

"DEFEAT AS THE FRUIT OF DESPAIR"

There is a Scriptural "aside" in today's brief but beautiful Sidra which is full of significance. After announcing the terms of the berit or covenant, with all the benedictions and maledictions which follow upon obedience or disobedience, the Torah now directs its remarks to the individual Jew:

"וְהָיָה בְּשָׁמְעוֹ אֶל-וְדָבָר הַזֶּה וְהִלָּלָה בְּלִבּוֹ וְיָמַן לֵאמֹר שָׁלוֹם יִהְיֶה לִּי כִּי בִּגְבוּרָה עָשִׂיתִי אֵלַי... לֵאמֹר לֹא יִשְׁלַח ה' סִלּוֹה" (Deuteronomy 10:12-13)

"And it shall be that when he will hear the words of this curse that he will bless himself in his heart saying: I shall have peace though I walk in the stubbornness of my heart... the Lord will not want to forgive him."

There are two Hebrew words in this passage which remain quite difficult: וְהִלָּלָה בְּלִבּוֹ, which we have translated, "And he will bless himself in his heart." What do they mean?

One of the later Jewish exegetes, the author of "כְּתָב סוֹפֵר", has read this idiom quite literally: he will bless himself, or congratulate himself, upon his "heart." He will tell himself that while it is true that his actions are deplorable, his intentions are good. We all recognize the syndrome of what has been called the "cardiac Jew": whenever you challenge him to perform his duties as a Jew, he replies, pounding his chest like some latter-day Tarzan, "Rabbi, I've got it here!" Every form of misconduct is excused by good intentions in this contemporary theology of the good heart.

However, while this interpretation is beautiful and relevant, it

is not peshat, it is not the original meaning of the Biblical verse. Biblical man was simply too intelligent, too realistic, and too authentic to accept such a phoney theology.

What is the real peshat? Permit me to commend to your attention two interpretations by classical commentators which are, in essence, a delineation of two sources for moral defeat and failure. Actually, both go back to the two ancient Aramaic translations of the Pentateuch, Targum Onkelos and Targum Jonathan b. Uziel.

Targum Onkelos renders our two words as, simply, יִפְחַד בְּלִבּוֹ , he will think in his heart. Rashi, expanding upon this source, explains: he will think in his heart that he has the blessing of peace to himself, saying to himself: none of these curses will overtake me, for I shall rest in peace.

This is what I would call the "Immunity Theory" of moral misconduct. It is the outgrowth of the normal and natural infantile feeling of omnipotence. It is a protective shield thrown up by the psyche to filter out unpleasant thoughts. A person suffering from such arrested development thinks to himself: I admit that acts have consequences, that a pattern of accumulated immorality must have dreadful results -- but I will get away with it. Bless my soul, I am not really a bad fellow. The holocaust that must invariably follow upon a history of breakdown of morality will not affect me. And so, the childish illusion of immortality gives rise to the adult myth of immunity from the fruits of immorality.

The second interpretation is that of Targum Jonathan b. Uziel who translates our two words as: *וַיִּתְּאֵשׁ בְּלִבּוֹ*, he will despair in his heart. Why does the individual despair? Here this Targum answers the question with the translation of the words:

*כִּי אֶלְוִירוֹתָא דְּבִי אֶסְקֵי - אֶלְוִירוֹתָא דְּבִי אֶסְקֵי*

"because I go in a way into which I am coerced by my evil inclination." Disobedience is the result of a feeling of hopelessness, of despair, of the attitude that the yetzer hara is too powerful, the flesh is too weak, the moral law is too remote, the Torah is too forbidding. I can't resist my temptation, I can't live up to the Torah's ideals which are unattainable. This is the "Despair Theory" of disobedience.

Now this *עֵלֶי* or despair is a self-fulfilling prophecy. The young man, first confronted by great temptation, who is convinced that his yetzer hara is too powerful to resist -- will not resist it. The businessman faced with the opportunity for a shady deal who has persuaded himself you cannot make money being honest -- will not be honest. The professional who has told himself that you cannot be truly ethical and effective at the same time -- will slip into unethical patterns. Jews who despair of the future of Judaism in this country -- are helping to make it unworkable. Parents who despair raising children to be observant Jews in this tumultuous society, will never succeed in raising observant Jewish children.

So we have two sources for moral deceit and bankruptcy: immunity and despair. I dare say that despair, suggested by Targum Jonathan b. Uziel, is the more relevant one today. It is a source of the greatest

resistance to the challenge of תשובה or repentance.

In this sense, Hasidism capture the essence of the Jewish attitude. Unlike Christianity which maintains that sin leads to despair, Hasidism taught that despair leads to sin. Christianity taught that as the result of the Fall of Man, the human race is hopeless. Dante, in his Inferno, wrote of the great sign over the portals of Hell: "Abandon hope all ye who enter here." But the Hasidic teachers taught that אכזבה, depression or dejection, the emotional dimension of despair, is itself the greatest sin that leads to other sins.

Consider the history of the American Jewish community. The first great waves of immigration from Eastern Europe formed the major basis of our present American Jewish community. The overwhelming majority of these immigrants came from the shtetl, where observance of Torah was the rule, not the exception. Why did so many of them abandon Judaism wholesale? It was not primarily because of the socialism preached by The Forward, it was not because of the philosophy and ideology of the Bund, it was rather because of despair.

הם לא יכלו -- considering the economic conditions of the sweat-shops, the lack of educational facilities, the general mood in this "treifeneh medinah," they simply threw up their hands and told themselves it can't be done. And that is why they did not do it -- why they did not build enough proper synagogues, why they did not build enough yeshivot and day schools, until it was all but too late. We are still suffering from the disaster, the catastrophe of that early

despair.

This week there took place a tragedy in the State of New York. I refer to the rioting in the Attica prison and the massacre that followed in its wake. Now, I shall not attempt to second-guess any of the officials' actions taken in the grip of the crisis. Nor is such a complex problem to be commented on off-handedly in a moralistic and simplistic manner from the pulpit. What I refer to, more generally and perhaps more pertinently, is the general background of this riot. What kind of society is it that creates "correctional" facilities for prisoners that are so dreadful, that the prisoners will prefer to risk death in attempting a riot rather than to continue under such conditions? Such violence -- if we except the work of revolutionaries -- issues only from despair and hopelessness, from *like*. No wonder that in the American "Wild West" criminals were referred to as "desperadoes" -- literally, men who have despaired, given up hope.

I sometimes wonder at those who consider the Talmudic method of punishment -- flogging -- as "cruel and inhumane punishment." Is it, perhaps, better to give a man his punishment forthwith, humiliating and physically punitive though it be, rather than rob him of 10 or 20 years of his life, in which instead of being "corrected" he is hardened in his criminal behavior and attitudes by confining him in a criminal and desperate milieu? Let us always remember that these men, despite the color of their skin, despite their hardened attitude, are still human beings created in the Image of God. As such, they are

as fully deserving of our compassion and elemental human respect as is every other human being. Let us not forget that the Talmud, in tractate Sanhedrin, has told us that the commandment ואהבת לרעך כמוך, "Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself," refers to criminals condemned to execution!

As we finish one year and prepare, tomorrow night, for embarking upon a New Year, we remember that this is a time, according to our tradition, that we are called upon to respond to the challenge of teshuvah, repentance. A man in despair can never hope to marshall the inner strength and resources to make a turn in his direction, to change his outlook. If we are to give teshuvah a chance to effect its healing rays upon our life, we must banish despair and its consequence: moral defeat.

Let us enter the New Year with a different kind of self-fulfilling prophecy: hope. כי קרוב אליהם הוצרך להוציאם ממצרים - as we read this morning: The Torah, the Commandment, the moral law, is very very close to us. It is in our mouths and in our hearts, and we can accomplish it.

This hope can give us strength, and this strength will lead to moral triumph: ה' חזק ואלהינו נחזק, "Hope to God, be strong and may your heart be courageous."

And finally, this strength and this moral triumph engender -- yet more hope: אמן קוה ה'!