

"IT'S TIME TO GO HOME"

In the Jewish tradition, the two months of Nisan and Tishri are both called the "first months" of the year. In the Bible, Nisan -- because of the Passover holiday that falls in this month -- is considered חודש ראשון, the first month. Thus we read: חודש ראשון זה לכם, "this month (of Nisan) shall be for you the first of months."

In the later Jewish tradition, the festival known in the Torah as יום ראשון or יום טוב, which falls on the first day of the month of Tishri, is referred to as Rosh Hashanah, the first day of the New Year.

Thus, Passover and Rosh Hashanah, at the opposite ends of the year, are related to each other as two kinds of New Year. Actually, each offers a different kind of emphasis, so that the two are supplementary to each other.

Tishri is individual and universal, it speaks of all men and of individual humans. Nisan concentrates on family and nation. Tishri speaks of the destiny of כל תושבי הארץ, all dwellers of the earth, who are assigned either חיים או מוות, for life or for death. The nations of the world too have their fate determined on this day: יום זה יגדל כל אומה, Whereas Nisan concerns only עם ישראל, the Jewish people: our freedom, our history, our redemption. Even the moods are different: Tishri is solemn; its note is יראה, fear or awe. So we pray on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur: והטת את חלוקת היראה והיראה, cast Your pall of awe or fear onto the world. On Nisan we speak of love and warmth and optimism. The characteristic song is שיר השירים, the Song of Songs, with its pean of love. We celebrate the Seder with songs and happiness.

Passover thus reminds us of what is a truism: that the home is the true center of Jewish life. A thousand years ago, Saadia told us that the preservation of the family is the purpose and goal of a good part of the Torah legislation (השומר את ביתו). And a contemporary professor has pointed out that Abraham first appears on the scene of Biblical history as one who will bring blessing to all the nations of the world, who are described as בתי אבות, families. Since then, the Jewish people is known as an extended mishpahah or family.

This seems crucial because it is not really a truism any longer. Never before has the family been under such sustained attack, both explicitly and implicitly, both ideologically and empirically.

One observer has pointed out somewhat cynically but quite correctly that, in our days, who needs a home? I am born in a

maternity ward, raised in a nursery, educated at a boarding school, spend my vacations in summer camps, then I go to an out-of-town college, am married in a caterer's hall, spend my time "eating out," vacationing in hotels and on cruises, I retire to an Old Age Home or Senior Citizens Home, and I am buried from a funeral parlor. Who needs a home?

About the only time that the family spends together in our society is: around the TV set. What a charming sight of family togetherness: father and mother and all children sitting and meditating, with eyes glued on that infernal screen from which so much inanity is spewed forth into empty and receptive minds. And even then, this beautifully pastoral scene of familial conviviality (disguising inner cultural pollution), this too does not last. Because, in order to avoid conflicts over which channel to watch, there have to be at least two or three television sets to accommodate different tastes...

Home and family have been rent asunder in our times by such characteristic phenomena as loudness and anger, gaps and revolutions and confrontation. Cohesive values such as affection, which C.S. Lewis correctly considered as more important than love, are receding. The social dynamics of the family today are usually expressed as a shriek, with harshness and friction, rarely with that gentility which Dr. Jonson (in 1799) described as "elegance of behavior."

But this attrition of the family has now been elevated from a psychological orientation and sociological fact to a philosophical value: the destruction of the nuclear family. This assault on the family was predicted in the gory prophesy of Huxley's Brave New World -- or, perhaps, Orwell's 1984 -- where "mother" became an obscenity, a dirty word, probably the only pornographic reference that still shocked.

Consider what we have done in our lives. Some time ago we got rid of grandparents. They no longer were permitted to inhabit the same home with their children and grandchildren. All kinds of excuses were offered, and the rationalizations were as much accepted by the older people as by the younger ones: we have different interests, we don't want to be a burden, let them make their own mistakes, we don't want to get in the way. And so we exiled grandparents to "senior citizens homes" and left our own children with the erroneous impression that history begins with them, that they have no roots in or ties to the past. Children themselves are now being considered as a burden, almost as a shameful confession. "Z.P.G." is now the greatest commandment that invokes pious submission. We plead for fewer children, and consider abortion not only as acceptable, but even virtuous. There is little doubt that society is now on the verge of sanctioning various forms of euthenasia. The New Morality

has told us that we can find our conjugal satisfactions wherever we wish, not necessarily in the home. Geneticists speak of "cloning," whereby reproduction can take place with only one parent; it will not even be necessary to have a set of two parents. And Women's Lib, no matter what its other virtues or extravagances which are not relevant to the present discussion, is a movement that has not really recognized the position of children as such in a women's life, and the fairly irreplaceable role of the female in bearing and caring for children, no matter how that role may be modified. "Mother" has indeed become a dirty word in contemporary literature, to wit the contemporary attack in Jewish-authored novels against Jewish mothers. And a professor of English from Bar Ilan has now pointed out that this is only a special case of the attack in contemporary literature against mothers in general.

In a word, to plead for family solidarity is no longer a superfluous cliché.

What a sad commentary in our times! It was only a very, very short time ago that if one wanted to criticize a speaker for uttering banalities, for dripping pious platitudes that contained nothing new, he would say that the speaker "came out four-square for God, Mother, and Country." Yet today, to advocate "God, Mother, and Country" is genuinely courageous. To do so in front of certain kinds of audiences means to risk the sneers of the avant-garde and the ridicule of those who reject religion and family and patriotism -- who consider themselves either "radical theologians" or outright atheists and so have done away with God; who, in their attacks on the nuclear family and mother and children, have no use for mother; and those for whom patriotism, even without sentimentalism or exaggeration or the noxious theory "my country - right or wrong," believe that to turn against one's country constitutes some kind of universalistic virtue.

We have reached such a stage that when the editor of a Jewish journal still accepts these elements in some "parave" manner, he is involved in a literary feud with a sophisticated snob who publishes and edits a certain review of books!

In such a society and under such circumstances, Passover comes to tell us: it's time to go home, to rejoin and strengthen the family.

That is why the Torah in its description of Passover emphasizes the elements of home: *למנוחה*, that one lamb was to be reserved for a family unit; *בביתו*, we are supposed to remain indoors during the Passover event; *בביתו*, it must be eaten in one home, and not in several of them.

So it is time to go home and make a conscious effort to keep

the family together - strong, cohesive, affectionate, and gentle.

The Rabbis put it in a rather quaint, indirect, but far more subtle and charming way. Thus the Jerusalem Talmud (Pes. 10a) writes: *אמר ר' חיי הילולא אציה בליל קודם פסח כבא ליה אכיל מצה* One who eats matzah on the day preceding the Seder, which is forbidden, may be compared to a betrothed couple who, out of immature impatience, consummate their relationship before marriage. Both cases reveal an instance of grossness and vulgarity. The medieval commentators (ראשונים) point out that there are certain striking similarities between the two cases. Thus, in each event there are nine blessings involved. In the wedding there are nine blessings -- the two of kiddushin, and the *על ביכור* or seven of the second part of the ceremony; and the number of blessings from the beginning of the Seder (*קרבן*) until the eating of the matzah also totals nine.

Now, this is not just an idle analogy, but a significant insight. Passover is dedicated to *בית, אהבה, אשמה* -- home, family, and love. Its exclusion of the *גוי*, the alien who must not partake of the paschal sacrifice, is not a discrimination against the foreigners, but an attempt to create an intimate family atmosphere. Patience, maturity, restraint, affection, mutual respect, the rejection of all vulgarity and glutony, these are the characteristics of both Passover and the family.

No wonder that the first Gerer Rebbe pointed out that the three pilgrim festivals together represent the symbol of a wedding relationship between God and Israel. Passover represents the betrothed (kiddushin) between Israel and the Lord, for then God said *אני אקח את ישראל לי*, I shall "take you as a people for Me;" and the word *קח* generally refers to marriage, to "take as a wife unto oneself." The festival of Shavuot commemorates the giving of the Torah at Mt. Sinai, and the Torah is reminiscent of the Jewish marriage contract, the *כתובה*. And on Sukkot, the leaves (*סוכות*) covering the booths or sukkot are reminiscent of the *חופה* or the canopy which finalizes the wedding. All of them therefore are family and home symbols, and Passover as the beginning of the process calls out to us: it's time to go home.

But this emphasis on family is not only for the individual, nuclear family alone. For in this sense, one must agree with the counterculture: the nuclear family must never be such as to exclude the rest of the world. In Jewish life, the family was one unit which, together with other such units, made up the extended or expanded family, *בית ישראל*, the House of Israel, the entire people. In the case of Jews, the stronger the family, the stronger the Jewish identity.

Indeed, if I were asked what is the most significant element in guaranteeing a Jewish future and Jewish survival, I would say that

maximal Jewish education is the second most important such element. The primary consideration is: the kind of home you have. If you yourself are sincere in your religious commitment, if you are genuine -- and remember that children are remarkably perceptive and sophisticated in their ability to detect phoniness and to appreciate authenticity -- and you have built a home such that children see love and feel attracted and loyal to their parents, then the odds are heavily in favor of your children following in your footsteps. The family is more important than the school in guaranteeing Jewish future. That is why I would so strongly urge you not to be satisfied merely with Jewish education but to make every deliberate attempt at raising the level of family life. Our communal and religious disintegration began when we traded off kiddush for cocktails, and Friday nights about the Shabbat table for every other night around the television set. The Seder must become the symbol of what we do throughout all the year -- general togetherness, affection, gentleness, and the little family rituals that are so important for all members of the family.

For basically, there is a deep reciprocal relationship between family and national cohesiveness. If there is שלום בית and affection in the family, it will tend to keep the children identified in בית ישראל. And if there is ethnic and religious strength, which comes about primarily through Torah education, this will reinforce our family cohesiveness.

It is appropriate on this holiday when we ask of God to build His House, the Temple, that we paraphrase the prayer at the end of the Hagaddah as a plea and reminder to ourselves:

אֱלֹהֵינוּ הוֹסֵא וְבִנֵּנוּ אֶת בְּיַתְךָ יְיָ אֱלֹהֵינוּ  
 קִדְּשׁוּנוֹתֵינוּ וְעֲבָדֵינוּ אֶת בְּיַתְךָ יְיָ אֱלֹהֵינוּ

He who is בָּרוּךְ, wise and alert and toughminded, will tend to his home -- immediately, quickly come without delay. O Jew, build; O Jew, build, build the relationships and affections and loyalties that will sustain and strengthen family and home. בְּיַתְךָ יְיָ אֱלֹהֵינוּ

It's time to go home.