

"THE SECRET THINGS"

In inducting Israel into the berit or covenant with G-d, a covenant which consists of Torah and Mitzvot, Moses warns his people against one kind of sinner whom he regards as particularly noxious. Pen yesh ba-khem shoresh poreh rosh ve'laanah - "lest there be among you a root that bears gall and wormwood"; in other words, lest there be found among you one whose attitude and conduct is such that he is a poison root in the garden of faith.

One would imagine that this strong condemnation - "a poison root" - be followed by a list of horrible crimes and unforgivable sins perpetrated by the person so designated. Yet we are somewhat taken aback by the unexpected mildness of the wrong-doings of this shoresh poreh rosh ve'laanah, this "poison root." This is how the Torah describes him: ve'hitbarekh bi-levavo, when he hears the terms of the oath of the covenant, he will congratulate ~~the~~ <sup>and</sup> reassure himself, saying, shalom yihyeh li, all will be well and peaceful with me, ki bi-sherirut libi elekh, for I will follow the thoughts and views of my own heart (see the translation of Onkelos and the interpretation by Rashi).

What we see is a man who is, at most, small, self-centered, self-satisfied, smug, perhaps egotistical - but not a "poison root." Why, then, the bitter denunciation and harsh epithet?

The author of "Ha-Ketav ve'ha-Kabbalah" offers an answer which makes the passage of the Torah relevant directly to the situation of modern man. He sees in the response of the man, described as a "poison root," to the commandments of the covenant, an attitude which is remarkably and unfortunately contemporary. Hearing the various duties imposed by G-d upon Israel as obligatory, this individual does not reject them all peremptorily. He is, rather, selective.

He will accept whatever appeals to his conscience and his reason. Ki bi-sherrirut libi elekh - after all, he says, I have a good heart, a healthy conscience, and a passably intelligent mind; therefore, if a mitzvah can be explained to me rationally, if you can demonstrate to me why I ought to observe it, then I will accept and practice it. But what is not comprehensible, what is unexplainable and irrational according to my own understanding, that I cannot accept. For that goes against my grain, it causes inner conflicts for me. It gives me no peace of mind when I do something the reason for which I do not fully comprehend. Shalom yihyeh li - I prefer to be at peace with myself, not to feel that I am being a hypocrite for performing those mitzvot for which the taamei ha-mitzvot are not clear to me.

And this sort of individual, the Torah tells us, is a poison root! Indeed, ve'hitbarekh bi-levavo, he blesses himself in his heart, he appears to congratulate himself on the excellence of his lev, his mind and his better instincts. The same man who blindly trusts his physician, who unquestioningly swallows his pharmacist's prescriptions, who <sup>credulously</sup> ~~courageously~~ accepts the decisions of his accountant, and never doubts his lawyer or dietician or dentist, will challenge the Torah to justify its every commandment with a plausible explanation!

The reason for the harsh epithet for this typical character is not the ludicrousness of his demand or the overestimation of his limited intelligence as compared to that of the Almighty. It is that by differentiating - in faith and value and practice - between those commandments which he understands and those he does not, he is effectively <sup>undermining</sup> ~~destroying~~ all of Torah. For, despite its vast respect for reason and the intellect - and no religion is as comprehensive in its emphasis on intellect and study as is our tradition - Judaism insists that G-d judges man, and it is not for man to judge G-d. Man must answer to the Almighty; the Torah need not justify itself to man. If you accept G-d and Torah as a rational and paramount principle of your life, then each individual mitzvah is rational by virtue of its inclusion in the larger framework of the Torah and as the Will of the Creator - even though you may not understand its specific reason. But if it is for man to judge each

word of Torah, then this is in effect a repudiation of the authenticity of Torah, for it questions the fact that it is G-d who gave it, and that is the end of Judaism. The search for taamei ha-mitzvot is a splendid intellectual game with much to commend it, but once the observance of the mitzvah is made conditional upon knowing its reason, then the totality of Torah and mitzvot becomes a meaningless jumble.

A big mind considers its own limitations; a small mind is smugly ignorant of its own ignorance. A small mind examines each individual aspect of Judaism piece-meal-wise, expecting that ultimately they will add up to a convincing case. A big mind ~~knows~~ knows that this is well-nigh impossible, and that the order is reversed; first must come a commitment to the sum total of Torah, and then one proceeds to the parts.

This arrogation by man of the right to judge the world of G-d is thus indeed a "poison root." When a plant has a poison root, then the rest of the plant - all that is visible above the ground such as foliage, fruit, and flower - appears normal and healthy, But ultimately the poison must spread and the plant die. So it is with this fundamentally irreligious approach to Torah. A man may make Kiddush, "daven" three times a day, observe countless other customs and laws, but if deep down he has made a decision to make Torah submit to the judgment of his own limited reason before he practices, then he contains a poison root. Today he does not understand and hence rejects the Havdalah ceremony; tomorrow he will change the laws of Kashruth in accordance with his ascription of hygiene as its reason; the day after he will reject Shabbat, then berit milah, then his responsibilities to Israel... then, who knows what?

The words "reason" and "conscience" sound good, as indeed they should. But let us not delude ourselves. Our generation knows only too well what an unholy alliance conscience and reason can become when self-interest dominates. A whole world stood by while Jews were slaughtered -- does it mean that they had no reason or conscience left? No, it does not. What happened was that the reason of otherwise civilized human beings weaved a web of rationalizations to cushion the shock to their

conscience. And so Europe was bathed in blood while conscience and reason embraced each other and ignored the law of G-d.

No, the law of G-d must remain beyond the judgment of man. Reason must be used not to test G-d, but to learn His Will. Conscience, in Judaism, is not the source of morality and religion, but that in man which encourages him to obey the moral and religious precepts which originate with G-d.

And if this is the poisoned root of ir-religion, then the antidote for the poison lies in reversing the process: in acknowledging that the wisdom of the Creator is greater than that of His creatures. No wonder that some commentators observed that the initial letters of the words shoresh poreh rosh ve'laanah, the poison root, when rearranged spell the Hebrew word "shofar." For shofar reminds man of Malkhiot, of the sovereignty of G-d, that it is He who is King, and that He therefore transcends the lives and minds of His subjects. Shofar is the call to teshuvah, to repentance or return, to reversing the process initiated by the poison root, the shoresh poreh rosh ve'laanah.

Indeed, in our own portion the passage dealing with the poison root concludes with the advice of the Torah to perform this kind of teshuvah, to purge the poison from the roots of our souls. We read: ha-nistarot la-Shem Elokenu ve-ha-niglot la-nu u-le'vanenu ad olam. "The secret things are for the Lord our G-d, but the revealed things are for us and our children unto eternity." What does this mean, "secret things" and "revealed things?"

The famous rationalistic commentator, Ralbag, identifies nistarot, "the secret things," as the taamei ha-mitzvot, the reasons for the commandments, because such reasons are usually concealed and obscured from man's inadequate powers of understanding. He may occasionally catch a glimpse of these obscure truths, but he cannot rely on plumbing their depths and discovering them completely; only G-d knows them in their fullness. The niglot or "revealed things" are the mitzvot themselves, for the actual performance of the commandments is uniform, standard, and readily available and observable to all people.

This, then, is what our Sidra had in mind. If there be amongst you this poison root, this overconfidence in your heart and mind and conscience, remember that to return to G-d you must leave the secret things, the reason for each individual religious precept, to G-d. What we must emphasize is: the revealed, empirical performance of the sacred act itself. A mitzvah, quite literally, means an act performed not because our reason invented it, but because G-d <sup>f</sup>commanded it. *The genuine religious spirit must be theonomous, not autonomous.*

Interestingly, according to the Masorah, we place a series of dots in the scroll of the Torah over the last words of the phrase we have been discussing: la-nu v-le'vanenu ad olam, "for us and for our children unto eternity." Perhaps the Masorah meant to emphasize that, in connection with our theme, the relation of man to G-d is the same as that of children to parents. If these parents-child relations are formal, cold, and without affection, then ki be-sheirut libi elekh and shalom yihyeh lif - then the child will obey a parent only if he thinks the parent's demands are reasonable, not inordinate, and not excessive. The child will go along with father and mother only if they do not interfere with his shalom, his routine, undisturbed course of life. But let the parent request something which the child considers illogical or troublesome - then the parent is dismissed and his request unhonored. Not so where a situation where mutual love and respect and warmth and affection prevail. When children have genuine love for a parent, they will carry out his or her wishes even if they do not know the reasons for it; even, in fact, if they do not agree with them and do not find them proper or sensible. This does not mean the abandonment of reason; it means merely that love is more important than logic. La-nu u-le'vanenu adolam, just as between father and son, or mother and daughter, a warm and loving relationship lasts "unto eternity" by allowing "the secret things", or reasons and motives, to go unexpressed and unexplained and justified, so with a Jew who truly loves G-d, loves Torah, loves Yiddishkeit.

With us Jews, even with the most rationalistic amongst us, love of G-d is the abiding and superior principle. Dr. Israel Eldad, a modern Bible commentator, has said that the difference between the Greek philosophers and our Rabbis is this: both of them aspire to wisdom, the "philosophers" being, as the word indicates, "lovers of wisdom."

The rabbis are called chakhamim, wise men. The difference is this: the philosophers were ohavei chokhmah, lovers of wisdom; the rabbis were chakhmei ahavah, wise in the ways of love. And where there is love, then the beloved need not justify his wishes by revealing "the secret things."

No wonder that Maimonides, in describing the determination and resoluteness to abandon sinful ways required of <sup>the man</sup> he who performs teshuvah, writes in his Code of Jewish Law: ve'ya'id alav Yodeia Taalumot she-lo yashuv le'zeh ha-chet le'olam - so firm must be his resolve to improve his conduct, that even G-d, the Yodeia Taalumot, He who knows all secret things, will testify that this man will never return to his wonted evil ways.

Why this unusual title for G-d, Yodeia Taalumot, "He who knows secrets?" Probably because the essence of teshuvah consists in reversing the essence of sin, the "poison root." Just as sin consists in attempting to judge G-d, in ignoring the "revealed things" or practice of the mitzvot until ones knows the "secret things" or taamei ha-mitzvot, so repentance consists in G-d Himself, as it were, acknowledging that this man will never return to do evil because he has now come to recognize ~~never~~ that only G-d is a true Yodeia Taalumot, that the concealed taamei ha-mitzvot can never be fully discovered by mere mortals, that there is something which is secret, something beyond man himself. Then, and only then, can teshuvah be considered complete and final.

As we enter the season of teshuvah, as we prepare to recite the Selichot this evening, and brace ourselves for the call of the Shofar, let us return to our own healthy roots, in Torah, and administer the antidote of teshuvah to whatever poison root any of us may contain. In the spirit of warmth, of love, and of loyalty to Almighty G-d, we assign "the secret things" to Him, and accept upon ourselves "the revealed things". And we pray that, in the same spirit of love, we may have the privilege of witnessing the continuation of this kind of life of Torah and mitzvot, la-nu le'vanenu ad olam.