, and our life was utterly unnatural. We had no home, no nation, no roots. We lost contact even with that part of our religion which speaks of the sanctity of the natural, the **מצוות החלויות בארץ**, those commandments which relate to the Land of Israel. We had an exaggerated interest in the mind and the spirit and in culture, because we were totally cut off from contact with the realm of Nature.

Zionism sought to correct this imbalance. It tried to bring us back to a home, and therefore to a more natural setting. Indeed, Zionism was successful. Today the State of Israel represents our return to our own nature.

Today, however, the real problem is the reverse. Nowadays we find that Nature has begun to triumph over History. In the State of Israel, the <sup>grave issue</sup> ~~real problem~~ is the loss of historic continuity, the threat to the uniqueness to the Jewish people, and peril that the increase in our geography will take place at the expense of our history. We may yet become, Heaven forbid, so "naturalized" as to be indistinguishable from any other advanced Levantine people.

In the Diaspora, too, we are faced with the great threat of assimilation and intermarriage -- which are completely natural for a minority people in a democratic state. Nature alone will guarantee the loss of our historical identity: the survival of our physical selves, but the defeat of our metaphysical identities.

In the recent Zionist congress in Jerusalem there was voiced an acknowledgement of this threat, and a call for a return to and strengthening of our religious bonds. Unfortunately this call is a bit late, and it is not voiced convincingly enough. Furthermore, it borders on the ridiculous for the people who are avowed atheists and agnostics to advise other Jews to be religious. "Religion" is not a prescription that one writes out for others, it is not a kind of cultural aspirin, or a form of ethnic therapy. It requires commitment, participation, belief, and the partaking of a community's <sup>genuine</sup> ~~great~~ dedication to God. It is our hope, nonetheless, that our fellow Jews all over the globe will recognize the need to reassert the historical aspect of Jewish life, which is embodied in Torah and in our great oral tradition, and which alone can guarantee the survival of the people of Israel as a unique people on the face of the earth.



It is most appropriate that our Sidra ends with the law of the Tefillin: -- והיה לאות על ידכה ולטוטפות בין עיניך -- these Tefillin shall be a sign on your hand and frontlets between your eyes. The Tefillin of the hand or arm, the תפילין של יד, represents the forces of Nature. It is with the arm that one creates progress and builds a home. That is why during the blessing of the morning service we touch the Tefillin of the hand when we recite the blessing אנוך ישראל בגבורה, blessing God who girds Israel with strength; for the Tefillin of the hand represents the strength to create a setting for ourselves within Nature. And by the same token the Tefillin of the head, תפילין של ראש, represents History. In the head and in the mind is the repository of the Jew's soul and his spirit, which is the essence of his History. No wonder that during the same morning blessings we touch these Tefillin of the head when we bless God who is עוטר ישראל בתפארה, who crowns Israel with pride or beauty: the History of our people is indeed our pride and our beauty.

We who desire to remain Jews and wish for our posterity to continue in the ways of our forebears, shall always abide by the Tefillin and its message of affirmation that both elements, Nature and History, the life of the body and of the soul, are both part of the Jew. We shall never relinquish either one.

The dream of the Jew today remains that it always was: גאולה שלימה, the complete redemption. And redemption means for us both a vindication of our History, that time in the future when all the promises made to our ancestors in the past will have been proven true by the Almighty; and the return of Israel to its own natural setting, its own homeland. This dream we cherish now and always;

the redemption of our history by the return to our home, the  
land of holiness.      וְבֵא לְצִיּוֹן גּוֹאֵל , May the Redeemer come to  
Zion.

Amen.