

"BEYOND RESPECT"

It is one of the premises of Judaism that whereas all people are created equal, they are different both individually and in their groups. Individuals are different in talent and endowment, and collectivities are different in historic experience, in the formulation of their destiny, and in their national character. Thus, when the prophet says

הא, אלה אלה אלה אלה אלה?

"Behold, do we not all have one Father?," he is enunciating the Jewish principle of equality. And when the Sages said:

הא, אלה אלה אלה אלה אלה, כן ד' אלה אלה אלה אלה אלה

that "just as people's faces differ one from the other, so do their opinions and characters differ," they were expressing the Jewish concept of the differentness of each human being from all others. Both are true -- the universality and equality of innate human values, and individual variety and group heterogeneity.

Hence, Judaism ordains different laws for men and for women, for Jews and for non-Jews, for the Cohen, the Levi, and the Israelite, for the scholar and the ignoramus. In addition, amongst people in general, whether men or women, Jew or non-Jew, the greater the achievement and potentiality of a person or group, the greater the responsibility that must be assumed and the

more may rightfully be expected. Thus, power imposes certain obligations on people who possess it, burdens of which the powerless are free. The wealthy are obligated to certain duties which do not devolve upon the less affluent. Genius and intellectual brilliance impose on those blessed with them responsibilities that the ordinary people are not expected to bear.

Similarly, those who have, through sacred resolve and fortitude of spirit, or even by accident of station or birth, attained certain positions and have come close to God and His service, have heavier spiritual, moral, and religious burdens to bear.

With this introduction we may be able better to understand an important passage in this morning's Sidra. We read of the tragedy that occurred when Aaron lost two of his sons, Nadav and Avihu, at the highest moment of his joy, the first day of their service when they were initiated into the priesthood. For reasons which are not clear, the two young priests decided to change the order of service from that which was prescribed for them, and offered up an *עֹשֶׂה* *עֵל*, a "strange fire," for which they were punished with immediate death. The reaction of Aaron, their father, to this traumatic disaster was -- silence. But his brother Moses turned to him at this dramatic moment and said:

אני אהיה מקודש, ובעיני כל עם ישראל, "Through those that are close to Me I will be sanctified, and before the entire people I will be honored."

What kind of consolation was this? What did Moses mean to tell Aaron -- and all of us of succeeding generations?

If we listen closely to the words of Moses, we discern two concepts: kedushah and kavod, holiness or sanctity and honor or glory. Both are worthy Jewish goals and represent the highest aspirations. Yet they are not identical, and one is vastly more important than the other.

Kavod or honor is an external or social act. When I give kavod or honor someone, I perform an act of courtesy and acknowledgement; but I do not imply acceptance of his principles or love or participation or involvement. It is a gesture, possibly very sincere, but it does not touch my depths.

Kedushah or holiness, however, represents an inner transformation, a total commitment, a dedication of the entire personality to a transcendent goal. It is an existential, not a social act. I can give kavod without being changed. When I strive for kedushah I must risk a profound metamorphosis.

Now, kavod is something of which the masses are capable. But kedushah is something to which only the elite and the initiated

are obligated. Isaiah calls out, in his famous "Seraphic Song,"

קדוש קדוש קדוש ה' צבאות כבודו מלא כל הארץ כבודו

"Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of Hosts, all the world is full of

His glory (kavod)."

God Himself is the highest expression of kedushah, but קדוש, "all the world," perceives nothing

more than His kavod.

Kavod is noble and necessary, but it is antiseptic and alienated. Kedushah is higher and deeper and a more faithful commitment.

So this is what Moses meant.

ואני אהיה כבודי לפני כל ישראל

"Before the entire people will I be honored." The entire

people, the ordinary ones, can attain the level of kavod for

God. They come to the Temple or the Tabernacle with respect,

with decorum, and they are refined. One can expect no more of

them, one cannot entrust to them leadership, service, and the

responsibility to follow through on every detail. But for

קדוש, for those who are close to God, kavod is insufficient;

only the surpassing goal of kedushah is appropriate. And holiness

imposes a most strict discipline!

This, then, is what Moses told to Aaron: you are aggrieved,

and although you are silent, I, as your brother and as a father

too, know what goes on in your heart. You ask: why? Why did

they deserve this merely for a slight change in the order of service? And the answer is: for kol ha'am, for ordinary people, it would be sufficient if they gave the Lord kavod or respect. But for Kohanim, for priests such as Nadav and Avihu, for those who are krovai, close to the Lord -- and who (according to one Midrashic source) were greater than Moses and Aaron, only kedushah will do. Their innovation in the service was a failure according to the norms of kedushah, and that is why they suffered such terrible retribution. So, Aaron, if they failed and they were punished, at least this is your consolation: they proved that they were krovai, close to the Lord.

That, indeed, is what has long been wrong with the American variety of religion. A generation or two ago, John Dewey wrote, "Nowhere in the world at any time has religion been so thoroughly respectable as with us -- and so nearly totally disconnected with life." And, in our own generation, Abraham Joshua Heschel has written of the "theology of respect" that seems to have gripped so much of America. Certainly it is true of us Jews. Too many American Jews are willing to respect the synagogue -- but never enter it; to respect the service if they attend -- but not participate in it in any meaningful way. Jews respect Torah and Judaism, they respect scholars and rabbis and observant Jews --

and the respect and kavod therefore mean that the object of their honor is alien to them, it remains externalized and superficial and meaningless. Our American Jewish community has almost choked with respectability and kavod.

I hold no brief for those of the counter-culture who have made a virtue of disrespect and raised it to the level of a dogma of the Liberation Movement. I am often revolted by their crudeness, by their ~~downtight~~<sup>sophomoric</sup> exhibitionism. But maybe the disrespect has resulted in one unintended positive consequence: maybe it will clear the air, give us a clean slate, and let us start again on the religious enterprise, understanding that respect and respectability are only the first baby-steps towards the great goal which is -- holiness, kedushah.

For the "average man," for kol ha'am, respect is enough. But no man in his right mind should ever be satisfied with being an "average man." The goal must be the culmination of meaningfulness in life, to rise, to transcend oneself, to come close to God, to be amongst krovai; and for such people, prestige and politeness alone are insultingly inadequate. Religion demands kedushah -- passion and involvement and risk and courage even unto death.

So the synagogue must possess kavod, most certainly; but

only on its way to kedushah. For the goal of a synagogue must not be to become a place of respectability, not even to teach children to respect their parents and all of them to curtsy to the ancestral faith, to respect the honored but obsolete tradition. The ideal of a synagogue, of a Jewish community, is to become a kehillah kedoshah, a "holy community!" That means that services were not meant to enjoy but to inspire; that words of Torah spoken from the pulpit were meant not to please or tickle the intellect, but to upset and to criticize the status quo.

The same holds true for Day Schools. Too many of them have set as their goal merely to become socially acceptable; to give their students a smattering of Jewish knowledge in the abstract; to be merely survivalist; to let the children know what, later in life, they will be rejecting. But mere kavod, respect or respectability, is the inevitable mark of failure. We must strive for much more -- for kedushah, for a holy way of life, for the perpetuation of the word of God in the world, for a living faith so engaging that the question of survival becomes a sheer irrelevancy.

For us in The Jewish Center it means increased attention to Jewish education -- and here, form is important. We must learn

not "about" Judaism but "it"; education must be not entertainment but enlightenment; it must deal not with pretext but with text; it must aim not at a general overview but at particular insights.

This week all of world Jewry will celebrate Israel's Yom Haatzma'ut, its Independence Day. We shall gather together to offer our gratitude to God for continuing the miracle of 1948 and even expanding it, and together we shall pledge our solidarity with the State now embattled by friend and foe alike.

But as we do so, let us remember that despite the overwhelming external problems, Israel also suffers today from an inner tension, which I would describe as a contest between kavod and kedushah.

Almost all Israelis, with the exception of an unimportant fringe element, agree that Israel must be a Jewish State. It was the result of three and a half thousand years of Jewish history, and it therefore must bear a Jewish character. The great question is: How? In what way? What form shall it take, and to what degree shall it be Jewish?

The problem now being discussed in Israel, one of hafradah, or separation of State and religion, is an issue that we shall discuss on another occasion. For the present let us define the problem as follows: Some Israelis, perhaps most, are satisfied that the Jewishness of the State should be expressed in the form of kavod. Israel must honor its Jewish past; and so Saturday is

an official day of rest, all the holidays are officially observed, and the Holy Tongue is the spoken language of the State. But not much more than that.

Others, however, maintain that Medinat Israel must really strive to become Eretz Israel, and Eretz Israel is, for us, artzenu hakedoshah, our Holy Land. And kedushah implies not just a gesture towards the Sabbath, but a real Sabbath, as it was historically observed, and not as you see it in the streets of Tel Aviv. Kedushah means a higher moral tone in the community of Israel, not to continue the import of the decadent hedonism that has corrupted the Western world and especially America. Kedushah means compassion for the disadvantaged Moroccan and Oriental children who have, through the curse of poverty, been forced into delinquency. It means that we must not be hypersensitive and frightened by the bravado of Israeli youngsters calling themselves "Black Panthers." They have nothing to do with American Black Panthers; they are simply using drama and shock in order to make Israeli society aware of their problems. And I believe it would be much better for Israel, and for American Jews through the U.J.A., to pour money into these Black Panthers than to have the Israel Ministry of Tourism so foolishly and stupidly seek to sponsor an Israeli version of "Woodstock!" Kedushah means that Jewish law must return to the Jewish State,

which must not be satisfied with a patchwork of English and Common, and Ottoman law.

One can never tell how and when the courtesy of kavod will culminate in a career of kedushah. This congregation knows of the organization called Geshet, a young group which seeks to bring the message of Torah to the uncommitted youth of Israel, without coercion or missionizing but through dialogues and seminars. The first seminar, of which I told you, took place during Hol Hamoed Sukkot and was highly successful. I am now pleased to report that the second such seminar took place this past Passover and was an even greater success. Despite the incessant rains and the threat of flood in the Kfar Etzion area, all the youngsters came -- many more than came to the first seminar. At the end of this very, very inspiring session, a young girl, one of the most intelligent and sensitive of all, left her cabin on her way home, but was carrying a siddur with her. The counselor told her that she was making a mistake, the siddur belonged to the kibbutz, and would she please return it before leaving. She turned to him and said, "But you don't understand. I have never been exposed to this kind of life before. I never in my life held a siddur in my hands. Now that I have it -- I just can't let it go. I just can't." With that, she turned

around and went home -- with the siddur in her hands.

Such innocent love of Yiddishkeit is not just respectful, but an incipient sign of the sacred emerging into consciousness.

That is what kedushah means. To feel so close that you can't and won't leave; that Judaism is as precious as life; that the siddur will never leave you and you will never leave it.

עצרת אלהים "Through those who are close to me will I be sanctified."