

"THE CREATIVE USES OF CRISIS"

Last week we tried to explain why Jacob bequeathed the mantle of leadership not to his favorite son, Joseph, but to Judah. Today I should like to offer an answer to the question of why this gift of *מנהיגות* (sovereignty, leadership) was given by Father Jacob to Judah rather than to Reuben, who as the eldest son was the most likely candidate for that office.

In order to appreciate the choice of Judah over Reuben, let us go back just a bit into the life of Jacob, to the painful episode when the viceroy of Egypt, whom the brothers do not recognize as Joseph, demands of the brothers that they bring with them on their next trip their youngest brother Benjamin -- who is the only full brother of Joseph. Meanwhile, Joseph holds Simeon as a hostage. The brothers return to Jacob in Canaan, and when the provisions begin to run low, they plead with their father to entrust Benjamin to them so that they may go down to Egypt and restock their dwindling supplies. But Jacob is, understandably, adamant. He will no longer trust his sons, certainly not with the only child he has left from his beloved Rachel. The sons continue to implore their father to accede to their request, but the more they beseech him, the more is the old father reluctant. Finally, out of sheer desperation, the eldest son Reuben turns to his father and says, I will guarantee the safe conduct and return of Benjamin, and if not: *אני אהיה אבן עמל*, you can take the life of my own two children in return. Jacob listens to this strange offer of holding his own two grandsons as hostages, and his answer is negative. He will not give over Benjamin into the care of Reuben. At last, it is Judah who speaks and says: I will guarantee the safe return of Benjamin, and if not, *אני אהיה אבן עמל*, "then let me bear the blame forever." The Tradition maintains that Judah here offered as surety *אני אהיה אבן עמל*, his two worlds. If he would not restore Benjamin to Jacob, then he would yield his claim to both worlds. He would be willing to abdicate his life in this world, and his immortality as well. Jacob listened to this offer -- and he accepted. He gave over Benjamin into the safe keeping of Judah, and sent the brothers on their way to Egypt.

Now, two questions present themselves to us. First, what kind of man did Judah and Reuben take Jacob for, that they felt constrained to offer either the lives of their children or their continued existence both in this world and the next? Did they detect, what no student of the Bible ever had, that there was in Jacob a streak of cruelty? Second, why, given the shocking offers, did Jacob accept that of Judah and reject that of Reuben?

Reuben therefore was rejected as a leader because, ^{אין שום דבר}, unstable and mercurial, Jacob was worried that ^{אין שום דבר}, he would not keep leadership because these inner forces will not keep and remain at his disposal after the crisis is over. Judah, however, was given leadership: ^{אין שום דבר}, "the scepter shall never depart from Judah," because Judah's newly discovered and newly revealed strengths also ^{אין שום דבר}, do not and will not depart from him once he has become aware of them.

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It is unfortunately true that most people are like Reuben, not like Judah. Most of us rise to great occasions greatly; we then revert to pettiness when life envelopes us in petty contexts. In crisis, we may be mighty, magnanimous, and creative. But in the routines of life, we turn slothful, insipid, and uninspired.

But if we cannot boast of Judah's qualities, the leadership of the Jewish community today demands of us at least that we exploit Reuben's nature: that we allow the thunderclap of crisis to arouse the giants that lie dormant within us.

I do not believe in fomenting artificial crises, much like those journalists who used to invent crime-waves when all other news of sensational value had receded and there was nothing left for the front pages. There is nothing inherently more virtuous in "viewing with alarm" than in "pointing with pride."

But when there is a genuine crisis at hand, it should be utilized in order to invoke loyalty and strength. At such times, to allay and to pacify, to dull the shock and smother the crisis with the security blanket of vain assurances, is self-defeating and innane.

And we are all in crisis today. America is in crisis with the resumption of the bombing in North Vietnam. We had been promised that "peace is at hand," and work up to discover that with our bombs we are grinding a small country underfoot. It is doubtful whether the moral fabric of this country can survive any more such treatment.

Israel is in crisis. The discovery that young kibbutzniks have betrayed their country should not, as has been said, be used as a club to beat an entire movement. But it cannot be escaped: the inner contradictions between Marxism and Zionism have surfaced, and they have thrown a whole segment of Israeli society into genuine crisis.

But this morning I wish to speak not of the crisis of the United States or that of Israel, but that of the American Jewish community. I have spoken before, and I am currently writing in the Bulletin of The Jewish Center, about the painful phenomenon of Jews on campus who are turning to Christianity. These facts have come to me from personal knowledge, from observation by colleagues of various campuses, and other sources.

Yet, the New York Times had recently reported to us that an important figure in B'nai B'rith, the leader of the Hillel movement, denies these dangers. There is nothing unusual about them, he tells us. And, in a marvelous non sequitur he assures us that there are as many non-Jews coming into Judaism on the campus as there are Jews going out to Christianity. This is insensitive and wrong-headed. I dare say that there are some campuses on which there are more Jews attending the Jesus movement services than there are those coming to Hillel services or even dances. The statistics about the equations of those coming in and those going out are simply silly. Remember that in the one case, those coming into Judaism, the sole reason is usually convenience: marriage. When it comes to those who are leaving Judaism for Christianity, the reason is usually conviction -- whether balanced or unbalanced. Furthermore, Judaism teaches to weep more for the loss of one Jew than to be joyous at a non-Jew who has converted to Judaism. There is something dreadfully wrong, yet all we are given is the smugness of business-as-usual. Can it be that this complacency is a symptom of the way the bureaucratic mentality defends the Jewish campus-establishment from criticism?

We are in crisis. And it will grow worse in 1973. We are informed that 130 Christian denominations are reputedly raising 18 million dollars in "Key 73," a year-long evangelical campaign with a branch of its activities directed to the campus. It is true that there is little being said in those circles of a direct move towards the Jews. But that does not matter. Our great organizations, in approaching young Jews, sorely neglected the spiritual and "Jewish" elements, and the new generation finds nothing meaningful in what we offer them. They are therefore ready and right for a spiritual message that goes deep, and that is why the Christian evangelical movement poses a challenge. We are in crisis, and unless we are manly enough to acknowledge it and to feel the pain and experience the anguish, we will continue in our somnabulistic trance, and the shocking facts will not have the therapeutic effects of releasing whatever talents and powers we do possess to combat this dreadful assault on our youth.

And not only is Christianity a danger, but assimilation in general poses a historic threat to us. Our minds often boggle at the Holocaust, when we recall that we lost one-third of our people. One third. But how many are we losing on the campuses? If we are optimistic, we can estimate that 20% identify as Jews and with Jewish activities. That means that we are losing over 80%! True, there are countervailing tendencies, and on many campuses there are healthy signs of a return to Judaism. But these are minor, and these usually occur as a sign of intensification amongst those Jews who are with us in the first place and who are deepening their contacts and the quality of their commitment. It may also be true that some young people drift away in college age but come back later. But is this sufficient consolation? Can we and may we deny that we are in crisis?

So let us be men and women of honesty and courage and face up to it. We are in a state of crisis, and a very serious one.

But for Jews, crisis is not an occasion for despair, inaction, or paralysis. It is a challenge to invoke those inner powers of which we spoke. If indeed we are in a position of *mind up to the neck*, of losing our children, and of *mind up to the neck*, of being devastated in both worlds for our inaction, then what is called for is a great, historic, creative response, all over the world, here and in Israel.

We must be ready to give all we have. Financially, we are not doing enough. We must increase our support for day schools, yeshivot, Yeshiva University, and all other Jewish educational institutions, and also para-educational efforts, both here and in Israel.

We must pay attention to our personal religious habits, and never use inertia and habit as the excuse for not affecting a change in our slovenliness in *mitzvot*, observance of all religious laws and customs. As we grow older, we fall into poorer habits. But if we want our children to rise Jewishly and remain firm, we must show them that we are going to set an example for them.

We must be serious in our study of Torah and never allow busy-ness to become a lame apology for our intellectual indolence. To be a Jew means, above all, to be a student of Torah, and there is no way out of this challenge to our intellectual endeavors.

Crisis demands creative reaction, that we tap that inner reservoir and mine it well.

Then, and only then, will the Almighty entrust us with his Benjamins, with our future generations.

Then, and only then, shall we be able to confront the Egypts and the Pharoahs of life and discover *in 1911 and*, Joseph still lives, we can still save the majority of our Jewish youths.

Then, and only then, when we will have evoked an infirmative and creative response and shown new energy and new vitality, will young Jews accept an affirmative response to their old question about us and our vitality and our commitment and our future. That question is: *in 1911 and*, are my parents still Jewish alive?

Let us allow the crisis to summon up from within us the power to give a positive response to that gnawing and decisive question.