"FROM DEFLECTION TO DEFECTION"

With startling simplicity and disarming non-chalance, the Torah records an event in this morning's Sidra which is astonishing almost to the point of being shocking. The elders, together with Moses and Aaron, ascend Mt. Sinai to seal the covenant of Torah. At that time, we read, va-yehezu et ha-Elohim, they saw the glory of God, va-yokhlu va-yishtu, and they ate and they drank.

The juxtaposition of these two activities, so disjointed, so antithetical, so inappropriate to each other, presents us with what is probably the most painful paradox in all the Torah. Hence, it is not surprising to find two interpretations of this passage by our Sages which are diametrically opposed to each other: one commends the elders, and the other condemns them; one congratulates and one criticizes.

The Midrash, quoted by Rashi, is quite harsh on the elders. It points to the first part of our verse, in which we read that "and to the nobles of Israel he did not stretch forth his hand," i.e., God did not harm the elders. From this we learn, the Midrash deduces, that in reality the elders deserved to be punished. Why? Because hayu mistaklin bo be'lev gas, mi-tokh akhilah u-shetiah, they had the effrontery to gaze directly at the glory of God with a heart that was crass, crude, and vulgar, experiencing this supernatural phenomenon while they were stuffing themselves with food and drink.
Onkelos, the Aramaic translator, however, gives us a reverse judgment. When the elders experienced this vision, he declares, they offered sacrifices, and were so thrilled and overjoyed that their offerings were accepted that they felt as if they themselves had eaten and drunk. They cherished their unusual vision, they "ate it up" and "drank it in."

Now it is presumptuous of me to decide between two giants of Israel who disagree as to an interpretation. But, as Maimonides taught us 800 years ago, "the gates of interpretation are not closed." I therefore commend to you an explanation, based upon a certain psychological insight, which borrows from both these contradictory comments on the conduct of the elders.

This insight has been brought to my attention by William Manchester's account of the day that John F. Kennedy died. The moribund President was brought into Parkland Hospital in Dallas. No one knew at that time that he was already beyond help. Yet, at that critical moment, hysteria took over, and even the most important individuals in this country were struck with sudden impotence, manifested a behavior that was nothing less than fantastic. Each began to attend to trivialities that never would have occurred to him otherwise. Consider the following examples:

The President's senior military commander ignored the Signal Corps and its superb communications, and instead made a credit-card call to the operator of the White House. There he left two messages,
in the following order: 1. A message to his wife; 2. A request for information on any intelligence on a plot against the country!

A brave Secret Service officer, who had given his jacket to cover the gaping head wound of the martyred President, ran to and fro in the hospital trying to borrow a jacket. At this time of grave emergency he was concerned about his propriety in dress.

An experienced reporter left the scene and went elsewhere in order to find out "What's new in the world."

The secretary of the President, in this excitement, concluded that the President would not be able to keep an imminent speaking engagement and that the Vice-President would have to substitute for him. She therefore was concerned that the Vice-President would not have a large enough audience, and therefore made off immediately to the site of the address.

The clerks at the hospital insisted upon registering the President in usual bureaucratic form: "Kennedy, John F., white-male."

And one of the most distinguished aides of the President was stopped by a woman at the desk, obediently proceeded to sign in, printing his name laboriously.

What happened that fateful day? Why this epidemic of irrationalism?

Apparently, when confronted by an unimagineable event which cannot be assimilated and understood, the human mind turns from the center to the periphery, it gives its attention to little matters which can be understood, assimilated, categorized, and performed.
Faced with the enormity of crime and tragedy, the most steadfast personalities, the clearest thinkers, the keenest minds averted their gaze from the horror, and threw themselves into easy, ritualized, petty routines, preferring the easy, tiny, tidy tasks which were no challenge to them. When we are overwhelmed by greatness -- whether happy or sad, magnificent or monstrous -- we are deflected to meaningless trivialities. And this is a great danger, for such deflection leads to defection, to critical neglect and moral and human failure.

This insight into human nature in unusual moments offers a helpful explanation in understanding the conduct of the elders at Mt. Sinai. Unlike Moses, who was a giant and accustomed to the personal encounter with God panim el panim, they were smaller individuals. And so when they suddenly encountered God, va-yehezu et ha-Elohim, they were crushed. Nothing in their experience had prepared them for anything quite like this. So shaken were they, so agitated and staggered, that they lost their rational balance, and, unable to gaze into God's glory, they reverted to the easiest, most uninspiring, most irrelevant and unchallenging task at hand: Va-yokhlu va-yishtu, they began to eat and drink. No doubt they did so with the utmost care, washing, making the blessing, and saying grace. But it was an act of deflection from the crucial to the trivial.

Therefore, the Midrash is right: Va-yokhlu va-yishtu points to their failure and collapse. But Onkelos is right too: It is hard to
blame them, for they were not culpable of willful contempt against God. As mere mortals, they were deflected by the magnitude of the experience of revelation to a concern for the trivial, the peripheral, the secondary.

I believe that this irrational reaction of individuals to events in their own lives has its counterpart in the irrational deflection from historic events in the lives of whole peoples. Our people have, in our lifetime, sustained a succession of two incomprehensible events: one unspeakably horrible, the other indescribably marvelous. They are: the holocaust of Europe which cost us one third of our people, and the rebirth of the State of Israel. Together with these, and that to which these two point, is the crisis of Judaism: the acid test of whether Jews are worthy of Judaism. Our crisis is fundamentally spiritual: whether we understand our tragedy, appreciate the miracle of our renaissance, whether we can confront the need for continuing the Torah with new zeal and fervor. Our physical survival depends upon our spiritual survival: whether we know what it means to be a Jew, whether we understand what is required of us, whether we are willing to risk all for the continuation of Judaism, whether we can articulate what Judaism still has to say to mankind.

Yet, this challenge is so overwhelming, of such magnitude, that we are deflected from va-yehezu et ha-Elohim to va-yokhlu va-yishtu. Consider how irrationally we have elevated the secondary whilst ignoring the primary.
Some of us adopt a sacred linguism. We declare that the most important thing for a Jew is either Yiddish or Hebrew. Of course, both are important, perhaps in different measure. Yet we succeed only in ritualizing the trivial when we declare them to be of primary significance.

Other people seem to believe that the only way to appreciate what has happened and to confront a spiritual crisis is by improving the economy of Israel; or fighting anti-Semitism even if it is necessary to create some in order to do it battle; or to stand fast by the "wall of separation" between Church and State as the ultimate expression of Jewish idealism.

Of course, none of these can save us by itself. If we are not to sink in a sea of secondary irrelevancies, we must begin to cope with the problem itself: the meaning of Torah, the meaning of holocaust, the meaning of Statehood.

There is really not much time to spare. For deflection can only lead to defection. Remember that two of the elders so deflected at Sinai from the vision of God to the filling of their stomachs were Nadav and Avihu, the two who later defected from Judaism.

Our youth -- youth in every age -- asks authentic questions. And even if they ultimately will be satisfied by pseudo-answers, for they too will some day be adults, yet they will not accept our fabrications, our trivial artificialities. No open-eyed young person searching for meaning in life and for the response of Judaism to his
quest will ever be satisfied with language instead of content, with heroic gestures of fighting the wicked anti-Semites, with a liberal posturing as 110% democrats. If they are not introduced to authentic Torah and a genuine Torah experience, then defection must lead to defection and they must leave us altogether.

Our Sidra, then, bears for us a plea not to be deflected from our primary concerns: the revelation of God in ways sometimes too terrible, sometimes too marvelous for us to behold.

At such times, we are summoned not to va-yokhlu va-yishtu, to trivialization, but to confirm the covenant, to stand up once again and commit ourselves, with all our heart and our soul, to the berit of Torah and mitzvot.