

"IN PRAISE OF IMPRACTICALITY"

Our Sidra opens with the words ^{ויבאר ה' אל משה בסיני},
"And the Lord spoke to Moses at Mt. Sinai, saying..." What
follows this introduction is a portion that deals with the laws
of ^{שמיטה}, the Sabbatical year, when the land must lie
fallow and all debts be remitted.

The Rabbis were intrigued by one word in that opening verse:
the word ^{בסיני}, on the mountain. Why this special reference to
Mt. Sinai at this time? The question as they phrased it has come
over into Yiddish and Hebrew as an idiomatic way of saying,
"what does one thing have to do with the other?" Thus
(למה זה) as quoted by Rashi): ^{מה קשר בין שמיטה לסיני},
what connection is there between the sabbatical laws and Mt. Sinai?
Were not all the laws and commandments enunciated at Mt. Sinai?
Why then this special mention of Shemittah in association with
Mt. Sinai?

Rashi quotes the answer provided by the Rabbis. Permit me,
however, to offer an alternative answer: although Judaism is
action-gearred, oriented to the improvement of man and society;
although it has a high moral quotient; although it addresses
itself to the very real problems of imperfect man and suffering
society; although, in contrast to certain other religions, it is
more this-worldly; nevertheless, this concern with the real and
the immediate and the empirical has a limit. Not everything in
Judaism has to be as practical as an American businessman's profit-
and-lost sheet or as "relevant" as the social activists and the
radicals would like it to be. Judaism may not be ancient history;
but neither is it journalism.

And this we see from the piquant fact that the laws of
Shemittah were given specifically at Mt. Sinai. Laws known as
^{מצוות ארץ ישראל}, commandments whose fulfillment is
dependent upon the Land of Israel, were given to the people of
Israel before they ever arrived in ^{ארץ ישראל}, the Land of
Israel! Agriculture laws were now given, in all their details,
to a nomadic tribe without farms, without roots in the soil.
Consider what the laws of shemittah sounded like to our grand-
parents as they surrounded Mt. Sinai, that bare desert
mountain. They must have appeared weird, irrelevant, out of
place, impertinent.

And yet, what was true of shemittah at Mt. Sinai is true of

all the commandments at all times. They may seem hopelessly impractical, untimely, and irrelevant to the cold-eyed and hard-headed man, and yet they are the Law of the Lord, obligatory upon Jews at all times and all places.

Indeed, there is hardly anything as irrelevant as the piddling relevancy of the coldly practical man. Show me the man who sees only what is before his eyes, and I will show you a man who cannot see beyond his nose!

What does this praise of the impractical teach us?

First, it tells us simply that there are things that are of value in and of themselves, not only because they are instrumental or lead to other things. Thus, some of the commandments may restrain man's destructiveness. Others may lead him to improve society or his own soul or help the disadvantaged. But some are valuable simply because they were commanded by God. No other reason is necessary.

The same is true of knowledge. There are some kinds of knowledge which may lead to invention, and enhance the health of man and his convenience. But science is more than technology. There is also such a thing as knowledge for its own sake, knowledge acquired in order to satisfy the natural intellectual curiosity of man.

A week ago, Apollo 16 returned from its trip to the moon. Except for those Americans who are so benumbed by the sensational that after the first time a thing is done it becomes a dreadful bore, the exploits of the astronauts kept the world enraptured. And yet consider what a monumental irrelevance the whole project is! The government spends millions of dollars, some of the brightest men in the world donate their talents, three men risk their lives -- all in order to study the structure of remote rocks so that we might formulate a theory of when the moon was created and how old it is. So what?, one might ask. And the answer is: so everything!

Yes, there may be legitimate questions about the priorities in our national budget. That is not now our concern. But without doubt, knowledge for its own sake must not be deprecated. The real point, to a small man, sometimes appears to be beside the point.

And the same is true in Judaism. There is the study of Torah for the sake of performance of the מצוות, or the sake of cohesion of the community, or the sake of raising the level of Jewish observance. But the highest concept of Torah study

remains ^{תורה} תורה, Torah for its own sake. Here too, there may be a question of priorities in determining the subject matter of Torah. But there is no denying the ultimate and high value of ^{תורה} תורה, of study for its own sake.

It was the Jerusalem Talmud (Hag. 2:1) that attributed to the most notorious heretic in Jewish history the opposition to "other-worldly study of Torah." Elisha ben Abuya, known as ^{האחר} האחר ("the other one"), is said to have stormed into a classroom, rudely interrupted the teacher, and shouted at the students: "what are you doing here? Why are you wasting your time in such irrelevant material as Torah? You, you must be a builder; you must be a carpenter; you ought to become a fisherman, and you should be a tailor. Do something useful in your lives!" The great heretic was an eminently practical man...

Of course, I do not mean to be cute by espousing impracticality and advocating irrelevance. Total irrelevance is deadening to the spirit and results in what philosophers call solipsism, ^{the} divorce from the outside world and experience and the introversion into oneself; and impracticality can become nothing but a semantic excuse for inefficiency and incompetence. What I do mean is that relevance is a good, but not the only one or even the most important one. And while practicality is necessary for the execution of ideals, dreams and visions need not be pre-restrained in the Procrustean bed of a mercantile mentality.

The second point is that sometimes the apparently remote does contain highly significant and very real dimensions, but it is our narrow vision and restricted understanding that does not allow us to expose these obscure insights. Kashrut sometimes is ridiculed in this modern age because it appears superfluous when we consider the sanitary facilities we possess. And yet, those who understand kashrut realize that it has so little to do with sanitation and has so very much to say about reverence for life -- and this, in a world in which life is losing its value, in which the approval of abortions is moving into the encouragement of euthenasia. ^{שבת} שבת and ^{אילנות} אילנות, the prohibitions against mixing various garments or seeds or animals, has always been held up as a paradigm of non-rational commandments, and yet today we realize how much they have to say to us about ecology and the preservation of the separate species of the universe. The Sabbath laws are meant not only to give us a day of rest, because Sunday in modern America can accomplish that as well. It does tell us that we are not the by-products of a cosmic accident, that we owe our existence to God, and must therefore curb our insufferable pride and collective arrogance.

So, these and many other such illustrations remind us of the need to search beneath the surface of Judaism for teachings

that are eminently pertinent.

Third, we must be future-oriented. We must have faith that what is genuinely irrelevant now may, some day, become most relevant and meaningful as a result of our ability to carry on heroically despite present irrelevance and impracticality. What today seems visionary may prove indispensable to tomorrow's very real need.

The Rabbis were fond of saying:

צבנו מורה עניימ בקולם לה אשכנח אדוקים אלה

the words of Torah and the Sages are "poor" in one place and "rich" in another. By this they meant to say, that sometimes the text of Torah will seem utterly narrow and superficial, teaching very little indeed. It is only when we compare it with another text, in another context, that we can appreciate how genuinely deep and insightful it really is. I would like to paraphrase that passage, switching from אדוקים to אלה, thus: צבנו מורה עניימ אלה אשכנח אדוקים אלה. It sometimes happens that the words of Torah in one epoch may seem to be thin and insignificant; it is only later, at another time, that the same words stand revealed as possessing unspeakable richness of insight and teaching.

Take as the most striking example: the hope for Jerusalem, whose fifth anniversary of liberation we celebrate later this week.

If we have the privilege to commemorate the reunion of people and city, of Israel and Jerusalem, we must acknowledge our debt to a hundred generations of Jews and Jewesses who since the year 70 have been wild dreamers, impractical idealists, possessed of visions impossible of execution; Jews who turned to Jerusalem three times a day in prayer; who when they ate bread thanked God for bread -- and for Jerusalem; who mentioned Jerusalem when they fasted and when they feasted; who brought little packets of dust of Jerusalem during their lifetime in order to take it along with them in their coffins on their long journey to eternity; who arose at midnight for אלה אדוקים, to lament over Jerusalem, and at every happy occasion promised to return there.

If we live in Jerusalem today -- it is because of those unsophisticated visionaries who wanted at least to die in it.

If we can visit Jerusalem this year -- it is thanks to those other-worldly dreamers who sang out אלה אדוקים אלה, at least let us be there next year.

If we can happily laugh -- אלה אדוקים אלה -- it is

in large measure the work of those who did not realize how irrelevant they were, how impossible their dreams were, and who prayed to return there, thus daring and braving and risking the derisive laughter of legions of practical men who simply knew that we were finished, and that Jerusalem would never become a Jewish city again.

It is only because of generations of bridegrooms who concluded every wedding by stamping on a glass, its shattering fragments recalling the חורבן ירושלים (the destruction of Jerusalem), and proclaiming אלהים ימיני לא ישתק ("If I forget thee O Jerusalem, let my right hand fall") that today we can defy the whole world, East and West, and say: Never again shall you separate us from Jerusalem, not Capitalists and not Communists, not Moslems and not even Christians who have lately discovered that Jerusalem is important to them.

Jerusalem Day is a tribute to this special Jewish brand of impracticality and irrelevance.

So, מה בין שבת לארבעה עשרה, what is the association or connection between the sabbatical laws and Mt. Sinai? They come to tell us first, that not everything need be relevant; second, that not everything that appears irrelevant really is; and third, that what is irrelevant today may be the most important fact of life tomorrow.

This lesson too is part of the heritage of Sinai. Indeed, without it all the rest is in jeopardy. With it, all the rest will prevail too

כי אלהים ימיני לא ישתק.