

"TO BE A MAN"

I

Almost two years ago, I stood before this congregation and apologized for allowing personal sentiments to color my remarks. That was the occasion of the Bar Mitzvah of my first son, Joshua. I now happily impose upon this patient congregation once again, and ask you to indulge me if a number of my comments turn out, in a manner purely unpremeditated and completely coincidental, to be inspired by and have some relevance to the Bar Mitzvah of my second son, Shalom. I hope that what I have to say will be at least of some passing interest to others as well.

What can one say to a youngster being initiated into Jewish manhood? What advice can we give him about what it means to be a man, in an overcrowded, dirty, depressed urban society, in which violence and pessimism and depersonalization are accepted facts of life? -- in which adults habitually grasp at the last straws of their vanishing youthfulness by retrogressing into adolescence and preferring to be boys rather than men? -- in which Judaism and Jewishness are in drift and on the brink of chaos?

II

That to be a man is an achievement, is obvious from the first words of this morning's sidra. Man, אִישׁ, is the Torah's encomium for Noah even before it accords him the honorific titles of צַדִּיק (righteous), שָׁלֵם (whole), and אִישׁ אֵלֹהִים (Noah walked with God). Simply, and perhaps this was the greatest compliment, Noah was called an אִישׁ, a man. Obviously, the Torah is speaking about the moral and spiritual content of manhood in the sense of a mature adult, not of the official and conventional definition of the category of "man." Halakhically, a child becomes a man at the age of 13 years and one day; the legal transition from minor to major is very abrupt. But, in the larger sense, what does it mean to be a man?

III

The first thing has to do with the social, political, and intellectual climate of our times. We live on an overcrowded planet, in which the sophisticates and cognoscenti who speak in the name of Science teach us the dogmatic truth that the universe is an accident and utterly without objective meaning;

that any attempt to ascribe purpose to life is a dated and discredited teleology; that man is a biological specimen no different from any other animal; that man's future can be biologically manipulated and engineered; that politically he is of almost no influence whatsoever upon his environment, which determines his behavior at every step. In sum, the individual does not count, and we are led to conclude that each of us is no more than a carbon copy of millions of others. We have been brainwashed with the notion that our differences are only marginal, and that in essence we are all the same -- accidents on the face of the earth, without purpose and without worth.

So, in this naturalistic, depressing, despairing age, an authentic Jew must assert and affirm that to be a man is to recognize that you are unique. For better or for worse, to be a man means to be yourself, to be your own man, to acknowledge your fundamental differentness from every other human being dead, alive, or unborn. To be a man means not only to be a possessor of value, but to be an individual of irreplaceable value.

Permit me to explain. We read in this morning's portion, the commandment given to man after the Flood:

וְכֹל דָּם אֲדָמָה אֵלֶיךָ אֲבָרָה וְכֹל שֶׁשָּׁפַךְ אֶת דַּם אָדָם אֵלַי כְּשֶׁשָּׁפַךְ אֶת דַּם הָאָדָם

"Whoever spills the blood of man, his blood shall be spilled, for in the image of God did He make man." Murder is deserving of capital punishment, because the victim as a human being is a creature formed in the image of God. Whoever commits murder therefore diminishes the image of God. However, one of our great commentators asks: why does man's creation in the image of God imply that the murderer is guilty of death? It may be true that he destroyed one who possesses the image of God, but there are millions upon millions of other human beings left who represent and embody that image of God? The same commentator (R. Mosheh Chefetz) answers: we may arrive at a solution by replacing a comma in that verse. The verse should be read not וְכֹל דָּם אֲדָמָה אֵלֶיךָ אֲבָרָה, but: וְכֹל דָּם אֲדָמָה אֵלַי כְּשֶׁשָּׁפַךְ אֶת דַּם הָאָדָם. The verse does not say, according to this repunctuation, that He made the man in the image of God, but rather: God made the man in his (i.e. man's) image. That man was created in the image of God we learned in last week's portion. This week the Torah wishes to teach us that, in addition, each human being has his own tzelleim, his own essence, his own characteristic being. God's image, the אֵלֶיךָ אֲבָרָה, gives man metaphysical value; his own tzelleim gives him differentness and absolute uniqueness.

To have a tzellem means to be different, in every place and forever. Murder, therefore, implies the eternal destruction of an irreplaceable and unique tzellem.

So, to be a man means to be aware that you are different from your father, brother, and friends. This can be a frightening thought. It can make one feel lonely, indeed. But that is the price we pay for being a man, an olam, in our world.

IV

And here we come to our second point. We must be responsible for how we use this tzellem, because it can be abused and misused as well. A man can take his differentness and selfhood and place it at the service of the noblest ideals. Or he can use it as an excuse for his egotism, selfishness, special privilege. He can seek to express it by making an unforgettable and unique contribution to the world, or he can do what, according to this week's shocking report, 45% of our high school population has been doing: to express his differentness (or, perhaps, to obscure it) by a life of narcotic addiction.

But to be a man means to appreciate that uniqueness places a heavy responsibility upon you; that never before and never again will there be another one just like you; that you have just one journey through life, and that what you fail to do will remain undone forever, and what you do wrong will remain your guilt and your blame for all time to come. To be a man means to be ready to answer for your use as well as your misuse of your talents, your natural endowments, and the uniqueness of your tzellem which God has given you.

In illustration of this point, let us turn to a Biblical law. When a man commits a sin ללא רצון, unwillingly and out of ignorance, he is required to expiate his sin by offering up an animal sacrifice, a זבח חטאת. Why should the expiation for an unwitting sin be an animal sacrifice? The author of the medieval work "שו"ת רמב"ם" answers: when a man sins without thinking, he reveals that he has acted without דעת, without intelligence, and if you subtract from man his capacity of thought, you have a body without a soul, and a mere body without a mind is -- an animal. Hence, a man who was witless and acted like an animal, must offer up an animal sacrifice.

However, one may ask: if that is the case, why does the

Halakhah teach that one who commits a sin ^{זוהר אהרן} -- consciously and deliberately and with malice aforethought -- cannot expiate his sin with an animal sacrifice, a

^{אדם נאמן}? The answer is: one who commits a sin maliciously and deliberately is not simply acting in a manner that is mindless like an animal. Far worse, he is misusing and twisting and distorting his mind, he is subverting his intellectual gifts, he is falling from the heights to a level far lower than that of a beast. To abuse one's reason, to misuse one's brains, makes one infinitely worse than a beast, and hence such a person cannot expiate his sin with an animal sacrifice, for he is lower than an animal. He has been blessed with a tzellem -- and he subverted it.

This insight is not my own. It was provided to me by the lad who today celebrates his Bar Mitzvah in the course of studying "ספר החינוך" with his father. And it highlights the elements of responsibility before God for the divine gift of tzellem -- or uniqueness. It is a recognition by mature men that our singularity can be a blessing or a curse, angel or demonic, and that we must answer for what happens to our individuality.

V

The third point deals with how this responsibility should best be expressed. And here a Jewish answer would be: to be a man means to be a builder. That is how Saadia Gaon and Shabbetai Donello interpreted the concept of ^{אדם נאמן}, the divine image: man must be creative, like the One whom he images, the Creator. To be a man, therefore, means to establish as a goal in life: to make a contribution, to do something new, to achieve, to accomplish, to leave the world in a better state than that in which I found it. If a man knows that he is unique and he is responsible for his uniqueness, he will build and create as an expression both of that uniqueness and that responsibility.

To be a man means to realize that whereas all work and no play makes Jack a dull boy, all play and no work will leave him always a boy, never rising to the level of ^{אדם נאמן} or man.

A man is one whose vision is based upon achievement, upon what he can give rather than what he can get, up on what he can contribute rather than on what he consumes. He is one who sees himself as a producer rather than as a parasite, who asks not "what does the world owe me?" and "what can it do

for me?" but, "what do I owe the world?" and "what can I do for it?"

A man is one who knows that life must not be measured; it must be weighed.

But I have been a bit too general so far. It is true, creativity in any field is an index to maturity and manhood. But not all achievements and buildings and creations are alike. A man can build a better mouse trap, and he is creative. But one who invents a machine to help the blind is creative in a greater way. A chemist can devise a better cosmetic, and he has made a contribution. But the one who has discovered a new medicine has made a greater contribution. And, in the catalogue of achievements for Jewish manhood, one field stands out above others: Torah.

In our Haftorah this morning we read the words of Isaiah:

וְכָל בְּנֵי אֱלֹהֵי אֱלֹהֵי ה' וְרַב עַלְמֵי בְּנֵי אֱלֹהֵי ה'
"And all your children will be taught of the Lord, and great will be the peace of thy children." The Talmud (Ber. 64a) suggests that we re-read that last word:

אֱלֵינוּ אֱלֵינוּ אֱלֵינוּ אֱלֵינוּ אֱלֵינוּ -- read not, "thy children," but "thy builders."

The greatest בְּנֵי אֱלֹהֵי ה', the most enduring edifice, the most sublime creativity, is that which comes from being בְּנֵי אֱלֹהֵי ה', "taught of the Lord." A Jew cannot be a man, a true אֱלֵינוּ, unless at least part of his creativity, the major part, is expressed in creative Jewishness: as a creative בְּנֵי אֱלֹהֵי ה', as a creative son of Israel, as a creative בְּנֵי אֱלֹהֵי ה'.

VI

Shalom, my son, these are some of the things that your mother and I expect of you on your Bar Mitzvah as you become an אֱלֵינוּ, a man. We are not asking too much of you; for, in a limited measure, you have already demonstrated that you have the capacity to attain these three elements of Jewish manhood, of being an אֱלֵינוּ בְּנֵי אֱלֹהֵי ה'.

Ever since you were an infant you reveled in your differentness and your singularity. Even your childish pranks -- the dozens of them! -- bore an original stamp. אֱלֵינוּ we survived them and, when sufficient time elapsed for an unemotional perspective, we even enjoyed them somewhat.

We have been pleased at the beginnings of a sense of Jewish responsibility that we detected in you, such as in

your attitude of צִדְקָה to other children, when we noticed that you are sensitive to the loneliness and embarrassment and pain of your peers. I mention publicly the הַחֵלֶס, the true joy, that your mother and I experienced when a complete stranger informed us how forthrightly and with what Jewish pride and dignity, respect and tact, you challenged the head of a major Jewish institution in this city for his failure to conduct his agency in a manner befitting a true Jewish organization. This bodes well for a continuing and developing Jewishness with responsibility.

But now, Shalom, as you become an אִישׁ our prayers turn to the third element: הַיָּבוֹא -- your future as a אֲדוֹנָיִם and a אִישׁ יְרֵאָה, as a man of piety and scholarship, as a man of Torah.

Here, we expect and demand much sacrifice, unceasing work, and heroic effort at building and at creativity.

אֲנִי אֶפְרָח. Our children must become our builders. No matter אֵיזוֹ תְּחִיבָהּ you choose for your vocation or profession, we expect that your greatest personal ambition, your life's greatest dedication, that which will attract the essence of your tzellem to the very marrow of your bones will be to place your manhood and maturity and creativity at the service of Torah and to advance the cause of Israel, both אֶרֶץ and אָמִת, people and state.

VII

The first two elements are yours and yours alone. Mother and I can only provide the frame-work for you to develop your own tzellem and exercise your responsibility for it. But the third element -- creativity, building -- is one where we can work together. The sublime task of הַיָּבוֹא is one in which the generations can participate as equals, without any gaps in the picture at all.

I hope, Shalom, that as time goes on our relationship will transcend that of Father and Son. I look forward to our becoming partners -- even brothers!-- in the common cause of building the edifice of Torah. We should aim at becoming friends -- not in the cheap, vulgar, and now discredited American way of being "pals," for that is an excuse for lack of parental discipline, which in turn is a cover-up for a father who does not really care about his children. I mean friends, rather, in the sense that Maimonides did, when he wrote that the highest level of friendship is those who are

"חברים אברה", friends in a common ideal, two mature people who draw closer to each other because of shared goals, mutual aims, common aspirations, and which brings them genuine mutual respect.

I reveal to you publicly some of my own inner biography. One of the greatest moments of my life, and a turning point for me from boyhood to manhood, came when my grandfather, אברהם, and my father, אברהם, began to talk with me as an equal in matters close to their hearts: the welfare of the family, the future of yiddishkeit, the destiny of Israel and, above all, matters of Torah and Halakhah. I became a man when Father asked my opinion about matters of Jewish communal and political interest, at a time when world Jewry was in its most critical situation during its long history; when my grandfather argued with me in אברהם, when he gave me a hearing in scholarly discussions and usually showed where I was wrong -- but, sometimes, even accepted what I said as valid. They invited me to build with them, share their joys and sorrows, their triumphs and frustrations. In short, I became an adult or man when they treated me as an adult, a friend, a confidant, and a co-builder in the sacred effort of constructing the edifice of אברהם.

VIII

Now, Shalom, I invite you to do the same with your father, with me. I pray -- if I may change one vowel in that verse -- that אברהם - אברהם, that you will always remain to your mother and me אברהם, Shalom our son; and that you will then learn to join me as אברהם, Shalom my co-builder and up-builder, one who will build on top of the little that I have tried to do (and the much that I yet hope to do), as one who will complete my unfulfilled visions -- because a real man will always have visions that are too great for one human being to realize -- and who will then go on to dream his own dreams and spin his own ambitions that derive from his unique tzellem, from his Jewish responsibility, and give full expression to his creative talent.

May He who created you in His tzellem and endowed you with your own tzellem, give you the strength to be responsible and the wisdom to choose the right goals for your life's work.

May He guide you to find your place always amongst the אברהם, those for whom Torah scholarship is their life, and excel in אברהם.

May He give your parents and grandparents the ^{שנים}
 to see you mature as one successful in his calling and happy
 with his lot, blessed both in matter and in spirit, flourishing
 as a ^{בן זמורה}, exceeding the warmest prayers and fondest
 hopes for you by your parents, and surpassing anything they
 and their parents and grandparents before them have
 accomplished.

Be a true ^{איש}.

And may He give all our ^{אשר}, all our family,
 the privilege of long life and good health, so that all of
 us may work together as partners and co-builders in the
 vineyard of the Lord, laboring in mutual respect and love and
 dedication for the benefit of ^{כלל ישראל}.

שמעתי אחי אורי אברהם נא שלום בק

It is for the sake of our fraternity and friendship that
 I speak thus to you, Shalom.

שמעתי ביה"א אלקינו אברהם שלום
 ה' אלהי ישראל יתן ה' יביק אגמנו שלום
 אמן