

"INSIGHTS INTO EVIL"

The episode of the building of the egel ha-zahav, the golden calf, was probably the most traumatic experience in the life of our nation during its infancy. It left an indelible impression upon the psyche of the folk. Its echo can be detected throughout the life and the literature, the dreams and the liturgy, the destiny and the self-image of our people. It is essentially an inexplicable phenomenon: so soon after the revelation at Mt. Sinai, this same people dances about a golden calf! From dizzying heights to harrowing depths!

Perhaps most incomprehensible is the conduct of Aaron, the Kohen Gadol or High Priest of Israel, the brother of Moses. His role has challenged our commentators, stimulated our exegetes, and perplexed the ordinary reader of the Bible. I would like today not to apologize for Aaron (although his position can be satisfactorily explained under the circumstances), but to point to certain insights resulting from the Rabbis' comments on his role, comments which are especially relevant to some of the central issues of our times and with which I was especially confronted during my recent trip overseas.

We read this morning of the pressure brought by the Israelites upon Aaron to help them build the golden calf, and the stalling and procrastination by Aaron. Then comes the following significant verse: va-yar Aharon va-yiven mizbeah lefanav va-yikra Aharon va-yomer hag la-Shem mahar, "and Aaron saw and he built an altar before Him, and Aaron called out and he said there will be a festival to the Lord tomorrow." The plain meaning of this verse, according to Nachmanides, is that Aaron felt that the Israelites were determined to go ahead with their idolatry, and so he built an altar not to the idol, but lefanav, before Him, meaning God, and announced: hag la-Shem mahar, tomorrow we will have a celebration not for this idol, but for the Lord.

The verse is introduced by ~~two~~ words, however, which are quite challenging: va-yar

Aharon, "and Aaron saw." What, exactly, did he see? The Rabbis, quoted by Rashi, tell us the following: va-yar Aharon - she'hayah bo ruah hayyim she'ne'emar ke'tavnit shor okhel esev, Aaron saw that the golden calf became infused with the breath of life, that it took on the appearance of an ox grazing in the pasture, feeding on the grass!

What did our Rabbis mean by that? They offer, I believe, a profound comment upon the nature of idolatry. They mean to outline for us three stages in any man's encounter with falsehood of any kind, ancient or modern.

The first stage is one of instinctive revulsion. The idol is immediately repulsive, the falsehood repugnant, the lie revolting. You can see right through the idol: it is illogical and irrational, as any half intelligent child ^{knows} ~~can see~~. It is simply evil and stands condemned without any further thought.

But then there comes a second stage. As you become accustomed to it, as you study it, you learn that it may work -- and indeed it does work! You can live with it -- and get away with it. Furthermore, it is not as absurd as you originally thought. They are compelling reasons for the existence of idolatry or any false doctrine -- sociological, psychological, and historical reasons. A society can be built around it, and survive. There are reasons for idolatry which you must appreciate and understand.

If you stop at this stage of your development, then insight turns to tolerance, tolerance to sympathy, and sympathy to consent and acceptance. If you stop at this stage, then you bow the knee to a statue, you swallow the lie, you swear by falsehood. Then open-mindedness becomes closed-heartedness. What is required is to make the transition from the second to the third stage.

And the third stage is one of deepest insight: with all the understanding, with all the appreciation, with all the study and awareness and broadmindedness, you recognize the perniciousness, all the ugliness and danger of avodah zarah,

and you condemn idolatry as evil throughout.

Va-yar Aharon, "and Aaron saw" -- this is the crucial point in the development of Aaron's role. In the beginning, at the first stage, he no doubt believed that the whole plan was ridiculous. It was inconceivable that so soon after Sinai these same Israelites would bow to a mere statue. Give them their little golden statue, he probably told himself, and before long they will laugh at their own error and recognize the absurdity of their request.

But then -- va-yar ^yAharon! He saw that the idol became alive: she'hayah bo ruah hayyim she'ne'emar ke'tavnit shor okhel esev! When he saw that his lifeless statue was becoming a living thing and that it assumed the attributes of life, he became frightened. He recognized that idolatry has, for its worshippers, certain clear esthetic values; it can be beautiful, and convincing. Paganism possesses a gripping and imaginative mythology. The idol and its worship respond to man's inner needs. You can build society and a civilization on such erroneous foundations. You can explain it -- and even justify it!

Quickly, therefore, Aaron passed over to the third stage. Precisely at the point of his greatest understanding of the nature of the Israelite idolatry, he announced hag la-Shem mahar: no longer will I humor you or entertain your childish and fallacious but highly dangerous notions. Tomorrow we return to the worship of the Lord. Va-yar Aharon, the seeing of Aaron, is the instant of insight, the moment of truth.

Both the first and third stage agree in principle and in conclusion. The difference is, that the first is an instinctive black-and-white judgement, whereas the third is aware of the complexities, the subtleties, and the nuances of idolatry, but nevertheless condemns it as evil. In the third stage you recognize, so much more than you do during the second stage, that the idol only goes through motions, but does not really move. It appears to eat, but it is only a mirage: it is only the tavnit of a grazing ox. It is an apparition, not

a reality -- it contains only the ruah hayyim, the breath of life, but not hayyim itself. The third stage is greater than the first because it is the result of a more realistic appraisal, it is mature, and not guilty of oversimplification and uncomplicated naivete. Hence, it is also more convincing.

This development of insight into evil refers not only to ancient but to modern idolatries as well. Whether it is scientism or materialism, communism or even godless humanism, the same three stages are required of man: the first, where you acknowledge immediately its absurdity and fallacy; the second, where you begin to appreciate the rationale and explanation; and the third, where, with a great deal more sophistication, you rise nevertheless to the moral heights of rejection. And the same development must apply to one of the most pernicious and idolatrous doctrines in the memory of living man, one that has caused untold grief to uncounted millions in our century: that of race superiority and race inferiority.

My recent trip to South Africa left me overwhelmed by the exhilarating beauty of the country, its great wealth, and the abundance of its natural resources. And yet I had the feeling that it is a tortured country, gripped by a tragic agony that dominates all thinking, underlies all conversations, and pervades all politics in this highly politicized community. The race problem is a pall that, in this land of magnificent climate and almost endless sunshine, darkens the heart of the country from one end to the other. The reaction to Apartheid, the doctrine of separate development of the races based upon the idea that the white race is superior to the non-white, must also go through these three stages.

The first stage is one that has aroused the conscience of mankind in our day and has excited the indignation of the great majority of the countries in the United Nations. There is no question that white supremacy is a foul doctrine and a malignant idolatry. Do we of the twentieth century even have to discuss it? Can there be any question about it? And so we condemn it no matter who are its adherents.

But -- va-yar Aharon: we must arrive at a second stage far less naive than the first. We Americans do no favor to the cause of equality if we close our eyes to some of the profound complexities and compelling justifications of this initially repugnant doctrine. And there are certain mitigating facts and factors. The visitor realizes that, despite certain unattractive restrictions, this is not a police state on the style of a Nazi or Communist or Fascist state. It has a proud and independent judiciary, and, despite intimidation, a fiercely free press.

The white man is not a colonialist in South Africa. He came to this country at about the same time the black man did from Central and East Africa -- the middle of the 17th century. The Afrikaner especially ^g regards this country completely as his home and has strong patriotic and nationalist feelings about it.

There is no obvious persecution of non-whites in this country. ~~It is true that~~ the black are better off in South Africa than in the independent countries in the rest of the continent. Their economic status here, despite its inferiority ^{that of} to the white^s, is so much more attractive than the rest of Africa, that there is a tremendous illegal immigration of blacks from outside South Africa into the country. Proportionately more blacks and other non-whites are literate and own automobiles than in all the rest of Africa combined. And there never has been a lynching in South Africa.

Furthermore, we cannot compare the situation of the ^{e w} white man in America with that of the white man in South Africa. There, in South Africa, he is outnumbered by about four to one, constituting only three out of a population of fifteen million people. The white man in South Africa, in conversation with an American, will always point to the Congo as an example of what happens when independence is granted to the black man prematurely.

Finally, the idea of "one man, one vote" is, to tell the truth, ludicrous. Even the black nationalist privately admits that it is nothing more than a slogan.

You cannot grant full votes to such people as are totally illiterate and still living in the most primitive of tribal conditions.

This second stage is one of sophistication and realism, and represents a pragmatic and open-minded appreciation of the hard facts of political and human realities.

And yet, having considered all this, having gone beyond an impulsive good-and-bad judgment of simple and naive solutions, there remains the burning moral issue which emerges from the mass of complexities and subtleties, and demands to be heard and seen and dealt with courageously. The moral issue is ^Simply this: that a human being is a human being, and must be judged as such, and not primarily as black or white or colored or Asian!

When a black University Professor is disenfranchised, though he is more literate not only than the white farmer but even than the white millionaire, because he is considered racially inferior -- that is a modern form of avodah zarah.

When people are forceably kept apart, when they are ghettozied without having been asked for their opinion -- it is an evil which must be exposed.

When by legislation the Bantu or black man is kept to the kind of school system which cynically ensures permanently inferior academic standards, which makes certain that the African will never be able to Westernize, and which will keep apart forever not only the white man from black man, but also tribe from tribe by perpetuating inter-tribal hostilities -- that is cruel.

When South Africa today considers a bill in its Parliament according to which its urbanized Africans will be turned into a portable labor force so that people may be assigned to jobs merely at the whim of some minor official; when a capricious commissioner will be able to separate husband from wife and parents from children merely by saying so -- that is inhuman!

When a society is so structured that there can never be communication between equals of different races so, that the only blacks most white people know are

their domestic and hired help -- that is rotten.

When a business success by a non-white is rewarded by shipping him off to a primitive tribal area called a Bantusan -- that is pernicious.

When such policies are advanced by Nazis, Crypto-Nazis, and Nazi sympathizers entrenched in the government -- the Minister of "Justice" was interned as a Nazi during the war! -- and when the Government is riddled by people who hold membership in a secret society called a "Broederband," a kind of legally tolerated Klu Klux Klan; when the government can detain any individual in prison for 90 days without giving any reason for its action and can repeat this 90-days detention up to three times without a trial -- than all of it is vicious and immoral.

When va-yar Aharon that the evil has taken on a ruah hayyim, that it has the appearance ke'tavnit shor okhel esev -- than we must proclaim an end to this kind of immorality, and insist that hag la-Shem mahar - that it is time to return to the verities of Torah and Godliness. We Jews have always proclaimed the existence of one God who created one Adam, teaching thereby that all the human race is descended from one father, and that hence no one family of colors is superior to any other.

It is true that we New Yorkers must not rush over-zealously to condemn and criticize those in other states, let alone other lands. For (without in any way favoring or denying the claims of certain Negro groups which may or may not be justified) we certainly have not been blemishless ourselves; and our race problem is far less severe and threatening to us than that in South Africa. Nevertheless, wherever one man oppresses another and shuns him because of the color of his skin; wherever one man denies another the benefit of his own labor and the right to the bounty of God's nature because of race or religion, whether it be in Georgia or Johannesburg, in Corona or Capetown; it is idolatry, because it denies the fatherhood of God. It is an affront to Torah, because Torah recognizes only one Apartheid: that between tamei ve'tahor, between pure

and impure, good and evil, gentle and wild, malevolent and benevolent.

We Jews who have suffered so from silence, from the silence of Popes and Presidents and organized populations during the time we needed help, when our families were slaughtered by the millions, we especially must not keep silent when an injustice is committed against others in our presence.

He who remains stationery in this second stage, he who becomes reconciled to evil merely because he understands the reason for its existence, is bound to suffer the consequences predicted by King David in the Psalms, which we recite during our Hallel. For David said concerning the worshippers of idols, and we may say it as well about one who abides and tolerates the existence of evil of idolatry or any other evil, that ke'mohem yihleyu osehem, "as they are so may be their makers." Just as the idol is only apparently alive, but not really so; just as he goes through motions but does not really move; so the idol-worshipper and the one who remains silent in its presence is not really and truly alive in the moral sense.

Peh la-hem ve'lo yedaberu - for a person of this sort, like a mute statue, has a mouth - but does not speak. He fails to voice protest when conscience challenges him to do so.

Einayim la-hem velo yiru, they have eyes but see not -- they see only what they please, not the squalor and suffering produced by evil.

Aznayim la-hem ve'lo yishma'u, they have ears but they do not hear the cry of the oppressed.

They have noses but they prefer not to be aware of the stench of slums in which entire families are condemned to a life of poverty and ignorance. They have hands but do not raise them to assist a fellow man, and they have feet which refuse to march on to greater happiness for all humans. Such/^{is}not only the worshipper of idols, but also he who sees it and its injustice and remains silent: lo

yehu bi'geronam, the throat fails to utter protest and is suffocated in syllables of silence.

It is this third stage in the encounter with evil -- whether of godlessness or race prejudice, of avarice or religious bigotry -- to which the Torah wishes to lead us in the story of Aaron's role in the making of the egel ha-zahav. It tells us that in an ultimate sense every man must choose for ~~himself~~ **between right** or wrong not in some far-off world, but here and now, in the real, non-ideal, mundane world.

With Aaron we must rise to the occasion when we can proclaim publicly hag la-Shem mahar -- tomorrow is a festival for the Lord. Or better yet, let us proclaim with Aaron's brother Moses, la-tet alekhem ^hla-yom berakhah - to prepare for everyone a blessing today -- today, not tomorrow.