

"FOR GOD'S SAKE, DO SOMETHING"

The theme of Parshat Parah is tum'ah and taharah, which we usually translate as "levitical purity and impurity." Now there are two aspects to the category of tum'ah and taharah in the Jewish tradition. The first regards tum'ah as a state of enforced separation from holy places or objects, initiated by contact with death: a dead body or a part of it, a debilitating disease, or the loss of vital issue or fluid. This is the kind of tum'ah about which we read from the Torah this morning.

The second understanding of tum'ah and taharah is the spiritualized interpretation about which we read in this morning's Haftorah. Tum'ah is considered a state initiated by sin, which is the rebellion against and the cutting off of oneself from the Living God of Israel. Both physical death and partial death, as in the Sidra, and spiritual death and partial death, as in the Haftorah, are regarded as the sources of tum'ah.

Thus our Haftorah begins, "Son of man, when the House of Israel dwelt in their own land, וַיִּטְמְאוּ אֶת-אֶרֶץ כְּנָעַן, they defiled it by their ways and by their doings" (Ezekiel 36:17). Israel's way of life was disobedient and rebellious against the living God, and therefore their tum'ah had to be purged.

But the remaining part of the Haftorah, its major section, does not deal with tum'ah and taharah but with another theme, that of Kiddush Hashem and Hillul Hashem, the sanctification of

God's Name and the desecration of the Name.

Now, Kiddush Hashem and Hillul Hashem are very important concepts in Judaism. They constitute one of the greatest and most powerful ideals in all of our faith. They tell us that God's Name, His reputation, is at stake in the world, and that it is our responsibility to enhance or sanctify that Name, and never to diminish it or desecrate it.

However, the question arises: What does taharah have to do with Kiddush Hashem? Why does the prophet combine these two concepts? How does the "divine prestige" relate to the twin concepts of sin and death that are inherent in the word tum'ah?

That there is a relationship between them we know not only from our Haftorah, but also from the famous statement of R. Pinhas b. Yair, that taharah meviah li'yedei kedushah (Mishnah, Sotah, end): taharah leads to holiness. But why? And how?

Furthermore, Kiddush Hashem is expressed in prayer too. The prayer which most strongly articulates Kiddush Hashem is the Kaddish: קדש ונשגב שמי, "May God's Name be magnified and sanctified" -- the prayer for the "sanctification of the Name." The origin of the prayer is unknown; we have only theories and conjectures, no facts. It is almost certain that in the beginning it had nothing to do with death or mourning. Nevertheless, the Jewish folk wisdom tied in the Kaddish with mourning, it made of the Kaddish the prayer par excellence of the man in

grief. It is not enough to say that the Kaddish represents "a dedication to life." It does, but so do many other prayers, especially the Shema, which speaks of teaching children and loyalty to God. Why, then, was the Kaddish chosen as the prayer to be recited by one in mourning?

To answer these questions, we must understand more deeply the meaning of Kiddush Hashem.

Kiddush Hashem is performed by man, in an attempt to enhance or sanctify God's Name in the world. Primarily, Kiddush Hashem is the consequence of the noble conduct of a Jew before non-Jews; God's reputation is enhanced when the Jew acts on an ethical plane. Conversely, when a Jew acts in a manner that is disgraceful and malicious and deceitful, people of the world attribute his conduct to his religion, to his tradition, to his God -- and God's Name is desecrated. The same holds true for the religious Jew in the company of Jews who identify themselves as non-religious: what the religious man says and does reflects upon his Torah and upon his God.

Ezekiel, however, gives us another interpretation, equally valid, of Kiddush Hashem and Hillul Hashem. It is not only man who can and does perform either of these two polar concepts, but also -- God.

Our people was born under the shadow of a glorious promise -- the promise granted by God to our Founding Father, Abraham,

that in the long run all will be well with us, that He will be with us, that we will prosper in our land, the land of Canaan. So whenever the world sees that Israel prospers, that God is with us, that that ancient promise is vindicated, they come to acknowledge God, grudgingly or ungrudgingly, consciously or unconsciously. They recognize that His word is truth. But if they see that Israel suffers in exile, that it is alone and hopeless, then they consider that promise a sham, the entire tradition a fraud, and the historic belief of Israel nothing more than an empty shell.

Thus, as long as Israel suffered friendlessly and hopelessly through the long black night of exile, Christianity referred to us as a prodigal son and the wandering Jew. The great thinkers and historians of the Western world dismissed all of Jewish claims to a special place in providence as nothing more than the psychological escape mechanisms of a persecuted people playing out its fantasies. And one philosopher of history called us the fossilized relic of a Syriac civilization, fulfilled by Christianity, and now condemned to historical obsolescence.

But when Israel suddenly experienced renaissance, when it gained its independence, and later proved its mettle in two important wars by its heroic actions, the entire Christian world was thrown into disarray. Its theology was disoriented. Suddenly, Christians who considered that Jews were fossils, rejected by God,

had to come to terms with the new reality: the vindication of God's promise to Abraham. Somehow, the people of Israel were considered unusual -- the secularists were still unwilling to use the word "unique" -- and its history a marvelous phenomenon. Deep within the secularist heart, and within the Christian heart, there grew the acknowledgment that something of that ancient promise was still alive, that it was quickening in the history of Israel. This was Kiddush Hashem.

So it is that Ezekiel speaks of redemption as the sanctification of the Divine Name.

And now we may understand the relation of Kiddush Hashem to tum'ah, and the relation of Kaddish to a person in grief.

As mature people, we know that death is inevitable. It is the most persuasive and conclusive of all logical arguments: what begins must end, what grows up in successive patterns of integration, must sooner or later disintegrate. Death must follow life, invariably and inevitably.

We have no quarrel with that proposition. Intellectually we all agree to it, and we know that so it shall be. From a purely abstract and impersonal point of view, we may even agree that it is "good" or proper, that those who lived should die and make way for the future. But all of this is in the realm of disembodied and impersonal intellect. In actuality, existentially,

no matter how wise we are, how mature we are, how brilliant we are, we rebel against the idea of death emotionally and instinctively and intuitively. We fear it, we detest it, we reject it, we consider it the vilest evil that disfigures the face of creation. It is לְבַדָּה, defiling, and filthy. No matter how poor the quality of life, we cling to life tenaciously and we abhor death. Death is evil, it is unclean, it is insufferable.

Now, God is a good God -- יְהוָה טוֹב. He created the world, and at every stage He Himself declared: ki tov, "behold, it is good." Now, when this ki tov is evident in the world, in its condition and in its history, man acknowledges the goodness of its Creator, he sees His holiness and justice and truth. Then God's Name is cherished and revered -- and sanctified. But when man senses the breaks, the discontinuities, the flaws in existence, when he is confronted by the tum'ah, the ugliness of evil -- the Name of God is desecrated. Man is thrown into utter confusion, and he asks the inevitable question, which has become the starting point for so many philosophies, both ancient and modern: How can a perfectly good God create so rotten a world? The reality of evil will not let him rest. He seeks sanctuary in the denial of God, but in his heart of hearts he knows that this is only childish spite-work, as if he were punishing God by denying His existence. He flees into metaphysics and theodicy, but

it fails to satisfy him. He flies into the ethereal realms of mysticism, and these may satisfy him, but they do not offer a solution. He piously denies the reality of evil, but it hurts, as does a nail in one's shoe, and will not go away; the realities simply cannot be denied.

Evil, suffering, misery, loneliness, hunger, starvation, disease, pain, physical and spiritual tum'ah -- these are the elements that bring on Hillul Hashem. And if this sickness of starvation and anguish reveal the defects of creation, and desecrate the Name, how much more so, the greatest evil of all, the dreaded specter that lies "behind the badness" of hunger and starvation and anguish -- death? With all our intellectual acceptance of death as inevitable and unquestionable, we know intuitively, emotionally, and even spiritually, that it is kn'q, it is a blot on the face of God's world, that strikes at the basis of our faith; that the death of man, created "in the Image of God," diminishes God Himself. It defiles and pollutes all of life.

What is left for man to do when he has suffered death of a loved one or a dear one, when he has been thrust into this unwelcome encounter with Hillul Hashem? He has no recourse, no one to whom to turn, save God Himself. And to Him he must turn with the only means left to him: prayer -- The broken but open heart, and the halting and faltering words. And his prayer must be that God no longer permit Hillul Hashem to prevail, that He now

undertake the great enterprise of rectification, of Kiddush Hashem, or sanctifying His own Name.

The mourner -- whose whole frame of reference has been disoriented if not shattered, whose foundations of trust and faith and security have been undermined by the Hillul Hashem of death -- now asks of God: no more Hillul Hashem! Your Name, my God, has been violated and profaned. Now, אלהינו ואלהיך, may Your Great Name be magnified and sanctified. The loss I sustained cannot be undone. But through Kiddush Hashem I know that another life and another existence will be vouchsafed for my loved one. But God, I seek the sanctification of Your Name not only in another world, in another arena, but here and now, במחנה הזה in this world whose existence You willed. Give us, here in this world, a society and a community which will actualize ever-more the visions of peace and justice. Restore it to full human harmony, so that "Nation shall not lift up sword against nation, and they shall learn war no more." Give us a society and a community in which children by the thousands will not perish from hunger while their elders debate the politics of civil war; a world in which young university students and women and children in supermarkets will not be subject to the terrorist's bomb; a civilization in which the best of our youth will not be shipped off to distant lands to fight wars for purposes of which they are ignorant.

אלהינו ואלהיך, May the reign of disharmony and hatred come to

an end, and the Kingdom of God come to the world, the kingdom of justice and of peace and of truth.

יְהוָה שְׁמֵהּ רַבָּא מְרַבְּךָ עַד עַד

יְהוָה עַד עַד, may God's Name be Great and sanctified and complete forever and ever. But we cannot wait until that "forever and ever and ever." We ask of God to begin now, right now: יְהוָה יְהוָה in Your lifetime and in Your days -- right now. O God, whose Name I care for more than all else: protect Your Great Name, cease to suffer the presence of death, to tolerate evil, to countenance hunger and misery and loneliness and unrequited love. For Your own Name, do not permit evil to dominate. For God's sake, do something, O God!

This, then, is the prayer of the mourner, whose heart has been touched by the finger of grief and whose eyes have been blackened by the tum'ah of death, that ultimate evil that both defiles man and desecrates God's ^Name. So we pray for the opposite, for Kiddush Hashem, to undo evil and safeguard life and banish tum'ah from existence.

Just as the individual prays for Kiddush Hashem, through the Kaddish, after experiencing the tum'ah of death, so does Ezekiel speak of God performing Kiddush Hashem for an entire people after the tum'ah of sin. The tum'ah of death disqualifies man from the relationship with the sacred; he is forbidden שָׂרֵפְתָא, entrance into the Temple in Jerusalem. Similarly, tum'ah as sin forbids a people to enjoy its sacred soil, the Land of Israel, and demands galut, exile.

So, the prophet in our Haftorah, after mentioning that our people had defiled themselves by their ways, says:
 וְאֶפְרַיִם אֶתְּחַבֵּא בְּגוֹיִם, "And I scattered them among the nations, and they were dispersed through the countries" (36:19). As people who were unclean, impure, we were not permitted to remain in the holy places, in our own homeland.

However, a problem arose. While Israel understood that its misfortune was a punishment, the consequence of its own ignoble action, that its exile was a reaction to its own defilement or tum'ah, the goyim, the nations amongst whom we were scattered and dispersed, did not understand Jewish history in that fashion. They did not accept our philosophy of history, that of אֶפְרַיִם חִטְאוֹתָיו גָּלוּ אֶרְצוֹתָיו. They saw Jewish exile as a defeat of the God of Israel, as an indication that the Jewish God was powerless and weak and could not prevent the evil that had befallen His people. The result, therefore, was: Hillul Hashem, the desecration of God's Name.

Therefore, the prophet says, God will now reverse the process and undertake Kiddush Hashem, He will return Israel to its land, so that the peoples of the world will come to praise Him:
 וְקִדְשָׁה אֶת שְׁמִי הַגָּדוֹל בְּגוֹיִם, "And I will sanctify My Great Name which has been profaned among the nations" (36:23). And this Kiddush Hashem will, in turn, lead to undoing the tum'ah, it will lead to taharah: וְצִדְקָתִי אֶעֱשֶׂה לְפָנֶיךָ, "And I will

sprinkle clean water upon you, and ye shall be clean" (36:25).

Taharah, in this sense, means undoing the evil of sin and disobedience. It therefore means that Israel will be granted the

opportunity for a new spiritual orientation: לֵב נָכוֹן יִצְדַּק

פִּתְיוֹן יְהוָה אֵלֵינוּ, "A new heart also will I give you, and

a new spirit will I put within you"(36:26). Thus, Kiddush Ha-

shem, through taharah, leads to geulah, to redemption, and the

undoing of the evil of exile.

In both cases, personal and national grief -- each an instance of the encounter with tum'ah and the resultant Hillul

Hashem -- we pray to God that He perform Kiddush Hashem: For

God's sake, do something!

But for the Jew, prayer has always had moral consequences. And just as God can perform Kiddush Hashem, so can and must

man perform the sanctification of God's Name. And if we pray to

Him that He perform Kiddush Hashem, we must attempt no less. He,

in turn, demands of us: For God's sake, now you do something!

This means that though man cannot defeat death, he can improve life, he can reduce the power of evil, he can alleviate

suffering and help bring redemption.

For God's sake, we can do something. We can feed the hungry and clothe the naked, we can offer friendship to the lonely

and comfort the bereaved, we can extend sympathy to the miserable

and help the needy. And we can bring geulah closer by striving

for both the political and spiritual welfare of the State of Israel.

In this manner, we remove the stain of tum'ah and reveal the taharah, and thus we sanctify God's Name and restore it to its former dignity -- we do something for God's sake.

אמר ל עקובא אשכנא וישראל עמך מי אהב
מטהרין ומו מטהר אהב, אהבך גשמיך

R. Akiva said:
Happy are you, O Israel, before whom do you purify yourselves and who is it who grants you taharah? -- Your Father in Heaven. Israel's adventure on earth is not purposeless and meaningless. It is an exciting enterprise, filled with purposefulness, for our search for taharah is that which will bind us forever to our Father in Heaven.

אשכנא וישראל, Happy are you, O Israel.