

PASSOVER AS IRONY

I.

There is a remarkable twist of fate, a strange turn of circumstances, that characterizes all of Passover.

This quality may be perceived in the key verse of the song of triumph that Moses and the Israelites sang at the shore of the Red Sea:

אֲשִׁירָה לַיהוָה כִּי גָאֹה גָאֹה הוּא וְיָרָד הוּא אֶל הַיָּם  
וְיָרָד הוּא אֶל הַיָּם וְיָרָד הוּא אֶל הַיָּם

"I will sing unto the Lord for He is highly exalted; the horse and his rider hath He thrown into the sea." Now, the Hebrew for "highly exalted" is the doubling of the verb gaoh, which means proud, i.e., God is more proud than those who are proud. What does this mean? One of the commentators, the author of the Or Ha-Chayyim, explains this as meaning that God undercuts the source of the arrogance of those who are proud, thus demonstrating that only He has the right to pride. But wherein lies the pride of Pharaoh? The answer is, in his fine Egyptian horses and his mighty and well-trained charioteers. If this is what occasions the pride of the Egyptian king, then God humbles him by

וְיָרָד הוּא אֶל הַיָּם , throwing both horse and chariot, the pride of Egypt and Pharaoh, into the sea. Pharaoh's army is disabled, his nation is brought to its knees, by having the very source of his pride becomes his downfall: his horses and chariots are mired in the mud of the parted waters of the Red Sea.

More specifically, we find that same characteristic present with regard to Pharaoh's involvement with water. The Midrash put it

quite succinctly: *בַּיַּם נִגְזַל מִיַּד פַּרְעֹה*, Pharaoh sinned with water and he was punished with water. It was the sea in which Pharaoh drowned Jewish boys, and into which he had cast even the infant Moses. It was the sea about which Pharaoh boasted that it was his very own creation -- *אֵי יָמֵי פַּרְעֹה* -- and it was that very sea that turned into blood, that very sea that split in order to save the Israelites, and that very sea which came together again in order to drown the Egyptian hordes and bring Pharaoh himself to a watery grave.

In one word, we are here dealing with a quality known as the ironical, and that may well be the central theme of all of Passover.

## II

It is difficult to define clearly what irony means. Irony is the feeling that arises from a sense of contrast or weakness or inevitability. Irony issues from surprise, from the failure to anticipate the opposite results -- results which, upon reflection, indicate a measure of unexpected justice in the world. It is a sudden awareness of the kind of justice that turns on those who posture as its greatest advocates, and that undercuts the smug, the certain, and the confident -- as, for instance, when we notice a tow-truck in distress at the road-side, a traffic judge caught speeding, or a preacher caught sinning.

Irony is related to humor. Both share the element of surprise at the unexpected turn of events. But the comical is a revelation of the inappropriate, the disjunctive, and the disparate, such as a man in full, formal outfit slipping on the sidewalk and sprawling over it

awkwardly. The grotesqueness or disproportion is what causes us to laugh. The ironical too is unexpected, but it is a sudden intuition of proper proportion, of surprising justice, which turns back and afflicts the one who, despite the greatest pretenses to righteousness, is himself most vulnerable. There are some situations which are on the borderline between the humorous and the ironical; an example would be the remarks by a celebrated wit during the recent mail strike who advocated giving immediate pay raises to the mailmen, provided they would be sent to them -- by mail!

The ironical points to the moral that man must not overreach. Irony results when man's pretenses are punctured, when his arrogance is deflated, when his much-vaunted security turns out to be dust and ashes, when his virtues look seamy, when his achievements prove baseless.

Life itself, irony teaches, rebukes man: it exposes the emptiness of his strength, his virtues, his wisdom. A great American thinker, Reinhold Niebuhr, in a book entitled The Irony of American History (1952), once said: "... Irony involves comic absurdities which cease to be altogether absurd when fully understood. Our age is involved in irony because so many dreams of our nation have been so cruelly refuted by history." We are the nation that boasted of the great "American dream" about affluence for all -- and now we are afflicted with a poverty problem of the first magnitude. We pretended to be the most just nation -- and now we have had revealed before all the world our own bigotry and racism.

So, when John Glenn successfully returns to earth after a voyage through outer space, only to suffer a serious injury in a household fall -- that is ironical, and it teaches us something about the temuousness of the power that we ascribe to ourselves. When the USSR, with its pretense of being "peace-loving," invades a "fraternal" country like Czechoslovakia -- that is the kind of irony that reveals the underlying hypocrisy of so much of our "virtue." Or, when Yiddishists who used to berate traditional Judaism now turn to the old-line Yeshivot as the only source for the survival of Yiddish -- that is the irony which shows up the emptiness and invalidity of our "ideologies."

III

Indeed, all of Jewish history reveals this divine irony so active in the affairs of our people. Abraham and Sarah, the originators of our people, had everything people could want -- except a child, and they gave up hope of ever having one. Could a man of 100 and a woman of 90 bear a child? *והיא צחקת*, she laughed or smiled. But if I were to defend Sarah, I would say that it was not a sardonic or sarcastic or cynical smile, but an ironical one. She saw that her despair itself was a sham, that man does not even have the right to despair in the confidence that his hopelessness is valid!

Purim is, perhaps, in an exemplary fashion, the festival of irony. *והיום*, everything is reversed. On the very day that the Jews were to be slaughtered by the anti-Semites, the same punishment was reversed, and administered by the Jews to their enemies. The people about whom Haman had said that they are *אנחנו יצאנו*,

scattered and divided, now banded together to attain a great victory.  
How ironical!

And the eschatological vision of Judaism, that of the Messiah, also abounds in irony: the man who will redeem Israel and raise it to its ancient preeminence, is not a man of great wealth and aristocracy, who will come riding in a Rolls Royce or Cadillac, but ani rokhev al ha-chamor -- a poor man riding on a mule.

#### IV

Seen in this light, irony possesses enormous moral significance. To open up oneself to the awareness of irony in history, is to acknowledge the limitation of man in the face of God, the ultimate victory of divine justice, and the inscrutable presence of God in the affairs of mankind. It therefore contains a double teaching: that we must not have too much confidence, and also not too much despair; that we must never be certain -- nor must we ever give up. If we forget the ironical, we either sink in despair or turn insufferably arrogant; either way, we lose touch with God's reality.

The Biblical reference to irony is in the expression  $\text{אֵלֶּיךָ}$   $\text{אֵלֶּיךָ}$ , "the Finger of God" -- not, as television comics call it, the "fickle finger of fate," but the willful finger of divine irony, puncturing pretenses, and leaving man utterly bewildered. It is a Finger which not only directs events and points the way to geulah, redemption, but a Finger which also wags under man's nose, which points mockingly at his vain presumptions, which tickles his swollen ego till it explodes

in gales of laughter -- at his own ridiculous pomposities. *יְהוָה יִשְׂמַח בָּהֶם*  
*וְהָיָה לְהִצְחָק לָהֶם*, "He who dwells in the Heavens will smile, the  
Lord will laugh at them" (Ps. 2:4).

So in the Haggadah we read: *בְּיָמֵינוּ* that when the Torah says, "in great terror," it refers to the Revelation  
of God. God is revealed in the moment that man confronts his own limita-  
tions, his own finitude and inadequacy, his own mortality and forthcoming  
death, when he is suddenly startled by his own lack of ultimacy or certi-  
tude or security. This is irony -- at the very moment he realizes how  
terribly weak and frighteningly unworthy he is -- *בְּיָמֵינוּ* --  
at that moment he discovers his greatest blessing and strength and hope  
and security in God Almighty: *בְּיָמֵינוּ*.

V

Consider how the Seder of Passover is replete with symbols  
of irony. The entire Seder is built around children -- various rituals  
are performed solely so that the children not fall asleep by arousing  
their curiosity; the four character types are referred to as four sons  
or children; it is the child who asks the Mah Nishtanah. And -- it is  
children specifically whom Pharaoh went out of his way to kill in order  
to destroy Israel!

Pharaoh is a man who had all the answers. When Moses told  
him about God, he did not ask anything. Instead, he delivered himself of  
a tirade: *מִי ה' וְאֵיךְ אֶשְׁמַח בְּקוֹלוֹ*, "Who is the Lord that I  
should listen to his voice?" -- and that was not a question, it was a

rhetorical explosion proclaiming his own denial. And so, we who relive on the Seder night the triumph against Pharaoh -- we are full of questions on this night...

Our ancestors didn't want to leave Egypt. They wanted to stay there, the land of the sir ha-bassar, the fleshpots of Egypt. They told Moses, whiningly, *אני רציתי את מצרים* *כי לא ידעתי מה עשה לי ה' וצאתי ממצרים* -- we remember all those wonderful and delicious foods of Egypt, the cucumbers and watermelons and leeks and onions and garlic... and, so very ironically, we, their descendants, celebrate our exodus from Egypt and our hard-won freedom not by eating all these vegetables of which they spoke, but with *לחם מצרים* *אכילתו* and a *חזקת מצרים*, with a broken piece of "poor man's bread" and a lump of bitter herbs -- and we bless God for it! Throughout their pilgrimage in the desert our ancestors complained that they did not have enough. And we celebrate our exodus by singing -- dayenu, enough, enough!

Consider too the commandment of *אכילתו*, the leaning on the left side when we drink the Four Cups or eat the matzah. We do so because it is a symbol of aristocracy and freedom. But it has always puzzled me: why adopt for our Jewish religious purposes a form or posture that was unique to the Romans of 2,000 years ago? Why retain this fossilized Roman custom when we have so many beautiful Jewish customs? The answer, I suggest, is once again: irony. Why is our Seder lacking and incomplete today? Why do we not observe the Passover sacrifice, which

was the center of our Seder in the days of our independence? Why hashata hakha, are we today in exile? Because the Romans of 2,000 years ago destroyed the Temple. But we shall not allow that destruction to undo us as a people. And so, today we practice that very Roman symbol of freedom, the inclining on the left side, we adopt the Roman posture of leisure -- and we celebrate zekher le-mikdash, remembering everything that occurred in the Temple, while they, the Romans, are no longer in existence!

VI

This indeed is the main <sup>i</sup>content of the plagues against the gods of Egypt, the פִּיטוּם הַיָּם וְהַיַּבֶּשֶׁת. It is ironical: what the Egyptians trusted most, became the source of their travail and woe. The Nile was a deity for Egypt -- and it turned into blood. They worshipped the frog, sign of fertility -- and God gave them so much fertility that the population explosion amongst the frogs threatened their comfort and their very lives. The stricken gods of Egypt were an act of the irony of the One God.

We too, in our own lives, can detect -- if we are perceptive enough -- the workings of divine irony. What are our idols? Science, for one. And so we receive in return -- mass destruction. We worship technology -- and we now appreciate how it has interefered with the ecology of our planet. We love machines and prostrate ourselves before them -- and they break down before the warranty is signed.

Ours is a generation which has prided itself on freedom; now we have anarchy. We participated so enthusiastically in the youth

cult, indulging our children; now they riot and reject us and are willing to bomb us out of existence. We spoke so much of love -- that we are flooded with pornography. We have identified as "the good life" a life of hedonism -- and there is no joy and no happiness to accompany our material pleasures. The State of Israel was founded and given its vision by socialists and progressives, who adopted the principles of the Left -- and now it is rejected by the New Left. And the reverse is true too: America was once called the "Treifene Medinah," and now it has become, ironically, the source of so much creative Jewish life: of the study of Torah, the publication of Talmudic works. Even American Jewish university students -- once considered as impossible in a life of Torah -- show themselves to be in the vanguard of Jewish survival and values, activists on campus and in institutions for Torah, for Jewish education, for Soviet Jewry.

## VII

There is a most remarkable way in which this double teaching of irony, as we have outlined it, is evident in the Talmud. The Talmud (Berakhot 48b) tells us that two of the blessings in the Birkhat Ha-Mazon, the grace, were composed in different eras. One of them was written by David and his son Solomon, the other by the Sages of Yavneh, in the period after the destruction of the Temple, specifically after the collapse of the Jewish revolt against Rome and the slaughter of the Jews in Betar. The two blessings are גוינין ברחמינו יידין, blessing God who rebuilds Jerusalem in His compassion, and הטוב והחסיד, blessing God Who is good and does good.

Now, one would imagine that David and Solomon composed the blessing celebrating divine goodness -- after all, they lived in times of security and power, and they were able to appreciate the goodness of God. Further, they built Jerusalem, and did not have to plead for divine mercy for its upbuilding. Similarly, one would imagine that the Sages who witnessed the massacre at Betar would plead with God for compassion and mercy and pity in rebuilding Jerusalem. Instead, the Talmud tells us the reverse: David and Solomon pleaded for divine mercy in building Jerusalem, and the Sages of Yavneh, when the victims of the massacre of Betar were finally brought to burial, referred to God as one who is good and does good, because He allowed them to give a decent burial to the victims.\*

What we are being told, then, is that we must never overlook the religious principle of irony. At a time of national triumph we must not overreach, we must still acknowledge our need for rachamim, for divine compassion; otherwise, we risk being undone by divine irony. And at times of national disaster, we must never indulge ourselves in despair, we must never give up; thanks to irony, we may yet wrest victory out of defeat, triumph out of disaster, and therefore we must still look to God as hatov ve-ha'metiv.

## VIII

Passover, then, reminds us never to forget the etzba Elokim,

---

\*This point has been proposed by Rabbi Yitzchak Glickman of Holon; see Avraham Kariv, "Shabbat U-moed Bi'derush Va-chassidut," p. 134.

that same Finger of God first revealed at Egypt and ever since active in the affairs of man -- that symbol of divine irony, that which brings down the arrogant Pharaohs of life, and which gives new hope to the downtrodden in the houses of slavery.

It is when we have learned this Passover-teaching of irony and acknowledged this Finger of God, that we shall be able to look forward in confidence to the words:

כי לא א'יבך כ'מלאה ד'פתיחה  
381 ידו פ'תם ע'תם א'תם ג'ו'ש א'תם , "to

Your hand, so full and open, so holy and broad, that we may never be embarrassed or shamed."

When we acknowledge the message of irony inscribed on the canvas of life by the etzba Elokim, then we can look forward to the full, open, holy, and broad hand of God; and then, having trusted in the "finger of God," and benefited from the "hand of God," lo nevosh ve'lo nikalem le'olam vaed, we will no longer be embarrassed or humiliated by the lesson of irony, for we will have anticipated it.