

"SPIRITUAL TRUANCY"

Whenever the Ark is opened in the synagogue, the congregation rises and recites the words of the famous prayer, Va-yehi bi'nesoa ha-aron, that when it came to pass that the Ark set forward, Moses would utter a special invocation to the Almighty. The origin of this prayer which, together with the brief passage we recite when closing the Ark, consists of 85 letters, is in this morning's Sidra.

However, beautiful as this prayer is, it is obviously out of place. When we view it in the context of the Sidra, we notice that it disrupts the narrative. Our tradition too recognized this fact, and therefore in the Masoretic text this paragraph is set off by special symbols.

But why indeed was this particular passage placed here? The Rabbis, quoted in Rashi, give the following reason: le'hafsik bein paranut le'paranut, "to interrupt between the tale of one disaster and that of another." In order not to make the series of catastrophic events that occurred to our ancestors in the desert too ^{and overwhelming} depressing, the Torah interrupts its story by telling us of the prayer recited when the Ark set forward.

What were these disasters? What is the^e relation between them? And what is the relevance of this particular passage, the va-yehi bi'nesoa ha-aron, to the woeful tales in which it intervenes?

Were we to look by ourselves for the first paranut, the one before the va-yehi bi'nesoa ha-aron, we would be hard put to locate it. All we read in this preceding passage is: va-yis'u me-har ha-Shem derekh sheloset yamim, that the Children of Israel journeyed from the mountain of the Lord a distance of three days. Is this a paranut, a calamity?

Yes, answers Ramban. These words indicate that the Children of Israel were a bit too overjoyed in travelling away from the mountain of the Lord! Ramban quotes

with approval the Agadah which describes with consummate artistry the quality of Israel's journeying: Ke'tinok ha-boreiah mi-bet ha-sefer, like a school child running away from school! They thought they had absorbed enough commandments at Mt. Sinai, and they were afraid shema yarbeh alenu mitzvot, lest the Almighty add commandments to those they had already received from Him!

What an insight we are given here! The Children of Israel were more like little children fleeing their school! They were chafed, they were irritated, they were annoyed. They felt that they had received too much homework, that too much discipline had been imposed upon them, and that their freedom of motion was much too restricted. They regarded Sinai, that great schoolroom of humanity, as an intolerable burden; and burdens were made to be disposed of. So that the first paranut, the first great disaster, was the attitude of spiritual truancy.

Do we not experience this attitude all too often in our own lives, in our own society? All too frequently we approach our religious obligations in a manner more belabored than beloved. Our observance lacks joy, it lacks love, it lacks inner attachment. We, whom this age of automation has given so much leisure, come to the synagogue to worship, and we begrudge the time we spend on prayer. We carefully monitor our sessions in the synagogue with our watch. Heaven forbid lest services continue beyond the prescribed time! And this dictatorship of the watch, this tyranny of the schedule, applies to our study of Torah as well. How wisely the Yiddish distinguishes between these two attitudes: between "davenen" and "updavenen," between "lernen" and "uplernen." One means to pray with one's whole heart and soul; the other means to ^umemble the words as if they were an obligation that must be disposed of with the greatest dispatch. One means to study with the complete participation of one's intellect and emotions; the other means to listen to a lecture only because it is "the thing to do." The same distinction applies to philanthropy: people who are accustomed to almost unlimited self-indulgence, will, when confronted with a request for charity, plead poverty! No matter what the religious obligation is, we accept it with reluctance rather than with relish.

Even when we do observe, it is all too often with a jaundiced eye. And sometimes it occurs to us to ask, whether openly or silently, "why can't the Rabbis make it easier for us?" As if the Torah were the invention of a malevolent group of individuals known as Rabbis who derive some special, obscure, sadistic delight from curbing and restricting their fellow Jews! Ke'tinok ha-boreiah mi-bet ha-sefer!

This holds true not only for individuals but for communities as well. I often have the occasion to speak to various communities throughout the country in an attempt -- sometimes successful, usually not -- to improve their religious level, whether it be that of mehitzah or mikvah, and so forth. What resistance I encounter! Sometimes it is almost resentment, as if the whole community asks: Are we not doing enough already? Are we not splendid people in that we have allowed God in to our institutions as much as we have? What synagogue or community can stand some ^{not} improvement; yet, how few are willing to appreciate this!

All this points to a lack of love, an absence of inner commitment, and therefore a religion which is joyless and unhappy. It is the approach ke'tinok ha-boreiah mi-bet ha-sefer, of a child who flees from rather than to school. It is the grievous error of spiritual truancy. And this indeed is the first great paranut or catastrophe of any people.

The second paranut, that which is mentioned after the paragraph of va-yehi be'nesoa ha-aron, consists of the same attitude -- except worse, in a more advanced stage of degradation. It is an attitude which came to the fore when the Children of Israel voiced their bitter complaints to Moses and said: zakharnu et ha-dagah asher nokhal be'Mitzrayim hynam, we remember the fish which we used to eat in Egypt free. What a strange remark: "free!" Were they not slaves who worked from dawn to dusk in their back-breaking labors? And if so, can the miserable piece of fish thrown to them by their task-masters be regarded as hynam, free?

The Zohar, however, gives us a profound insight into that one word. They did not mean that it was hynam, free, in the sense that it cost nothing. Rather, the

word means be'lo berakhah, that they were not required to recite a blessing over the food! Because, they argued, de'lo havi alana be'Mitarayim² ole di-le'ela -- while we were in Egypt, before we came to Sinai, the mountain of the Lord, there was not yet placed upon us the yoke of Heaven. Imagine! -- how bitterly they complained over the simple obligation of having to recite a blessing over a bit of fish; not only were they not anxious to receive new commandments, but they wanted to get rid of those they already commanded! When you have a negative attitude towards your religious faith, than even the responsibility to recite a few words of blessing becomes an intolerable burden.

Hence, what begins with a protest against homework, ends as a rebellion against all discipline. What begins as a rejection of school, ends as a revolt against the Divine Teacher. If the first paranut is that of being a truant, the second consists of becoming a drop-out from the school of Sinai.

A Judaism lived without joy and love and affection is disastrous. It is the way of wildness and irresponsibility. It is the way of binam, it is the way of be'lo berakhah -- no benediction, no grace, no charm.

And that is why va-yehi bi'nesoa ha-aron interrupts the narrative at this point, separating between the two paranayot. Now, the words va-yehi bi'nesoa ha-aron mean, "and it came to pass when the Ark set forward." But one of the Rishonim (see Moshav Zekenim, page 444) has correctly pointed out: does not ordinary logic and grammar call for a different formulation of the events of the Ark's movement? Ought it not to have been stated, va-yehi bi'nesoa nos'ei ha-aron - "and it came to pass when the bearers of the Ark set forward?" After all, it was the people who carried the Ark who began to move.

But the answer is: No, that was only a matter of appearance. Actually the Ark moved by itself! Va-yehi bi'nesoa ha-aron -- the Ark, the Torah, the whole Jewish tradition, moves under its own steam, it does not rely for its ultimate destiny upon the people who think that they are carrying it. As a matter of fact, as the Talmud has taught (Sotah 35a), ha-aron nosei et nos'av, the Ark carried

those who thought they were carrying it!

Indeed, this is what we must know if we are to rid ourselves of that pernicious attitude which transforms us into little children running away from school.

We think we carry the Ark; in reality it carries us. We think that our discipline of mitzvot is a gift to God; actually, it is His gift to us: ratzah ha-Kadosh barukh Hu le'zakkot et Yisrael, le'fikhakh hira^bh la-hem Torah u-mitzvot. We think we are giving; far more is it true that we are getting. We think that is us who support Torah; little does it occur to us that, to a far greater extent, it is Torah which supports us. We sometimes speak of the regimen of Mitzvot as a "yoke"; but ~~what~~ we too often forget ~~is~~ that a yoke is that which will direct us to the greener pastures of the spirit, and ^{allow} ^{to} ~~let~~ us carry along with us, during our long journey through life, highly precious baggage: a life filled with meaning, with purpose, with transcendent values.

Many, nowadays, are worried about the survival of Judaism. It is a worthy concern. But actually, it is not the main problem. Judaism will survive, one way or the other. Our mainⁿ problem is: will Jews survive?

Of course there is profound interdependence between the one and the other.

There can be no Jews without Judaism, and no Judaism without Jews. But there is a serious question of how many Jews will survive without Judaism, of how much Jewishness we can retain if we abandon Torah. To what extent can we perpetuate our people if we Jews will not express our loyalty to Judaism with more spirit, more love, more happiness?

The distinguished Protestant theologian, Reinhold Niehbur, is reported to have stated that Christians and Jews emerged from the Second World War in opposite ways. Christians emerged fairly intact. But Christianity is in deep crisis. It is the faith which informed a Western world which allowed this blood bath to take place. With Jews, however, it is reversed: Judaism emerged unscratched. "The Torah of the Lord is perfect." The bestiality of Western man presents no challenge to a faith, Judaism, which it has refused to accept and has even

denigrated for twenty centuries. But Jews -- they are in crisis! And the crisis consists specifically in their negative, begrudging, reluctant attitude towards their ancestral faith.

Hence, we must reverse our old approach. Instead of acting like school children scampering from the classroom at the gong of the bell marking the end of the period, ke'tinok ha-boreiah mi-bet ha-sefer, we must be mature adults who can hear the bell tolling and return to the Bet Ha-Midrash, to learn all over again how to serve the Lord with joy. Instead of harboring that dangerous fear of shema yarbeh alenu mitzvot, that there is too much to observe, let us be more apprehensive about the fact that we are not doing enough and with sufficient feeling.

Then indeed, va-yehi bi'nesoa ha-aron, will we be carried forth -- and forward and onward -- by the Ark of the Torah. Then will we discover in the timeless truth of the Torah in the Ark that which will bear us through the storms of life and guide us through the wasteland and wilderness of society. Then the Lord will answer Moses' ancient prayer: kumah ha-Shem ve'yafutzu oyvekha ve'yanusu mesanekha mi-panekha, arise O Lord and defend your people against all their enemies. Then indeed Jews will survive, the Torah will flourish, and Israel will prosper.

Then too Israel and all humanity will be the recipients of the divine blessing of menuhah -- peace and serenity and tranquility. U-ve'nuhoh yomar shuvah ha-Shem rivavot alfei Yisrael -- and when the Ark came to rest, Moses prayed: return, O Lord, to the myriads of the thousands of Israel.