"SWEET EXILE"

The history of the Golah or Diaspora is not one of an unbroken chain of physical disasters and a continuous spiritual blank. The most obvious proof is that extraordinary achievement, the Talmud, which was written in Babylon.

In some ways, there exists a uniquely Jewish warmth and charm to Jewish life in parts of the American Diaspora that is not easily duplicated even in the State of Israel. My own childhood in the Williamsburgh section of Brooklyn was, in toto, an intense, beautiful, Jewish experience, unquestionably more Jewish than in many sections of Tel Aviv. In certain ways, we in this Golah are more advanced than Israel in Jewish education -- as, for instance, in the implementation of "Torah im derekh eretz," the combination of Jewish and secular learning, as in Yeshiva University.

The ג"א , those Zionists who totally negated the value of the Diaspora, weakened their case by their extravagant overstatement. We have created something of great and extraordinary value in Jewish life in the Golah. To deny it is to indulge in the creation of a deliberate credibility gap.

The penultimate verse of the Shir Hashirim which we read this morning, states: קֹּלֶּךְ נִמְלַחְתֶּךָ וְקָרָאתִי לְבֶן הַגֶּשֶם יֵשָׁלֵם. "O Thou, who dwellest in the gardens, companions listen to thy voice, saying, 'let us hear.'" The Rabbis, of course, saw
in Shir Hashirim far more than a pastoral love song; they interpreted it as a metaphor of the eternal love between God and Israel. Thus, they understood this verse as a compliment from God to the Congregation of Israel. To quote Rashi,

The Holy One says to the Congregation of Israel: You who are dispersed in the Diaspora, who graze in the gardens of strangers and gather together in synagogues and in schools, companions listen to your voice; that is, the ministering angels, who are like you the children of God, come to listen closely to the voice of your prayer from the synagogues and the voice of Torah as it issues from your study halls.

What a marvelous tribute to the spiritual achievements of the Jewish Diaspora! Our companions, the angels, cluster about our synagogues and our yeshivot to listen to the pure voice of our spiritual accomplishments.

And yet, despite all this, despite the angelic approbation of our "Yiddishkeit" in the Diaspora, that is not the end of the story. It is only next to the last verse. But the last verse changes all that. Despite all the advantages of the Golah, its "shuls" and schools, its Torah and its piety and its creative Jewish existence, nevertheless, the Song of Songs of Jewish life ends on a different note:
"Make haste, my beloved, and be like the gazelle or like the young hart upon mountains of spices." Rashi, quoting the Midrash, interprets this final verse as the response of the Congregation of Israel to God's compliment:

Make haste, my Beloved, flee from this Diaspora and redeem me from it. Become like a gazelle to hasten the redemption, and allow Your Presence to rest on the mountains of spices, that is, Mount Moriah and the Holy Temple, may it be rebuilt speedily in our days, Amen.

Despite the physical comforts and the spiritual conveniences of the Golah, we ask God to flee from it and to take us out of it with Him.

Today there is a slight change in the personalities who utter these verses. Instead of God complimenting us on the Golah, and we begging Him for release, it is we who boast of our achievements in the Diaspora and He who pleads to us, by the very existence of the State of Israel, to flee from our exile and rejoin Him in His Promised Land.

The story of religious complacency of Golah Jewry is an old story. Not only did the Midrash predict it, and Rashi quote it, but unfortunately the last several generations practiced it. Of course, we in the 1960's can speak with the advantage of hindsight and the sure knowledge of what happened. Surely we find
it hard, in our heart of hearts, to blame those who preferred to remain in the European Diaspora, so beautiful and rich and warm was Jewish life there. But yet, were we to be permitted to pray retroactively, we might say: Would that had the last two or three generations concluded their Shir Hashirim on the last verse instead of the next-to-the-last verse! How different might modern and contemporary history have been!

Rabbi Menachem M. Kasher has recently published a short volume, "Kol Hator," attributed to the Vilna Gaon and his pupils. In this work of 175 years ago, we read a plea, passionate and zealous, that we not allow our pious smugness to deter us from yishuv Eretz Yisrael, from hoping for the redemption and emigrating to the Holy Land. The Gaon knew the Song of Songs, right through to Berah Dodi.

In a recent issue of the Israeli literary journal, Molad, the author tells us about a book, the solitary remaining one of all printed, that arrived in Israel just before the Six Day War from archives in Hungary. The name of the volume is "תנ"ך ה"ך" and the author is Rabbi Issachar Teichtahl, the Rabbi of a community in Slovakia. The book was published in Budapest in 1943, only months before the Nazis entered. The author was formerly a follower of the Rabbi of Muncacz, that zealous anti-Zionist whose most distinguished contemporary spokesman is the Rabbi of Satmar. The book is in the nature of a confession. Our
whole attitude and policy, the author says, was a dreadful mistake. It is a book full of great pathos and courageous honesty and profound sadness. Five years before the founding of the State of Israel, the author proclaims as the greatest mitzvah of this generation: Aliyah! He is bitter at his former colleagues who considered anti-Zionism a mitzvah, and even felt that the Nazis would not invade Hungary because Hungarian Orthodox Jews had not participated in the "crime" of Zionism. Shortly after the book was published, the author was killed by the Nazis. But now his words have come to life together with Israel's new and great victory. And if we were to summarize all that he had said, we could do so in terms of the finale of the Shir Hashirim, the point-counterpoint of its closing verses. His approach formerly had been: יִשְׂרָאֵל יִמָּרֵא; but now it was: יִשְׂרָאֵל נָטָה. Once he welcomed the angels to his beautiful Golah. Now he understood: we must flee, and quickly.

And yet, for all this criticism of what is known as ultra-Orthodox anti-Zionism and pro-Diasporaism, we must grant that it is religiously genuine and personally honest. Certainly it is infinitely superior and characterized by far greater intellectual integrity than the deceptive pro-Zionism or pro-Israelism of the Conservative movement in its recently proclaimed "reform" concerning Yom Tov Sheni Shel Galuyot, the "Second Days" of the holidays that we observe in the Diaspora but not in Israel.

The halakhic reasoning for our observance of these
five extra "Second Days," which we might call the "Holiday of the Exiles," is too elaborate for us to explain at this time. Suffice it to say that it is not possible to abrogate the Holiday of the Exiles according to normative halakhic procedure, and that, spiritually speaking, it is not an anachronism.

In the passage of the Shulhan Arukh devoted to the Holiday of the Exiles, the first law begins by stating that whoever attempts to abrogate these Second Days is automatically subject to niduy, excommunication. And the author of this passage was Rabbi Joseph Karo, a Palestinian Jew who himself observed only one day, as he was required to by law.

I have outlined elsewhere some of the spiritual and halakhic insights of the Holiday of the Exiles, and those interested may refer to the appropriate sources.

While I ordinarily prefer not to engage in polemics because such polemics are usually fruitless and are most often a case of preaching to the converted, the present case is somewhat of an exception. It drives a wedge between the Orthodox and other Jews of this country. We shall now be left alone to battle for our people to receive two days off for their holidays from schools and business offices and government. Whereas in the past we could argue that two of the three of the Jewish religious movements observe these "Second Days," we shall no longer be able to do so.
My major complaint against the Conservative move is its declared reason for this innovation. It was announced that henceforth Conservativism as a movement is not bound to observe the Holiday of the Exiles, and that it would be left to the discretion of individual Rabbis as to whether their congregations would be required to observe them, and that this step was taken in order to enhance the unity of Israel, and to give primacy to the State of Israel in the religious calendar of world Jewry.

Honesty would have been served far better had the real reason for abolition been offered -- and it has nothing to do with the primacy of Israel in the world religious calendar, for secular Israelis couldn't care less, and religious Israelis unanimously agree that the Halakhah requires the observance of both days in the Golah.

The real reason, according to documents that go back to at least 1963, is the simple fact of very poor attendance at Yom Tov Sheni services in most Conservative Temples. In all too many of them, on the "Second Days," the choir enters bedecked in gorgeous vestments, the organist comes in his or her robes, the cantor enters elegantly begowned as is his custom on these state occasions, and the Rabbi finally makes his entrance in his distinguished ecclesiastical vestments, rises to the pulpit, and turns to his congregation, which consists of: the choir, the organist, the cantor.... and very few others.
Had the difficulty of getting people to observe the "Second Days" been offered as a reason for abolition, we might not have objected as strenuously. We might even have approached the whole matter with a great deal of sympathy, because it may not, after all, be the fault of Conservative Rabbis that their Jews refuse to attend services and observe the "Second Days." Of course, we could never have agreed to abolition. We would have pointed out that it always was difficult, and that it was more difficult for our parents and grandparents and great grandparents to take those extra five days off from their work than it is for us in our affluent society. Furthermore, we would have pointed out that if difficulty of observance is to be the criterion of the abolition of a halakhah, then the same reasoning could be used to abolish all of the Torah -- Shabbat and kashrut and taharat ha-mishpahah are all hard to observe -- in which case we would be left with nothing but -- gefilte fish and matzoh balls. And they are not always light... The real reason for this move is more spiritual failure elaborately disguised in an appealing rationalization.

The clue to the religious inauthenticity of this reform is the paradox of the monumental disunity that will be introduced by a move recommended in the name of "unity." It is left to individual Rabbis of individual congregations to decide what to do. Imagine, now, what is to happen if two Conservative Temples, two blocks from each other, are to come to different decisions. For some Conservative Jews it will be Yom Tov, for others weekday. Some will make kiddush,
others havdalah. Some will go to work, others will not. And all this in the name of "unity!"

One need not stand accused of excessive cynicism for conjecturing that the most likely solution to be accepted by the majority of Conservative Jews in practice will be, to take the eighth day of Passover as an illustration, that they will consider it as holiday with regard to laying the Tefillin, and as weekday with regard to eating hametz; as weekday with regard to reciting the kiddush, and holiday with regard to reciting the havdalah...

Surely every elementary student of Jewish history knows that differences in the fixing of the Jewish calendar are disruptive of the cohesion of Kelal Yisrael. The most serious controversies in our religious history, in Tannaitic and in Geonic times, arose because of such differences of opinion as to the calendar of observances. That is why the Sages were so insistent about not allowing the calendar to be fixed by individual whim. And yet the (Conservative) Rabbinical Assembly now knowingly legislates confusion -- leaving matters of such moment to individual spiritual leaders of single Temples, and proclaims this sowing of dissension as an act motivated by the pious concern for calendrical unity! The mind is boggled. And the heart is broken.

No wonder that some Rishonim maintained that the statement of the Mishnah in Avot,
that one who disdains the holidays has no share in the world-to-come, refers to Yom Tov Sheni Shel Galuyot; the disdain for mo'adot, holidays, refers specifically to these "Second Days."

But if abolition is, on a conscious level, only a ploy and a disguise for an embarrassing failure, then in a deeper sense, although on an unconscious level, it is a piece of religious hypocrisy. To say that you abolish the "Second Days" because of regard for Israel, is to utter a brazen contradiction and attempt to pass it off as a commonplace.

Permit me to explain. The great Rabbi Moses Sofer (the "Hatam Sofer") taught that the Holiday of the Exiles will never be abolished as long as there will be an exile or Galut. Almost prophetically he maintained that there will come a time when economically and politically and socially, Jews will be comfortable in a very sweet exile, and they may even convince themselves -- perhaps correctly so -- that in their exile they are spiritually akin to the angels who applaud them: י"ע א"נ א"ג ע. In that case, Jews must remember in their religious life and practice that they are in Galut. They must be reminded by the observance of that extra day, that Holiday of the Exiles, to know and realize and remind themselves, that they are indeed in exile, sweet as it is, and that no exile, no matter how pleasant, is permanently desirable. We observe the "Second Days" specifically to show that we are not in Israel and that we must aspire to go there. This is the rationale of the Yom Tov Sheni Shel Galuyot.
Perhaps we American Orthodox Jews are delinquent in Aliyah. I grant it. It is true that it is difficult for men and women in their middle years to uproot themselves, more difficult than for retired people or for youngsters who have not yet started their careers; but such difficulty is an explanation rather than an excuse. However, as long as we do not affirm the permanence of our exiled condition, as long as we recognize that we are in Galut, there remains the possibility of geulah, for we and our children will always be confronted by the demand for aliyah. Our consciences will be alert. When we celebrate the Holiday of the Exiles we do so affirm: we are in exile, sweet as it is; we need the additional kedushah or holiness of an extra day of Yom Tov. We are still unredeemed.

There is still hope for the Jew who acknowledges the distinction between Galut and geulah, between Eretz Yisrael and Hutz la-Aretz. But abolish the "Second Days," and you erase the dividing line, and in effect declare that you are not in Galut, that this Golah is not an exile, that the Jews of the State of Israel will live there and we will live here, and that we consider ourselves permanently ensconced in the lands of our dispersion. At that moment, be you can belong and pay dues and/the president of ten Zionist organizations, and give to the UJA, and buy a million dollars worth of Bonds, but you have forfeited not only your Zionism but the common destiny of Am Yisrael. There can be no common destiny of our people if we
forego the dream of redemption and the prayer for the Messiah and the hope that the focal point of our redemption will be the Promised Land to which we shall return. To venture, therefore, such abolition of the Holiday of the Exiles, with its implied equalization of the Golah and Israel and the abandonment of the hope of Aliyah and geulah -- and to do so in the name of Israel's primacy and supremacy -- is to attempt to put over a specious piece of illegitimate reasoning. It is a case of spiritual demagoguery.

Conservative Jews who are sincere and genuine and who are troubled by the problem of our future and our survival, should very, very carefully re-think their position and perhaps even their affiliation.

And we American Orthodox Jews must consider very seriously on our own part, what our reaction shall be. We must continue to build Jewish life in the United States to the best of our ability. The fact is that a great majority will remain here for the foreseeable future. But we must never lose sight of the profound distinction between a temporary stay, even for several generations, and the fixing of our destiny permanently in exile. This is one case where a man's spiritual perceptions precede and affect his immediate practical decisions. We must never abandon the vision of shivat Zion and geulah. And it is the practice of the Holiday of the Exiles that reminds us of that vision by making us constantly aware of the fact that we are in exile.
If Shir Hashirim ends on the penultimate verse, of self-satisfied religious existence in the Golah, then the Shir is not a song, but a hypnotic litany, a tragic national lullaby that can put us into a trance and let us sleep in an eternal nighttime of Galut and prove, (‘), a dirge.

But if we read the Shir Hashirim to the very end, and conclude it on the high note, which is its proper conclusion, then we shall have sung the holiest and most thrilling and joyous love-song in the repertoire of Jewish history: the one that leads to the climax of geulah.