

"THE UNMASKING OF EVIL"

There is a remarkable contrast between the key verses of the Haftorah of last week and the one we read this morning. Last week we read of the prophet Ezekiel addressing the Pharaoh of the Egypt of his day. Even in predicting Pharaoh's downfall, the Prophet seems awed by his power and arrogance. He calls him ha-tannim ha-gadol, the great sea-monster or dragon, the one who boasts li ye'ori va-ani asitini, this river, the Nile, is mine, and I am self-made. This week, Ezekiel's older contemporary, Jeremiah, addresses the same Pharaoh in quite different terms: karu sham, Paroh mellekh Mitzrayim sha'on, "they called out there, Pharaoh the King of Egypt is but a big noise."

What a comedown! From ha-tannim ha-gadol to sha'on, from great dragon to hollow noise, from a monster to a mouse!

What this juxtaposition of prophecies teaches us is that the ultimate victory of God and the forces of truth and freedom will consist not so much of destroying falsehood as ^{of} ~~in~~ demonstrating its emptiness. Pharaoh is defeated by being deflated. More tyrants have been toppled by the weapon of irony than by iron weapons. Military victories are won by powerful arms; moral triumphs are achieved by perceptive heart and eyes and ears which can expose the vast vacuum at the heart of evil.

It is in this manner that we must understand Ten Plagues about which we read these weeks. The plagues wrought against the Egyptians were not meant simply to satisfy the sadistic, vengeful feelings of a persecuted people paying back their tormentors in kind. Rather, they have specific moral purposes. That is what the Torah means when it says u-ve'elohei Mitzrayim e'esh shefatim, "and against the gods of Egypt will I execute judgment." God, in punishing the Egyptians, aims primarily at ^{teaching} ~~demonstrating~~ them that their gods are false, their ideologies pernicious, their principles perverted. The late Prof. Casuto,

that eminent Italian-Jewish Professor of Bible at the Hebrew University, has demonstrated that the Ten Plagues were directed at particular gods worshipped by the Egyptians. For instance, the first plague was that of dam, whereby the Nile turned into blood. But the Nile itself, source of Egypt's agriculture and wealth, was considered a god by the Egyptians. The second plague was that of tzefardeia, frogs, the sudden increase of which became a curse for the Egyptians. Prof. Casuto tells us that one of the goddesses of the Egyptians was a figure that was half frog and half woman -- so that the object of their veneration became the source of their malediction. The plague of hoshekh, darkness, was especially significant because it blacked out the sun -- which was the chief god in the Egyptian pantheon. And the last plague, the death of bekhorot or the first-born, was similarly a "judgment" executed against the gods of Egypt -- for all first-born were regarded as deities, even the first-born of animals! So that the reason the Torah records the Ten Plagues with such meticulous detail is that they served clearly defined moral purposes, exposing the sham of Egyptian idolatry. Pharoah the King of Egypt -- and all the gods of Egypt -- are nothing more than sha'on, an empty noise!

Perhaps in this manner we may also understand a related issue. In the Passover Haggadah we read several opinions as to the total number of plagues with which the Egyptians were afflicted. Some say that there were sixty. Other believe there were two-hundred-forty. Rabbi Akiva puts the number at three-hundred. But if it is so, one might ask, why does the Torah not record more than ten?

The answer I suggest is: these larger numbers are mere details of historical facts, but they add nothing new to the great educational principles inherent in the Ten Plagues. For the Ten Plagues had ten specific goals of exposing the falsehood and vacuousness of Egyptian religion. All the other plagues merely repeated these lessons. Therefore the Torah made no mention of them. For the great purpose of Torah and the Messianic hope of Israel is not only iconoclasm, the defeat of Godlessness, but education, the establishment of

Godliness. Evil is expunged by being exposed. Falsehood is undone by being unmasked. A living lie is best denied by being debunked.

Recent events of our own lives affirm that principle. The military defeat of Hitler took place about twenty years ago. But the moral battle is not yet won. Only now, recently, have we begun seriously the task of the exposure of Nazis and Nazism. Thus, the major achievement of the whole Eichmann affair was not the hanging of this mass murderer, but the trial: showing the world the face of evil, exposing the system and the background, the inner rot and corruption and decay. It was the expose more than the execution which had historical significance.

Today there is taking place in Germany the trial of some of those demons who were in charge of the Auschwitz concentration camp. The life or death of these miserable individuals, who have long forfeited any claim to compassion, is of no relevance. What is important is that Germany and the world once again experience the exposure of evil in all its ramifications.

But there were also other evils committed during the war, not only by the hands of the Nazis. During these unspeakably terrible times others too were guilty of all the blood - letting on that accursed continent. These others were surely not as guilty as the actual murderers, but no one can deny that theirs is the overwhelming historical and moral failure of lo taamad al dam reiakha -- "thou shalt not stand by idly when thy brother's blood is being spilt." There were many who participated, by their silence and passivity, in this terrible crime -- even people who were widely admired and worshipped by us Jews. They include leaders of powerful Churches, leaders of the democratic West -- and even, to some extent, certain of our own people. Now, twenty years later, these too must be exposed; not in vengeance, not in senseless anger, but because of moral reasons.

Some people have said: what good will it do? What benefit will it be to anyone to reawaken these old hatreds and animosities and irritations?

The same question was asked when Israel prepared the Eichmann trial.

And the same answer applies now as it did then: u-ve'elohei Mitzrayim e'eseh shefatim -- it is not enough to destroy the Nazis, one must also destroy their gods; and one of their associate gods was the indifference of man to his brother's anguish. It is time for us, for the sake of our children and children's children, to declare that Pharaoh the King of Egypt is sha'on, just a great deal of noise, that all those pious phrases and eloquent declarations and good political public relations that were broadcast during the war -- if they did not speak the truth, if they were not inspired by humanitarianism, if they were not genuinely dedicated to spiritual principles, left their authors guilty of criminal cowardice.

Yes, if we are willing to gloss over the past, we may be able to breathe easier now and continue in our present illusion that inter-religious peace and harmony prevails and will remain forever. But before we choose to do so, let us bear in mind the burning words of the English philosopher Santanyana: "those who choose to forget history are condemned to relive it!" If we want to forget the history of the war, if we want to ignore the ignominious roles played by various key individuals, then we must be willing to risk the excruciating experience of reliving such monstrous times!

Surely this terrible era had something to teach us. If all we did is to fight with military arms for a military victory, and then go back to supposedly "normal" times -- then we have chosen to forget history and to forego ever learning about those hidden but very real forces that make for such mass devastation. Then we have failed to unmask evil, even the evil that infects the good man who ignores his neighbor's cry, ^{by means of} ~~in~~ the slow and difficult and painful process of exposure. And of course this exposure is painful; but it is vitally necessary. Saadia taught that the truth is ha-emet/ha-marah, it is

bitter. But if we do not swallow the bitter pill of truth despite its unpleasantness now, then we must be willing to remain the victims of these diseases and ailments that have characterized our times as the most blood-thirsty in all history.

There is an early chapter in Jewish history, fascinatingly recorded in the First Book of Samuel, which expresses this very idea. The city of Ashdod, where today a new Israeli city is being built and a great Yeshivah is rising, was once one of the leading cities of the Phillistines. The idol of the Phillistines in Ashdod was Dagon. In one of the many wars that the Phillistines waged against the Israelites, they captured the aron Elohim, the Ark of God, in which was kept the Torah and which was the symbol of Judaism. They decided to ~~the~~ bring the aron to Ashdod in a confrontation with Dagon. Their reasoning was, in the words of one of the Rabbis of the Talmud, yavo ha-menutzah etzel ha-menatzeiah -- let the vanquished be brought in submission to the victor, i.e. Dagon. The next morning the Phillistines were dismayed to find that the Dagon had fallen before the Ark. They quickly picked it up and set it a-right. The morning after, however, they were even more dismayed, for they found that not only had the Dagon fallen before the Ark, but its hands and head had rolled off and, in the words of the Bible, ve'rak ha-dagon nishar, "and only the Dagon remained."

What strange words! How can one say that the Dagon fell, its heads and hands removed, "and only the Dagon remained?"

The great Bible commentator, R. David Kimhi, explains that the word Dagon itself indicates that this was a god in the form of a dag, or fish. It had the body and torso of a fish, with the hands and head of a man. What happened when the Dagon fell is that the human head and hands fell off, and the idol was exposed as being nothing more than - a fish! The idolatry of the Phillistines was unmasked, their god was stripped of its amiable face of sociability, its deceptive smile, its beckoning and gentle hands. And with the

facade ripped off, all men were able to see that the vital principle of this people, the core of this religion, the center of this faith, was symbolized by: a fish! Underneath all this apparent humanity was a glossy-eyed indifference to others; a thick-skinned selfishness; a cold-blooded attitude insulated by scales. All that Dagon was could be symbolized by the big gaping mouth, the cannibalism of a fish that swallows its own kind, the desire to be the biggest fish in the pond, at any expense!

No preaching could have accomplished that. No military defeat alone could have brought about that end. Both Phillistines and Israelites -- indeed all of mankind -- had to see this humiliation and expose of idolatry in order to learn how hollow our pretenses sometimes are, how corrupt and decaying our Godlessness always is.

The aim of Judaism, then, in the struggle between good and evil is not so much to lay low the forces of evil, as to lay them bare; not so much to revile falsehood as to reveal it -- as decay^{dent}, as mean, and above all, as a failure.

Punishment -- whether of a sinner by God, or a criminal by society, or a student by a teacher, or a child by a parent -- must always aim at enlightenment. The whole ethical impulse of Judaism must lead to lasting pedagogical and educational results.

All that we have said is succinctly summarized in the beginning of our Sidra, in the very second verse. When God tells Moses that He will harden the heart of Pharoah, the reason is given as: "That thou mayest tell in the ears of thy son, and of thy son's son, what I have wrought upon Egypt, and My Signs which I have done among them, vi'yedatem ki ani ha-Shem, that you may know that I am the Lord." The punishments and plagues were not blind vengeance; they were meant to be a lesson and demonstration for all generations. And their ultimate purpose is the most noble and glorious known to mankind: ve'yedatem ki ani ha-Shem, that you may know that I am the Lord.