

"IF I CAN'T HAVE A LITTLE MIRACLE, I'LL TAKE A BIG ONE"

An idea or an institution can often be better understood in contrast with similar or corresponding entities. In the same manner, we may gain new insight into the nature of Passover if we view it in contrast to Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur.

Both months in which these two holidays occur, Nisan and Tishri, are considered the beginning of the year: **הַחֹדֶשׁ הַזֶּה לָכֵן רֵאשׁוּ חֳדָשִׁים**, "This month shall be unto you the beginning of months" (Exodus 12:2). And the first day of Tishri is, of course, *Rosh Hashanah*, which means, "the beginning of the year."

These two months, coming at opposite ends of the year, represent different facets of the great divine-human dialogue. This dialogue, indeed all of the Bible and all of Judaism, can be approached from two different aspects.

In the Kabbalah, these are known as **אַתְּעִירוּתָא דְלֵעִילָא** (*itaruta di-le'ela*, the arousal from above) and **אַתְּעִירוּתָא דְלַתָּתָא** (*itaruta di-le'tata*, the arousal from below). The first term, "the arousal from above," indicates the initiative taken by God in addressing man and in seeking him out. The second term, "the arousal from below," describes the activity of man in searching for God, in calling to Him, in "arousing" Him. When this cry or summons or arousal is answered by the other party, then bliss ensues. But when there is no answer, then we are confronted with tragedy, for it makes a shambles of the covenant which promises the mutuality of God and Israel.

Now, each of these two months, Nisan and Tishri, contains both elements, but each has a different emphasis.

Tishri begins with *itaruta di-le'tata*, the arousal from below. Rosh Hashanah and the Ten Days of Penitance that follow are a mighty effort by man to storm the gates of Heaven, as it were, to arouse the divine compassion by prayer, by **עֲלִיָּהוֹת**, and by the striving for repentance. But the climax is reached on Yom Kippur, when man's initiative results in the *itaruta de-le'ela*, the revelation of God's compassion, when God forgives man's sins, when He graces him with **כַּפֵּרָה**, atonement. In other words, the arousal from below was a prelude to the arousal from above.

Nisan shows the opposite development. It begins with *itaruta di-le'ela*, with God's preempting all activity. The first day of Passover commemorates the exodus from Egypt, in which man was a quiet observer, a passive participant. No wonder that the name of Moses is hardly mentioned at all in the entire Haggadah! Only God is our redeemer. **ה' יִנְהַם לָכֵן וְאַתֶּם תִּהְרִישׁוּן**, "The Lord will battle for you, and you shall keep silent." But the climax comes on the seventh day of Passover with a great *itaruta di-le'tata*, the arousal from below, the event that precipitated the splitting of the Red Sea. According to our Tradition, this great event was brought about by the heroism of one man, Nachshon ben Aminadav, the Prince of Judah, and those who followed him. It was not until Nachshon jumped into the swirling waters of the Sea until they reached his very nostrils, that the Sea split and the Israelites came through it. The high point of Nisan, therefore, is the human initiative, the *itaruta di-le'tata*.

Hence, Tishri represents the prominence of *itaruta di-le'ela*, divine activity, while Nisan is characterized principally by the "arousal from below."

In this manner we may understand the two different terms that are used to characterize these months. A word that is prominent in Tishri is **נֹרָא**, awesome or awe-inspiring. When God reveals Himself, when He addresses man out of His infinite heights, when He allows His compassion and forgiveness to be disclosed, man

can do nothing but quake in awe. That is why these days are referred to as ימי נוראים, "the Days of Awe." Throughout these days we emphasize, in our prayers, the principle of awe and fear: *וּבְכַן תִּן פֶּחַדְךָ*, "And thus, do Thou put Thy fear in Thy creatures..."

With Nisan, we find prominence given to the word גדול, great. The Passover story begins not with Moses but with Abraham, and the divine promise to him, *וַאֲנִי עָשִׂיךָ לְגוֹי גָדוֹל*, "And I shall make thee into a great nation." This nation, the seed of Abraham, will go into a deep exile, *וְאַחֲרֵי כֵן יֵצְאוּ בְרִכּוּשׁ גָּדוֹל*, "and afterwards they shall go out with great wealth." Perhaps one ought to read that a bit differently: "and afterwards they will go out with a wealth of greatness..." In the Haggadah we thank God for taking us out *וַיֹּצֵאנוּ מֵאֲדָמָה לְגוֹי גָּדוֹל*, from darkness to great light, and we recite the הלל הגדול, the great Hallel. When man rises to the stature that he can bestir himself to address his Creator, that he can call out to God and attempt to elicit a response -- that is a sign of his genuine greatness.

This element of greatness is a theme of this Shabbat Hagadol, the Great Sabbath. Many reasons have been given for the name *Shabbat Hagadol*, "the Great Sabbath." Permit me to commend to you one of them. Rabbi Jacob ben Asher, the author of the סוּפֵי שְׁנַיִם בְּיוֹם גָּדוֹל, holds that it is called the Great Sabbath *שָׁבֻעַ שְׁנַיִם בְּיוֹם גָּדוֹל*, "because a great miracle was performed on it." He refers to the commandment to the Israelites in Egypt -- a commandment which was meant only for them, and was not repeated -- that on the 10th day of Nisan, which that year came on a Sabbath, the Israelites were to take the lamb designated for the Passover sacrifice and tie it to their bedposts. For four days, they were to risk all the tension that went into this act of defiance against their Egyptian masters. These erstwhile slaves were demonstratively to assert their independence and their impending victory over the Egyptian taskmasters. This defiance was an act of greatness, and hence the name *Shabbat Hagadol*, the Great Sabbath.

I suggest that implicit in this explanation is the difference between נס גדול (a great miracle) and נס קטן (a small miracle). If a miracle is a result of *itaruta di-le'ela*, the arousal from above, if it is performed by God -- then it is merely נס קטן, a small miracle, because for the Creator of the universe to execute a miracle is no great achievement: He created the natural laws in the first place, and therefore to suspend or change them temporarily is not overly miraculous. But for man to do so, for man to undertake *itaruta di-le'tata*, the revelation of his human initiative, there you have a miracle of courage and sacrifice and greatness -- a true נס גדול or great miracle!

We live in a period when such "great miracles" are vital for us. When the Rabbis said *אֵין סוֹמְכִין עַל הַנֶּס*, that one must not rely upon a miracle, they were referring to the "small miracle," that of divine intervention. People cannot base their lives and project their futures on the anticipation of such divine miracles. But we must rely upon our own "arousal from below," our "great miracle." The Jewish situation today is such that we must take the initiative. In a word, if we can't have small miracles, we shall have to take the big ones...

Without the "great miracles" we are in mortal danger -- in Israel, in the U.S.S.R., and in the Western Diaspora, and especially the United States, because of assimilation and intermarriage and declining demography.

An Israeli historian, Professor Joseph Dan, has recently written, "Whether a Jewish nation will still exist in the 21st century will be determined by the attitudes, decisions, and actions taken by the Jewish people in Israel and the Diaspora within the next two years." To which I add, Amen!

The problems of Israel are obvious to all of us. But of equal importance is the continuity of Jews and Judaism in the United States. Consider this point made by Professor Dan: Not one in 1,000 young Jews today lives in the same community in which his grandfather was born, and not one in 1,000 speaks the same language as his grandfather. With such violent vicissitudes, with such radical changes in the condition of the Jewish people, where shall this continuity be found? How shall we, indeed, manage to survive?

There is only one answer: Jewish education. For Torah is our portable community, which can unite grandparents and grandchildren no matter what the geographical distance is, and Torah is the Jew's universal and timeless language which can keep us in communication with both our grandparents and our grandchildren.

And if we speak of Jewish education, we must speak specifically of the single most important Jewish school in the United States and in all the world, Yeshiva University.

Yeshiva University is important not only because of the approximately 7,000 students who study in it. It is also of the greatest significance as a symbol of all that we stand for, of all that we want of our children and of our posterity.

We know that in the kind of world we live in, and especially the kind we are heading into, we cannot survive socially and politically and economically without a *university* training for our children. But we know even more that it is not *worth* surviving without what is taught in a *yeshiva*. Yeshiva University is therefore the symbol, the source, and the goal of all our aspirations, individually and collectively. It is the institutionalization of the kind of Judaism represented by the giants of Medieval Spain, who were able to combine within their own personalities the greatness of Torah and the brilliance of Western culture. It is a symbol that was reinforced by, each in his own way, Rav Kook and Rabbi Samson Rafael Hirsch. It was adorned by the founders of Yeshiva, both those who were well-known and those who are unsung heroes despite their obscurity.

Today, this greatest of all institutions of Torah is in desperate trouble. Consider that all private colleges are in deep crisis. I read quite recently the prediction that things will get worse within the next five years, and the projections are that by 1990 fully one third of them are expected to fold up!

Now consider that Yeshiva University is not just another private university, but also and primarily a *yeshiva*, which accepts no tuition from its students for Torah studies. And remember that there are no government grants for the study of *Bava Kamma* or *Bava Metziah*; that no corporate research funding is available for *Yoreh Deiah*, and *Teshuvot* -- only the need to pay teachers and compensate *roshei yeshiva* and pay the bills for electricity and heat and maintenance...!

It will require a miracle for Yeshiva University to make it through the next several years. But **אין סומכין על הנס**, we dare not rely upon or wait for a **נס מן השמים**, a heavenly or divine miracle, for the "arousal from above," for the **נס קטן**, the small miracle. We need a *great* miracle only! We need an earthly, human miracle, the "arousal from below," a true **נס גדול** worthy of this Shabbat Hagadol. On such miracles -- or courage and self-sacrifice and generosity -- can we and ought we and must we rely.

You can do it, we can do it, Yeshiva University can do it. It is up to us to rise to the occasion in our support for Yeshiva as we never did before.

The Haftorah for this Great Sabbath concludes with the famous prophecy of Malachi: **הנה אנכי שולח לכם את אליהו הנביא לפני בא יום ה'**

"Behold I send to you the Prophet Elijah before the arrival of the day of the Lord." That **יום ה'**, "the day of the Lord," is described as **הגדול והנורא**, "the *great* and *awesome* day of the Lord."

Indeed, the day of judgment and redemption will be both **גדול** and **נורא**, great and awesome. For if we will prove that we have the quality of **גדול**, of greatness, that we can perform the great miracles with our *itaruta di-le'tata*, our arousal from below, then God in His goodness will respond with *itaruta di-le'ela*, He will seek us out from up above, and stand revealed before us as **נורא**, as awesome, bringing the full redemption in which all the generations will be reunited.

והשיב לב אבות על בנים ולב בנים על אבותם, "And He will return the heart of the fathers to the children, and the hearts of the children to the fathers."