

THE WAREHOUSES OF WISDOM

Recently we of the Western World laughed knowingly at the backward Indians whose astrologers and Hindu priests confidently predicted the end of the world. No doubt, these superstitions per se are so primitive and ludicrous as to justify all the ridicule.

However, was their concern about the end of the world really so very foolish? Or were they inadvertently, dramatizing the greatest, most agonizing, and most crucial problem facing all of us, East and West: that of the sheer survival of the human race?

The end of the world may not come about, as the Hindu astrologers predicted, because of a conjunction of the other planets. But it may very well come about because of a disjunction and moral confusion of the inhabitants of this planet. It is not the eclipse of the sun, but the eclipse of the human heart that ought to fill us with terror. What is the nature of this unprecedented problem? It is not that we have too much knowledge, but that we do not know how to use what we have. It is not that we are too smart, but that we are too smart for our own good. Our brains have grown, while our hearts have shrunk. The mind of man has sharpened, while his soul has grown dull. His science has leaped forward, and his spirit has been stunted. In the terms of our own tradition, we have increased Chokhmah (wisdom, knowledge), and decreased Yirah (reverence, piety, ethical aspirations).

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Rabbi Hayyim Volozhiner, in his Nefesh Hayyim (Part 4 Chapter 4), on the basis of a Talmudic text (Shabbat 30a), has analyzed for us the problem of Torah and Chokhmah on the one hand, and Yirah on the other, by presenting them in an agricultural metaphor. Wisdom, he says, is like tevuah - the harvest, the produce of the fields, which the farmer seeks to store away. Yirah, the fear of God, is the warehouse in which the harvest of wisdom is stored. In other words, if there is more knowledge than conscience, more tevuah than otzar, the knowledge is wasted and even harmful. Man's absorptive capacity of wisdom is limited by his spiritual powers. First, therefore, you must construct your inner warehouse, that of Yirah, then you may reap your harvest of Chokhmah and store it away for your own benefit.

How modern, how contemporary, that parable is! Only recently the New York Times ran a series of three articles, the burden of which was the fact that we already have too much knowledge for our own good. Even if all research should abruptly stop, we would have enough work ordering and utilizing the knowledge we have for the next 100 years. There is so much surplus knowledge in the world today, so many professional magazines published and circulated, that individual scholars find it impossible to keep up with all the information that is available to them. There is, indeed, a surplus of the harvest of knowledge!

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In today's Sidra, Moses is commanded by G-d to arrange for the making of the special priestly vestments for Aaron and his sons. We read: V'ata tedaber el kol chakhmeilev asher miletiv ruach chokhmah. "And you shall speak to all the wise-hearted whom I have filled with the spirit of wisdom" that they should make these garments (Ex.28:3). What is meant by chakhmei lev, "the wise-hearted?" The term means not the wisdom of the brain and the mind, not mere knowledge, but the wisdom of the heart and the soul, of feeling and faith, of reverence and ethical sensitivity. Only those who have the latter can be filled, by God, with the former. How appropriately the Baal ha-Turim points out that numerically, by gimatriya, the words chakhmei lev asher are equal to the word Yirat, of the expression Yirat ha-Shem - the fear of the Lord! Only those endowed with wise hearts and the fear of the Lord have the warehouses which deserve and can absorb the "spirit of wisdom." Indeed, before beginning to gather the fruits of wisdom, we must build in our very hearts the store-houses made of Yirat ha-Shem.

Our contemporaries have not taken this advice seriously at all. Our civilization, to use the analogy of Rabbi Hayyim, appears like a series of tiny warehouses, each filled to capacity and bursting at the seams, while thousands upon thousands of workers crawl about like busy ants, day and night, not building more and adequate warehouses, but growing, harvesting, and piling up more and more grain

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which lies all about the scene, unused, unassimilated, unabsorbed, wasting away and rotting, inviting the rodents of the spirit to disport themselves in it and inject poisons with which to destroy unhappy mankind. Certainly we have wisdom - too much, however, for our inner undersized warehouses of piety and morality.

Indeed this is not only a question of the Space Age or of nuclear bombs, but of the very fabric of our civilization. Only a few years ago Science Newsletter reported that the automobile has in the past forty years killed over one-million Americans - twice as much as America lost in all the wars of its history combined! Does this mean that the horse and buggy drivers were better? No, but it does mean that the advanced knowledge that lead to the invention of cars, required an equivalent advance in wise-heartedness, in the inner spiritual warehouse with which to control and assimilate that new knowledge. It means that we needed then, and certainly

now, a pervasive spirit of sophisticated Yir at ha-Shem in all our driver and pedestrians, old and young, to value life above speed, felicity above culture, one which will teach our engineers, our velocity, humanity above horse-power.

President Kennedy has only recently mentioned an even more serious problem: automation, what he calls "the major domestic challenge of the Sixties." What shall we do with the resulting unemployment? What will Americans do with the leisure that will result from automation - will it bring them happiness and creativity, or boredom and neuroses? Will we expend as much mental energy concerning ourselves with people, with G-d's image, as we will in blind devotion to

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technological advances? With the new advances in cybernetics, will we control our new thinking machines, or will they control us?

This week an American astronaut went into orbit. Is it heretical to ask: why? Why must the Russians do it? Why must anyone try to reach beyond the atmosphere? How long can we afford, haively, to assume that knowledge for its own sake is an absolute and unquestioned good? Could not all this brain power and money be used more advantageously - for medical knowledge, or to advance the social sciences? Perhaps to build more of the inner-warehouses...?

For everyone who is thrilled by the idea of inter-planetary travel, let us remember that this week we read of some scientist who is thinking of diverting an asteroid so that it can hit the earth and, properly directed, become a militarily valuable "continent smasher" which can destroy the whole continent of the enemy. How tragically we have entrusted our fate to technological geniuses who are ethical idiots! What a prostitution of knowledge to think in such terms!

What we desperately need is less engineering and more conscience, less new knowledge and more pondering and educating ourselves how to use the knowledge we already have best to serve humanity.

When King Solomon was a young man, he asked G-d for the gift of wisdom. He thought that with it he will be able to solve all problems. But when he was an old man he cried out: Yosif daat yosif makhov - "he who increaseth knowledge, increaseth pain."

A hundred years ago, in the heyday of the faith in "the inevitability of progress," most people believed that all the world's ills could be solved by more knowledge. And now the 19th century optimists have become 20th century pessimists. No wonder that Prof. Robert Oppenheimer, the "father of the Atom Bomb," has stated that in some way, scientists of his generation have "known sin." Indeed! In our Amidah prayer we recite the blessing of ata chonen l'adam daat - the blessing asking for wisdom - and immediately afterwards, we bless G-d ha-rotzeh bi'teshuvah, who desireth repentance.

Originally, the proximity of the theme of repentance to that of wisdom was to emphasize that only when there is knowledge can there be true repentance. Today, however, I think the direction is reversed. Today we must repent for the senseless accumulation of surplus wisdom gathered obsessively without any thought as to the consequences for humanity, without any thought of first building the inner structures of Yirah.

For indeed we moderns have much to repent for our thoughtless worship of wisdom and science and technology, and the consequent threat to all mankind. We have plumbed the nature of the Atom, but neglected the nature of the sons of Adam. Are today's uranium-hunters really any better than yesterday's head-hunters? One scientist quoted by Joseph Wood Krutch, has said: "we do not know where we are going; we do not know where we want to go; but we are doing everything possible to accelerate our movements."

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Let us conclude with the first verse in today's Haftorah from the Prophet Ezekiel: ata ben adam haged et Bet Yisrael et ha-bayit ve'yikalmu me'avonotehem u-mad'du et tokhnit. "Thou, O son of man, show the plans of the Temple to the House of Israel, that they may be ashamed of their sins; and let them measure accurately."

This is the order ordained by G-d for a prophetic people. First ve'yikalmu me'avonotehem, then u-mad'du et tokhnit. First introduction - the fear of G-d, then the construction of the house of God. First feeling with the heart, reverence; then measuring with the mind, progress. First, psychology, the inner-life; then technology, outer-life. First the warehouse, then the harvest.

Thus will the House of Israel build the Temple of the future.

Thus will all mankind build a civilization for both the present and then the future, one which will be safe from the overwhelming horror of universal suicide brought on by the disparity of overgrown minds and undersized souls.

Ata ben adam - "Thou, O son of man." It is up to each of us, in his or her own way, to contribute to that sacred goal, to a humane future for all humanity. How we live privately, what values we instil in our children, what goals we cherish, how we make our voices heard in this free and democratic society - these will determine the course of our race. "Thou, O son of man."