

"WAITING"

I.

There is one peculiar aspect of Shavuot which marks it as different from other holidays. That is, that it is introduced by a three-day waiting period known as *שלושה ימי שמיטה*. These three days are reserved for spiritual preparation for renewed commitment to the Torah, the revelation of which we commemorate on Shavuot, and they thus have the character of semi-festivals; hence, the sefirah mourning regulations are suspended during these days.

The origin of this three-day waiting period goes back to the giving of the Torah itself at Mt. Sinai. "And the Lord said to Moses: 'Go on to the people and sanctify them today and tomorrow... and be ready for the third day; for on the third day the Lord will come down upon Mt. Sinai. And you shall set bounds unto the people roundabout, saying: take heed to yourselves, that you go not up to the mountain or touch the border of it; whosoever touches the mountain shall be surely put to death... When the ram's horns sounds long, they shall come up to the mountain" (Ex. 19:10-13).

I say that this is "peculiar" and "different," and yet what it symbolizes is an extremely important and highly characteristic Jewish trait. And that is -- waiting, the strength to bide one's time in the anticipation of some future event.

II.

For, indeed, waiting is a fundamental theme of all Jewish life. Judaism teaches the young man and woman to wait, sometimes a painful and heroic wait, from the time of physical maturation until the time of marriage, before expressing basic instinct. The New Morality sneers at us because of this, it tells young people that they are being inhibited by an obscurantist and dehumanizing Establishment code-morality. But such waiting is of the essence of Judaism.

For twenty centuries Jews have rejected alluring utopias and meretricious "saviours," and have continued waiting for the Messiah. Christianity condemns us for this. They tell us that the Messiah already came a long time ago. But we looked around the world, found it a rotten and corrupt as can be, and we decided that Messiah never came and that we are still waiting for him:

*אנו חושבים שיש לנו משיח
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"I believe in perfect faith in the coming of the Messiah, and though he tarry, nonetheless I shall wait for Him..."

Such waiting is not easy. It taxes one's patience, energy, and credibility. I have always liked King James translation of the verse in Psalms ^{ה' אלהיך}, which we would normally translate, "hope to the Lord." The classical English translation is: "wait upon the Lord." For wait means hope, but even more than that. It includes faith and confidence, strength and heroism, discipline and restraint. Indeed, the word ^{ה' אלהיך}, in ^{ה' אלהיך} (the three-day waiting period before Shavuot), implies restraint, the renunciation of easy victories. ^{ה' אלהיך} symbolizes deferred gratification, the sign of both psychological and spiritual maturity.

Clearly, all of Judaism is suffused with the principle of heroic waiting. And Eli Wiesel has discovered that waiting is one of the distinguishing characteristics of Hassidic tales.

So in our turbulent age, with shifting tastes and changing life-styles and brand new dogmas, where what was "in" yesterday is "way out" today, where old philosophies emerge and then decline from one issue of Time magazine to the next, where even religious thinkers suffer from what has been called "mood theologies" -- in a time of this sort we are befuddled and bewildered. Traditional, Orthodox Jews sometimes do not know what to think and what will come next. But Judaism gives us strength. It tells us: "wait!" ^{ה' אלהיך}. If you wait patiently, you will survive all these chimerical and ephemeral storms, and in the end truth will win out. Wait and survive - and triumph. The pre-Shavuot three-day waiting period is a reminder of the Jewish capacity to wait, the warning not to hurry even onto Mt. Sinai and to receiving the Torah. The quickest way to lose one's head, is by a headlong rush. For eagerness leads to impatience, and impatience to impetuosity, and that to rashness, and that usually ends up as recklessness.

Not only ordinary people are subject to the temptations of impatience. Even giants can fail. When Moses was atop Mt. Sinai, God told him: ^{ה' אלהיך} "Go down, charge the people, lest they break through onto the Lord to gaze, and many of them will perish" (Exodus 19:21). The people will find it difficult to wait, they will be overwhelmed by anxiety and curiosity, and their impatience will get the better of them -- ^{ה' אלהיך}, many of them will perish. But the Aramaic translator Targum Jonathan renders that last word, ^{ה' אלהיך}, somewhat differently: ^{ה' אלהיך}, "and the greatest of them will fall." The word ^{ה' אלהיך} means not "many" in this instance, but, as Rashi mentions: ^{ה' אלהיך}, the most

distinguished, the ray. Waiting is a sore trial, even for the greatest of people!

III

And yet, that is only half the story. There is an equal and opposite danger of endless procrastination. It was Aristotle who taught us that vice is often virtue taken to excess. Waiting too long is frequently ^{an} rationalization for acquiescence to evil, and a super-abundance of tolerance to injustice and wretchedness. ^{אין אדם יושב ויחכה}, wait too long and all your sacrifices will be in vain.

Not waiting is a sign of impulsiveness and immaturity. But endless waiting is a symptom of moral arthritis and psychological atrophy and the creeping paralysis of the spirit. It is a form of disguised despair.

When the Jews were in Egypt, our tradition teaches us, they were redeemed at the very last instant possible, just as they sank into ^{הקניית הטהרה}, the 49th of the 50 degrees of impurity and spiritual corruption. Had the redemption or Exodus been delayed by one hour, it would have been too late, for the Israelities would have fallen to the very 50th and nethermost level of impurity. Had God waited any longer, had Moses extended his patience any longer, the result would have been irreversible, Israel would have fallen to an irremediable nadir, and the redemption could never have taken place.

Consider the revelation at Sinai itself. Jews were told to wait for three days. They heroically suppressed their curiosity and nervousness, and they waited. But they did it too well. They overwaited. They were so patient, that they were soon gripped by inertia, so that when the time came to respond, to show initiative, to climb, to ascend -- they were fast asleep! And on the morning of revelation, the tradition teaches us, Moses had to go about the camp of Israel and arouse his slumbering people. (Hence, as the author of ^{אין אדם יושב ויחכה} teaches us, we now have the custom of staying up all night on Shavuot to study the Torah to make up for that one fateful morning that we overslept!)

IV

So that waiting is good; but timely and precipitate action, such as the leap into the Red Sea by Nachshon Ben Aminadav, is even better. In this and in all else, we must follow the teaching of Maimonides about the "golden mean," the "way of the Lord" which bids us follow the middle path and yield to neither extreme -- neither underwaiting nor overwaiting.

Thus, waiting for the Messiah is a great Jewish virtue. To be ^{דפן מ' הו"ב}, prematurely to precipitate the redemption, is the vice of impatience. But to wait endlessly and without any effort to create the circumstances and conditions for the Messiah, to leave redemption entirely in God's hands and to be totally passive in our waiting -- this is a sign of quietism, of spiritual and political passivism. Had we followed this course, there would never be a State of Israel today!

We always confront the vexing problem of the balance between waiting too long and waiting too much. European Jewry in the 1930's and 1940's had that problem. It is too easy to don the mantle of self-righteousness and, with the benefits of hindsight and retrospect, blame the Jews of Europe for not getting out on time. They had a legitimate and excruciating problem: to wait longer to see what happens, or to abandon everything and get out quickly. There was a case when over-waiting had dreadful and deadly results.

Only two or three years ago, we in this country had the same problem with regard to Soviet Jewry. Some counseled us to wait longer. They made sense: impetuous action by American Jews in the public forum might very well endanger the lives, health, and substance of many Russian Jews. Others told us that if we wait any longer, we will have lost the opportunity to help them. It was a difficult decision to make. Most of us decided to wait no longer. The last two or three years have proved our decision correct. Thank God.

V

When the Israelites were told to wait before the giving of Torah at Sinai -- as though waiting were a pre-requisite to Torah living -- they were told to wait until the shofar sounds: ^{וְהָיָה כִּשְׁמֹעַ הַקּוֹל} "When the ram's horn sounds long, they shall come up to the mountain." The Aggadah tells us that this shofar was no ordinary one. The shofar that sounded at Sinai was quite ancient. As Rashi quotes the Rabbis, it was ^{הַשּׁוֹפָר הַזֶּה הָיָה מִיְמֵי אַבְרָהָם}, it came from the ram that was substituted at the last minute for Isaac in the sacrifice of the Akedah that Abraham was commanded to make at Mt. Moriah.

What does this mean? What is the relationship between these two events bound together by the one shofar? Ramban was puzzled and resorted to a mystical interpretation. Permit me to offer my own explanation. Abraham at Isaac's Akedah too had a three-day wait command to him -- his journey ^{מִן הַיָּם}, from the time he was commanded until he arrived at Mt. Moriah. Abraham could have been over-tense, anxiety-ridden, rushing to

get on with the job and get it over with, lest the wait of three days prove unbearable because of his love for his son. Had he done so, he would have killed Isaac, and there would be no Jewish people today. But he also could have over-waited, he could have stalled, hoping that his procrastination would defer the divine decree and he would never have to offer up his son. Had he done so, there never would have been an Akedah, and he would never have had the opportunity to demonstrate his heroism for God. Then we would have had a people -- but it would not have been a Jewish people!

The shofar at Sinai thus explains the three-day wait before giving of Torah. The שופר is, as Abraham taught, a lesson that we must yield neither to impulsiveness nor to endless procrastination. And as with Abraham, so with the Torah given at Sinai, and so with Jewish life which must always be co-extensive with Torah.

VI

So we are not given any clear guidance that can serve us as objective criteria for each and every individual case. A man has no choice, in his own situation, but to call upon the resources of his own wisdom and judgment. But we are given guidelines. We are told the outer parameters in which we should form our judgment. At first, wait. Do not rush recklessly. If you have not waited at all, you are probably making a mistake. (A friend of mine who is a successful businessman in New England once told me that he never accepts any offer which requires an immediate response and does not permit him to think it through.) But then, beware of waiting too long. When you have waited, and you begin to feel the creeping paralysis of resignation, when you feel comfortable in your inertia, when you feel self-righteous about your waiting and suspect that it has become the substitute for action, begin to rethink your position.

The decision of to wait or not to wait; to know when an act is premature and precocious, and when further delay is deadly and irreversible -- such decision is an agonizing one. It taxes the deepest resources of wisdom and intuition of even משה, the leader -- who must be neither a member of the "Now Generation," nor of the "Never Generation."

A man needs all the advice and help he can get, all the wisdom and experience he can muster, when he is called upon to walk the thin line between impatience and the paralysis of inertia, between impetuosity and procrastination. And even then, he needs לילה לילה, divine guidance.

VII

"They also serve who stand and wait," wrote John Milton in one of his sonnets.

"All things come to those who wait," Rabelais assured us.

And an English poet of the last century (Marie Montgomery Singleton) pondered this sage advice, took exception to the blanket generalization, and concluded:

Ah, "all things come to those who wait"
(I said these words to make me glad),
But something answered, soft and sad,
They come, but often come too late.