

"INDEED"

In coming to the end of the Five Books of Moses, we reach the climactic incident, recorded in today's Sidra, that is so full of poignant drama and so profoundly saddening: the declaration by God to Moses, hen karvu yamekha la-mut, "Behold, your time has come to die."

In studying this verse, the Rabbis were intrigued by -- of all things! -- what is apparently the least significant word, hen -- "behold." In the Midrash they relate the following parable. A man desired to honor his king with a gift, and presented to him a very precious and sharp sword. When the king received it, he commanded that the sword immediately be used to chop off the head of the man who gave it to him! Upon hearing this command, the donor approached the king and said, ba-meh she'kibadetikha atta metiz roshi, "I intended this sword as a gift of honor to you; is it right that you use it to behead me?"

So, the Rabbis aver, Moses complained to God: I honored You with the word hen, when I exclaimed to my people Israel, hen la-Shem shamayim u-shemei shamayim, "Behold, the heavens and the heavens of the heavens belong to the Lord." And now, ba-meh she'kibadetikha atta metiz roshi, with the very same expression which I used to enhance Your glory, You pronounce my doom, saying: hen karvu yamekha la-mut, "Behold, your time has come to die?"

Moses asked a good question. It does seem ironically unjust that the same interjection which Moses used to enhance the honor of

God, God now uses to inform Moses of his end. What is God's answer?

Here, the Midrash produces a surprise ending to this dialogue. It tells us that God responded to Moses: you are a shakhen ra, a bad neighbor! For when I sent you to redeem Israel, your immediate response to Me was, ve'hen lo yaaminu li, "But behold, they will not believe me." Hence, you slandered Israel, and therefore with the same expression of hen, "behold," I shall now pronounce your death sentence.

Do we have here a mere play on words? No, assuredly not. What the Midrash teaches us is a grammatical and psychological and ethical insight. The author of "Torah Temimah" (in his "Tosefet Berakhah") explains that the word hen implies certainty, absoluteness, opinion without doubt. In other words, hen should not be translated "behold," but "indeed!"

Now we can understand the dialogue between God and Moses. Moses knew he had to die sooner or later, but he was taken aback at the harshness, the strictness, the absolute certainty of the verdict implied in the word hen. It was as if God said: this is it, Moses, there is no appeal -- hen, indeed, you are to die! Moses complained: after I was the one who declared with such certainty of faith that You are the Master of the world, when I taught my people hen la-Shem shamayim u-shemei shamayim, that indeed, You are the Lord -- do I deserve this from You? Is it right that the same expression of absoluteness, hen or "indeed," should be used against me?

To this, God answered, yes, you are right; but remember that you were also dogmatic and categorical in your low opinion of your fellow Jews. In saying ve'hen lo yaaminu li, you assumed too much about the people of Israel. You were too certain of their faithlessness. The same categorical certainty must therefore be your punishment.

It is, then, legitimate to speak of God with the word hen; but never is it proper to speak so of man! In a sense -- with full apologies to the philosophers and theologians of all ages -- it is easier to know God (of what He chooses to reveal of Himself) with certainty, with hen and "indeed," than it is to know man with certainty. We are a shakhen ra if we think that we have taken the measure of a man or a people, if we hold that they are unchangeable and unredeemable, and we are infallible.

Rabbi Israel Salanter once said: what a pity that people question God and are certain of themselves; it ought to be the other way around -- we ought to be certain about God, and question ourselves...

What we are saying in effect is that man is not determined, that he is not always and clearly predictable. Despite the many successes of psychology and sociology, there is no such thing, strictly speaking, as "the science of man." I consider the term blasphemous. For men are not objects, like pieces of furniture or automobiles. Of course, there are aspects of man's existence, both

physical and psychological, that follow unchanging laws; it is here that the social sciences are relevant and valid. But not so all of man, in his entirety. If Judaism has anything to say to us, it is that we retain, to a greater or lesser degree, a core of freedom of choice, that the future is open.

In the history of Western philosophy, Thomas Hobbes maintained that man is an animal, and Descartes taught that animals are machines. So, by a quasi-algebraic process (as Joseph Wood Krutch put it in one of his books), it was assumed proven beyond doubt that man is a machine. But if so, man can be studied like a machine, his behavior and conduct can be predicted like that of a machine, and, ultimately, he can be used and manipulated as if he were a machine.

This, indeed, is the philosophy of "indeed." But the Torah rejects this hen ideology. Of course we can learn a great deal about man, but we can never be certain of every individual or every people. For man, unlike a machine, has freedom of will, and he is full of novelty and surprise. Thus, he may rise as high as an angel or sink as low as a devil. It is good to remember this whenever we pass judgment on people: always make it tentative and provisional, never categorical, never hen, never "indeed."

We used to make snap judgments, once upon a time, upon whole nations. For instance, Jews used to feel that Germans were a polite and civilized and educated nation, and hence there was no question that they were the most decent of all nations. How disappointed we

were to become! In the United States, before the McCarthy era, it was popular to say "it can't happen here." I hope that by now we are more sophisticated than to espouse the idea of hen so flippantly and so easily.

We must be careful not to make such hen exclamations in our own day about the Negro community. Not too long ago, in the memory of most of us, the typical prejudice was that all black men are alike: they are happy, singing, ignorant, and would always remain satisfied with their subordinate and inferior status. We have now learned how erroneous this is. But it is equally absurd and foolish to recite the word hen about the claims now being pressed by some of the worst elements in the Negro community. No people is altogether guilty or altogether innocent, altogether good or altogether bad. The theory that whatever the Negroes demand must be granted them automatically, is as pernicious as the theory that whatever they desire must be denied to them. They are citizens and human beings, the same as all of us, and therefore we must not say "indeed" to either assertions of their guilt or assertions of their purity and innocence. The recent SNCC conference, in which a number of our fellow Jews, all progressives and liberals, participated, is a case in point. Some of our people remained in the conference through the most bigoted kind of anti-white vituperation, and then continued to remain (at least some of them did) during anti-Israel and anti-Semitic votes by the same group. It was a sickly, masochistic, self-

flagellating demonstration of self-denigration that comes from taking dogmatic ideology to an excess, of using the "indeed" for any theory, whether liberal or conservative.

So too, the principle of rejecting the hen applies to individuals as well -- even more so. Thus, our Rabbis (Avot 4:3) taught: al tehi baz le'khol adam, never despise any man. Never assume, about anyone, that no good can come from him. And the Rabbis, in a tractate aptly called "Derekh Eretz" taught us: le'olam yihyu benei adam be'enekha ke'listim, ve'hevey mekhabdan ke'Rabban Gamaliel -- always suspect people of being thieves, but honor them as did Rabban Gamaliel, who was famous for his humility and hospitality (D.E.R. Ch.V)! Both suspect and respect; remember at all times that people are equally capable of the greatest folly and of the greatest nobility. You can never tell how a person will develop, what untapped potentialities, both for good and for evil, lie buried within his heart.

I have seen -- as I have no doubt everyone here has -- fine, upright, pious people go wrong after a long history of decency and creativity. The Talmud records the case of the High Priest who, after eighty years of service in the Temple, became a heretic, a Saducee. Much more important, I have so often, and so happily, observed children whom one could describe as dull and uninspired and unmotivated, justifying the impression that nothing would ever come of them -- and yet, at the proper time and with the proper effort, were galvanized into great activity, great creativity, until they

became some of the most valuable human beings who made enduring contributions to society. There can be no hen, no "indeed," about human beings! Our very humanity rebels against such muzzling of our potentialities.

The Halakhah too recognizes this principle. The Talmud (Kid.49b) discusses the cases of conditional marriages. It tells us that if a man approached a woman, gave her a ring, and said to her: harei at mekudeshet li al menat she'ani tzaddik, you are hereby married to me on condition that I am a tzaddik, a righteous man, then the law is that the marriage is valid, even if the man is known as a rasha gamur, as a complete scoundrel. The reason the Talmud gives is, shema hirher teshuvah be'daato -- it is always possible that inwardly he experienced feelings of repentance, and therefore he no longer retains the category of a scoundrel, but becomes a tzaddik! Conversely, if a man married a woman al menat she'ani rasha, on condition that I am a scoundrel, then even if he is known as tzaddik gamur, completely righteous, nonetheless the marriage is valid. The reason is, shema hirher devar avodah zarah be'daato, it is possible that at that time he entertained thoughts of idolatry. No one is "indeed" good or bad. There is always the option, the freedom to rise or to fall, to attain repentance or degenerate into idolatry.

It is this marvelous uncertainty and novelty, this element of surprise and unpredictability in human nature, this open-endedness of man's future, this essential freedom at the core of the human heart,

because of which all of Ellul, Rosh Hashanah, and Yom Kippur make sense. Were it not for this freedom, for this absence of hen or "indeed," man could never be held accountable for wrongdoing, and there would be no sense to asking for forgiveness.

Tonight, when we begin the special season of repentance with the prayers for Selichot, for forgiveness, we reaffirm what God taught Moses in today's Sidra: there can be no hen, no categorical certainty about the human heart and the human soul; indeed not!

In learning from Moses not to use hen with regard to human beings, we approach the High Holiday season, resolved to abandon hen even about ourselves. We begin this teshuvah period with the awareness of how low we have sunk compared to how high we could have risen; and with the determination that no matter how low we have sunk, we shall arise ever higher.

Our hope and our prayer, in asserting once again the freedom that God has granted us, is that God Himself will use the word hen about us, when He will proclaim, in the words which the Sephardic version includes in the kedushah prayer: hen gaalti etkhem afarit ke'reshit, li'heyot lakhem le'Elokim -- "hen, indeed, I shall redeem you now as I once did before, in order that I shall truly be your God."