

November 11, 1972
Toledot

"AN OBSCENE RUMOR RISES AGAIN"

The Midrash, quoted by Rashi on the first verse of today's portion, parts for us the veil that obscures antiquity, and allows us to catch an intimate glimpse into, and hear a personal echo of, the mean passions, the malicious gossip, and the petty rumors that agitated high society of long ago. One particular rumor is reported for us in the form of a comment on the first verse of today's Sidra. The Torah tells us:

וְעַבְדָּךְ, וְלֹא תִּמְלִיכֵנִי, כִּי תְּמִלְכֵנִי, כִּי תְּמִלְכֵנִי

"And these are the generations of Isaac the son of Abraham, Abraham begot Isaac." But, ask the Rabbis, is it not obvious that if Isaac was the son of Abraham, that Abraham was the one who begot him? What is the purpose of this repetition? They answer: *וְיָדֵעַ תִּהְבֹּא בְּנֵי אֶחָד*

the Almighty shaped Isaac's face to be just like that of Abraham, so that everyone testified that indeed it was Abraham who begot Isaac.

How that choice piece of gossip must have circulated from mouth to mouth in ancient Canaan! Not until the baby Isaac began to appear as the image of Abraham did the rumor die of itself. We may ask: but why did the Rabbis bother to resurrect this obscene, vicious rumor, even if only to lay it to rest? Had they no more profitable pursuit than frustrating the prurient interest of contemporary ¹³ in some scurrilous ancient scandal?

I submit that if we understand this rumor symbolically, as
רַבְבָּי יְהוָה אֶלְכָא דְבָרָא (what happened to the Patriarchs
is symbolic for the children), it will be seen to have much
wider ramifications; indeed, it will prove to be more significant
for today than it was in the days of the Midrash or Rashi -- and
also far more dangerous.

Father and Mother must be understood as symbols. Mother represents a natural, organic bond, whereas Father is more remote, or abstract. A child's relation to his mother is direct

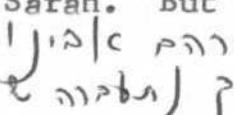
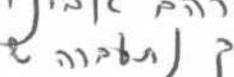
and immediate. His relation to his father is more distant, more conceptual, not as obvious. Mother, therefore, is a symbol of organic immediacy. Thus, we refer to a "mother tongue" (מֵתֶתֶת), and to "Mother Earth," because the earth is the cradle of all life and therefore our immediate bond to nature. The ocean, source of all animal existence, is, in Freudian psychology, the symbol of mother. Fatherhood, unlike motherhood, is not regarded legally and halakhically as self-evident; it is only presumptive, a result of a בְּרִית. Father thus represents what is beyond the natural, one's spiritual gestalt, his supernal origin and goal. Thus, in mythology and literature the search of Ulysses for his father becomes the symbolic search by man for his spiritual origins. For fatherhood represents one's spiritual legacy. That is why in the Jewish tradition Father is a symbol of God, the

בָּבָשׂ, whereas Mother is a symbol of Israel, מִצְרַיִם. Or, to put it in more contemporary terms, motherhood is the token of national and ethnic identity, whereas fatherhood is the symbol of spiritual and religious identity. Mother represents Jewishness, father represents Judaism.

That ugly report, interpreted according to these symbols, now assumes new proportions. It no longer is a nasty little rumor whispered behind the back of one's hand to a neighbor who is all ears, but it is a charge and an accusation against a large part of the population that has dreadful implications, and that, if it is true, can prove fatal.

That charge is that the Isaacs, the young Jews of today, are indeed the children of Mother Sarah: ethnically and nationally they are part of the Jewish people. But the rumor is that Abraham is not the father! The תָּנָךְ בְּגִיסָּה, the cynics and the scoffers, trumpet aloud: הַיְהוּ נָכְרִים פְּשִׁיטָה, Jews of today, while ethnically Jewish, are spiritually illegitimate! Religiously and ideologically they are the children of secularism or materialism, of Marxism or humanism, of scientism or hedonism, but they are not the offspring of Abraham, of Judaism, of Torah, of God.

That is the obscene rumor that is abroad again, after 3500 years of dormancy. There are just two differences, and both of them make things worse for us: some of the Isaac's today confirm the rumor; and an objective assessment of the situation lends a certain degree of credence to the charge. Unfortunately, the obscene rumor has a measure of verisimilitude.

What occasions these thoughts this morning, is my awareness of a new and painful phenomenon, that of Jewish youths caught up with Christianity, the "Jews for Jesus" movement. These victims of shemad are different from the older variety. Once upon a time, Jews converted to Christianity not because of religious persuasion or intellectual conviction, but because they wanted to opt out of the Jewish people; they used baptism as a conduit to success and status in the Christian world. These new converts to Christianity identify themselves as Jews ethnically and nationally. They proclaim that they are Hebrews, the children of Sarah. But spiritually, they are Christians. They are not  , the children of Abraham. They confess:  , they come from a different father.

Permit me to present to you some facts, not to alarm you, but merely to inform you -- but in full confidence and expectation that they will indeed prove alarming. In Toronto recently, it was estimated that some 200 Jews on campus have converted to Christianity. At a Yom Kippur service held for Jewish Christians this past Yom Kippur, the hall was crowded with potential Jewish converts. On the West coast, there is a resurgence of Christian missionary activity. In Princeton, Christian evangelicals form the most active movement on campus. Detroit has experienced recently an invasion of evangelical preachers. A few weeks ago, on Halloween eve, a Catholic pentecostal group held a public baptism service -- for ten Jewish students. And God knows how many Jewish youths have been ensnared by the so-called "Jewish Christians" only a few blocks away from here, in the mission on West 72nd Street.

You may well ask: is it not possible that these Jewish youngsters are mentally sick? Some certainly are. Many -- possibly or probably. But not all! Not all are freaks. They may all be confused, but there are some of them who are genuine searchers, who yearn for religious meaning and religious experience, who look for a way to God.

Why did not they find it in the Jewish community? Look at what we give them: the B'nai B'rith offers anti-defamation; the American Jewish Committee presents civil rights as the essence of Judaism; and the American Jewish Congress rides on the white charger of opposition to parochial schools, shouting "long live the Constitution." A colleague of mine whose work is on the campus told me that he recently had a conversation with one of the girls of the "Jews for Jesus" movement. She expressed shock when he mentioned that (at least the) rabbis believed in God. She denied that that was so. Her reason: every time I go to a synagogue I hear a sermon, and the sermons deal with such topics as the State of Israel, United Jewish Appeal, Bonds, Soviet Jewry, social justice,

civil rights. I have never heard a rabbi speak about God!

These poor, confused souls do not understand that it is the Jewish way that our faith never remains an abstraction, a pampering of one's emotion and desire for ecstasy, but that faith is expressed in a program of living which includes such practical items as justice and the Land of Israel. Yet I confess that we may have gone too far in our pragmatic bent. We perhaps ought to have spoken more of God, of religious experience. Perhaps all of us, Orthodox included, are guilty for hiding what little *Emunah* or piety we really have.

So that Christianity is a problem for the Jewish generation of today -- and I believe it will be as much of a problem in Israel, and perhaps even more, than it is here.

And let us not be concerned only with Christianity. It is just as bad when Jewish youngsters are lost to Buddhism or to Zen or to Krishna. These are no less idolatrous and perhaps more so than Christianity.

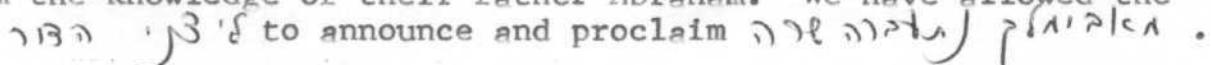
How do I interpret all this? That chickens are coming home to roost. All the Jewish movements and organizations which thought that Judaism was dead, that religious Jews were vestigial, relics of antiquity and totally irrelevant to the modern age -- all those Jewish groups that thought and taught that man can live on bread alone and on politics alone and on democracy alone and on liberalism alone, that man can live without the word of God -- all have proved bankrupt.

Zionism began, and to an extent still is, a substitute for religion. It stressed Sarah, and Sarah's home -- the ethnic and national dimensions of the Jewish people; but it neglected and even rejected the teachings of Abraham: the fatherhood of God, the teachings of Torah.

Jewish secularism thought it could get away with a viable Jewish community based only on secular Jewish culture here in the Diaspora. It failed. I personally resent when Jewish secularists refer their sub-culture as Yiddishkeit, as if Yiddish literature and Jewish food itself, without Torah and without *Emunah*, can ever be really Yiddishkeit.

The danger of what we are now discovering on the campuses was brought home to me about two or three years ago, in a shaking personal encounter. I had often read the articles of a man with a very Jewish name who is probably the greatest philosopher of

medicine in this country. He writes wisely, and he is informed by profound and broad knowledge of classical literature, ancient philosophy, expertise in modern medicine, and keen wisdom. When I received an invitation by him to address a group of physicians and clergymen on certain medical-moral problems, I accepted with alacrity. When he picked me up at the airport in Chicago, I saw before me a tall, large man, with typical Jewish appearance and speech patterns. Yet, when I mentioned words like the imminence of "yom tov" or 'Pesach," he said he did not understand what I meant. Soon he told me the painful truth: he was not a Jew, he was a Catholic. He explained that he was born to socialist parents who were Yiddishists, but bitterly anti-clerical and anti-religious. When, as a child, he asked the usual questions about God, they refused to discuss it, and acted as if God and religion and Judaism were all dirty words that only naughty boys speak of. So he grew up without any satisfaction for his religious yearnings, inchoate and infantile though they were. But they continued with him, and when he came to the university he was introduced to Aristotle and then to Thomas Aquinas, and soon he found himself in the Church as a baptised Catholic.

What his parents had done to him, our Jewish community has to some extent done to those of the Jewish students who have gravitated to Christianity, ^{and} who are mentally balanced and true searchers. Our established organizations in this country now must learn the bitter fact: Jews without Judaism will soon end as Jews for Jesus. We have allowed the obscene rumor of antiquity to gain currency again in our days, by shielding our Isaac's from the knowledge of their father Abraham. We have allowed the  .

I wish I could say that we are doing something about it. We are not. It is true that the youth groups are agitated. Yavneh, Lubavitch, the NCSY, Hillel, all the young people and their advisers in the campus groups are very alarmed, and have appealed to their parent groups in the adult community for emergency help. But the adult groups are studying the statistics and evaluating them. I know that before long the adult groups will take over and do something. They probably will repeat what happened with Soviet Jewry -- the adult institutions debated and debated; but until the young people came and made a tumult and shook the pillars, nothing happened. Afterwards, the great Jewish organizations acted as if this was their battle all along. So that probably something will be done eventually -- but God only knows how many more Jewish children will be lost because for them we may come too late.

What must be done?

First, we must train a "mobile task force" of Jewish university students who will speak to the potential converts to Christianity, and who will appear at the various rallies to present our case.

Second, we must have adequate literature to answer the claims of the Christian missionaries.

Third, it may be necessary, unpleasant though it is, to publish polemical literature attacking evangelical Christians on their own grounds.

But all the above are first-aid, the "band-aids" that we bring to the problem. These are necessary actions, but they do not attack the problem at its roots. Above all else, what is really fundamental, what is necessary to assure our survival into the future, is to reshape the whole appearance and reality of the Jewish community so that indeed it will be more Jewish. We must do today what God did to Isaac of old:

רְאֵתִים אֶת־יְהוָה וְתַעֲשֵׂה

we must remake ourselves and reform ourselves and remold ourselves as genuinely Jewish. We must undertake a much more serious effort at Jewish education. We must pay more, and more serious, attention to Jewish education on a higher level, on campus and for campus-age people. We must stress genuine Jewish observance at home. We must prevent this disease of Christianity from infecting Jewish children -- even before the Jewish child is born.

This must be our major task. When we will do that, we will obliterate the obscene rumor and lay it to rest for once and for all. Then רְאֵתִים אֶת־יְהוָה וְתַעֲשֵׂה, the world will recognize that Jews are not only the children of Sarah, but also the children of Abraham; that the heritage of our fathers still lives; that only those who are both the children of Sarah and Abraham are legitimate Jews; and that the blessing of Abraham will come to those who are so identified.