

"ADAM'S CRIME COMPOUNDED"

In pronouncing the verdict of guilty against Adam for eating from the forbidden fruit, God said to him: Ki shamata le'kol ishtekha, because your hearkened to the voice of your wife, va-tokhal min ha-etz asher tzivitekha lemor lo tokhal mi-menu, and you ate from the tree from which I commanded you that you shall not eat from it, arurah ha-adamah ba-avurekha let the earth be cursed because of you.

What is remarkable about this proclamation is the apparently superfluous introduction. Adam's sin consisted of eating the fruit forbidden to him by God; why, then, does the Lord preface His announcement of Adam's punishment with the word Ki shamata le'kol ishtekha, "because you hearkened to the voice of your wife?"

Permit me to present to you three interpretations offered by three different commentators, widely separated in time and geography, but all of which point in one common direction, which is of tremendous relevance to us in our own days. All of them indicate that even more significant than the actual crime was the attitude that Adam brought towards that crime; the apology was worse than the sin. Adam had the opportunity for greatness: to come clean, maturely to acknowledge that he had been wrong, and to beg forgiveness. Instead, he whiningly offered an insipid self-justification. And it is here, in this attitude, that Adam compounded his crime many times over again.

The first of our commentators answers our problem by stating that the major sin of Adam was not the eating of the fruit, but in his demonstration of an utter lack of responsibility. Adam absolved himself of any guilt, and shifted the fault to someone else. When God first approached Adam to ask what he had done, what was his response? Ha-ishah asher natata imadi hi natnah li min ha-etz va-okhel, "the woman you gave to me, she gave me of the fruit of the tree and I

ate thereof." What a colossal impertinence! Adam feels he has now established his innocence by blaming his wife! And by disclaiming responsibility for what was obviously his own fault, he makes things that much worse. Therefore the Lord answers him, in pronouncing his punishment, and says, in effect: even more than for your guilt for eating from the tree, you are doubly punished for refusing responsibility for it: ki shamata le'kol ishtekha, "because you hearkened to the voice of your wife." The fact that she tempted you is no excuse; you are responsible for that as well.

How important that lesson of responsibility is for men and women of all ages, but particularly for us in this most complex age in which we live. It is one of the signs of our spreading and deepening civilization that as the sources of power become more diffuse, the sources of responsibility become more and more vague, and therefore irresponsibility begins to prevail. Take the classical crime of murder. Once upon a time, it was a simple, personal, direct confrontation between criminal and victim. Cain rose up and murdered his brother Abel. Plain, simple, man-to-man. There can be no question of where the responsibility for the ugly deed lay. But look what has happened to murder in our own days. From the ghastly mass slaughter revealed in the Eichmann trial to the professional executioners of the Mafia as revealed in the current testimony before Congress, the organizational structure and system is such that it is easy to shift responsibility to someone else. The leading Nazis or Mafia Board members do not dirty their hands with spilling blood; they simply command their subordinates to commit the fo^Ul act. And the subordinates maintain that although they committed the murder, they are guiltless, because they were forced to do so by their superiors. And so the victim lies dead, but responsibility is nowhere to be found. Murder has become a complicated affair in our civilization, and this has made it so much easier for the criminal to avoid a sense of personal responsibility for his crime.

On a much less heinous level, the same problem of responsibility holds true for the world of business. One of the foremost writers on problems of business ethics today (Thomas M. Garrett, "Ethics in "usiness") has referred to our current age, at the risk of over-simplification, as "the Age of the Buck-Passer." The nature of our social institutions, especially in the large corporate structures, is such that no one knows where the actual fulcrum of power and responsibility lies. For instance, in the great electrical conspiracy of price-fixing of two years ago, in which the guilty parties were not peripheral characters living on the margin of society but the very pillars of that society, all those who faced the judge disclaimed responsibility! Top management maintained that it had given no instructions for price-fixing. And the subordinates, the second-line executives, said that their conspiracy was not directly commanded by their superiors, but that they knew it had their tacit approval; and that, in any case, the pressure to "produce" was so heavy that it could not be achieved without the criminal act. Ha-ishah asher natata imadi - it is not my fault, it is her fault or his fault or their fault - but not mine!

The whole philosophical tone of our times lends itself towards highlighting the sense of irresponsibility. From pseudo-scientist to arm-chair psychologist, from cocktail-party Freudian to convinced college-sophomore behaviorist and determinist, we view ourselves not as thinking and deciding individuals with free wills and minds, but as objects that are pushed and pulled and stretched and shrunk by events and forces outside ourselves. And if that is the case, we cannot be held psychologically or morally accountable for our act. This man murdered? -- he may be excused, for we must consider the fact that he hated his mother when he was an infant. Another man steals? -- his environment and his genetic constitution forced him to the act, and hence he is not responsible. The other man is an adulterer? -- his answer is easy and his justification ready: it is the fault of his uncontrollable drives, or in the fact that his wife

doesn't understand him. Ha-ishah asher natata imadi.

And so, the words of God to our first forefather Adam remain relevant to us in the twentieth century: Ki shamata le'kol ishtekha va-tokhal min ha-etz asher tzivitekha lemor; we are responsible; even more than the guilt for the act we perpetrate is the guilt that comes from trying to pass responsibility elsewhere and not accept it in a manly and moral fashion.

The second explanation of this verse is offered by R. Simḥah Zissel of Kelm, one of the three great students of Rabbi Israel Salanter, the renowned leader of the Musar movement in 19th century Lithuania.

It is an answer that goes beyond the question of responsibility to an even more subtle and more important notion. And that is, that the secondary crime of Adam was: ingratitude.

God had made a Paradise for Adam. He had all that his heart desired. And yet he was miserable - for he was lonely, and he suffered greatly in his solitude. He beheld the members of the animal kingdom about him, and saw that each animal had its mate, that they did not suffer from the loneliness which afflicted him. And so, according to our tradition, he cried out to God, le'khulam yesh ben zug ve'li ein ben zug - everyone has his mate, but I do not! And we are told in the Torah that God agreed and commiserated with him: lo tov heyot ha-adam le'vado, said God, it is not good that man should be alone. And so, in response to Adam's fervent pleas, God gave him a wife, Eve. How happy Adam was with this wife! How he exulted when his misery was banished and God presented him with his greatest blessing and fortune: zot ha-paam etzem me-atzamai u-vasar mi-besari, "this time I have someone with me, a real and true companion, bone from my bones and flesh from my flesh!"

Without her, all the delights of the Garden of Eden were as nothing. His paradise was a Hell. And now, with his wife, he had received his greatest and most precious gift. And yet, at the very first crisis, at the first

sign of trouble, Adam forgets the happiness which she brought him, he promptly dismisses from his mind the misery of his life before she came into it, and when he is asked by God to explain his actions, he says: ha-ishah asher natata imadi hi natnah li min ha-etz va-okhel -- that woman you gave me, she enticed me and tempted me to eat from the fruit! Adam was an ingrate. He was thankful neither to God nor to Eve. Instead of exercising the elementary human sentiment of gratefulness, and accepting the blame upon himself and shielding his wife, he immediately blamed her and forgot all that she meant to him. And that is why, in enunciating his punishment, God spoke with such devastating sarcasm: ki shamata le'kol ishtekha, for you hearkened to the voice of your wife; you have the unmitigated gall and consummate ingratitude to blame her after all she has meant to you!

Indeed, gratitude is one of the greatest principles of Judaism. The first thing the Jew says upon arising in the morning is: Modeh ani, thank you, O God, for returning my soul and my life to me. And when, a thousand years ago, the great Gaon Saadia wanted to show that it is possible to construct Judaism de novo on entirely rational grounds, the very first principle that he produced was: gratitude, from which flow the commandments of prayer, of saying grace after food, of charity, and so on.

How interesting that the great sages of Israel throughout all the generations not only preached well, but practiced their greatest teachings. Of the same R. Simḥah Zissel, who advanced this explanation of Adam's guilt of ingratitude, a most charming story is told. It used to be his custom that when returning from services on Friday evening, as he approached his home, he would open the door and stand on the threshold, without moving and without speaking a word, for three or four minutes. He would merely gaze all about him. Then, at the end of this period, he would say "Gut Shabbas" to his wife and his children and guests, and enter his home. Once, his disciples were bold enough to ask their rabbi and master for an explanation of this strange behavior. He answered as follows: "every Friday my wife works so hard in order to make my

home beautiful to receive the Queen Sabbath. She puts in so much labor and effort, energy and thought, into preparing our home. I do not want her efforts to go unappreciated. I do not want her to feel that I am not grateful to her for all that she has done. Therefore, when I return from 'Shul' and open the door, I want to spend several minutes simply absorbing the delights of the home she has prepared for me: the candles casting their beautiful glow all about, the dining room table all set with kiddush cups and 'challos,' the cleanliness of the home and the odor of the food and all the delicacies. As I absorb all this, my heart is filled with a boundless gratitude to my dear wife and she knows that I appreciate her work, and that it has not gone unnoticed and unthanked." Such is the lesson that a sage of Israel has learned from the failure of our first father Adam.

The third interpretation is given by the author of Or ha-Hayyim, one of the Jews expelled during the persecutions in Spain in the late Middle Ages. It is a more subtle and astonishing explanation. He points out that we nowhere are told that Adam actually knew that the fruit his wife gave him was from the forbidden tree. We read, merely, va-titen gam le'ishah imah va-yakhol - and she gave of it also to her husband with her and he ate. It is likely, our author tells us, that Adam never knew what he was eating. And in that case, it would seem that the excuse he offered to God was perfectly legitimate: ha-ishah asher natata imadi - she gave it to me, I knew not what it is, and therefore I am guiltless.

And yet, Adam is found guilty. The answer of God is profoundly significant. It involves the following idea: if a man really cares about something, if he is involved deeply, if he is totally committed, if he is really concerned, then he will bother to check and investigate and re-investigate. But if his commitment is only superficial, if all his concern is only a surface gesture, then he will be satisfied to live his life as he wills without bothering to make any investigation. The tragedy and the crime is that Adam did not take God seriously. If he did, then the command "thou shalt not eat thereof" would have emblazoned itself into the conscious and also subconscious of Adam, he

would have been so aware of the need to refrain from this fruit, that the very texture and color and structure of the fruit would have been deep in his mind at all times, so that the moment his wife gave him something to eat he would have pondered, thought, noticed, inquired, and checked. But Adam was too busy enjoying his paradise to worry about God's commandment. And so he satisfied himself with the fact that as long as he does not, with total awareness, clearly and directly violate the divine will, he is on the safe side. And this, his indifference and his unconcern, his inattention and his lack of inner commitment, were the background and essence of Adam's tragic failure. That is why God told him: ki shamata le'kol ishtekha, I punish you because you listened to the voice of your wife - because this was an index of your inner indifference, because if you really cared you would not have eaten of anything that was given to you, but you would have made it your business to know, understand, and beware.

I submit to you, my friends, that here is a problem which often afflicts us observant, traditional, Orthodox Jews. It is a condition that we prefer not to discuss or even think about. Our commitment is too shallow, our sense of concern too superficial, our feeling of involvement too narrow. Take, for instance, the problem of Kashruth. People who really care, who are really concerned, will check the kashruth of their food as seriously and as solemnly as they check the business credentials of the companies whose stocks they want to buy. People who really care about kashruth will not be satisfied to accept any food merely because the word "kosher" appears on a label, without bothering to investigate the reliability, validity, and authenticity of that claim. If the Jewish kosher-eating public was really concerned about kashruth in a deep, committed way, then the laxity in reliable kashruth-certification which has plagued American Jewry from its inception, would be cleared up over night. For that matter, people who take God seriously and to whom Torah really means something will never settle for the religious schizophrenia which says that I should keep kosher at home, but outside of the home "anything goes." When we

do not bother to check, and do not bother to investigate, and do not bother to ask -- when ki shamata le'kol ishtekha, it is a sign that we are religious by gesture and not by commitment. Then we repeat the sin of our grandfather Adam.

Indeed, the problem of indifference and unconcern is a far larger question of human and universal significance. And who knows it, if not we Jews! Our people were decimated in the greatest blood bath of history not only by the cruel hands of the actual murderers, but also by their accomplices who were partners in the crime by their very indifference and failure to protest. The crime of silence and indifference will return to plague the conscience of mankind for centuries. Government and church, President and Prime Minister and Pope, were all indifferent to the fate of six million Jews. And that silence was criminal! And we shall be criminal if we fail to expose it no matter what the cost! Ki shamata le'kol ishtekha va-tokh^al min ha-etz asher tzivitekha lemor lo tokhal mimenu arurah ha-adamah ba-avurekha - because of indifference is man led to the most cruel of sins and crimes. And if man is indifferent to the God who blew the breath of life into his nostrils, then the earth out of which he was formed will be indifferent to him. Arurah ha-adamah ba-avurekha - then the virus of indifference is passed on by man to infect the world he lives in, and the earth remains callous and unconcerned with man's fate and destiny, she does not produce enough to satisfy his needs and his wants, and man is thus left hanging, between Heaven and Earth, alone, by himself, uncared for, unattended. The punishment fits the crime.

Here then are three great lessons that we learn from three or four words of today's Sidra. From the negative we deduce the positive. We learn three great lessons: those of responsibility, gratitude, and a feeling of concern.

Perhaps we shall never find our way back to that Paradise from which Adam was banished because of his folly. But if the path to that Garden of Eden is forever blocked to us, it does not mean that we are lost. For by following the precepts

we have mentioned, by correcting the mistakes of Adam and by learning responsibility, gratitude, and concern, we can yet create our own Paradise - in our own nation, our own community, our own family, indeed, each and every man in his own heart and soul.