

THE JEWISH NAIVETÉ: A PURIM STORY ALL YEAR*

"Jewish naiveté?" That sounds surprising, even ludicrous. Surely, a people that boast so many successful businessmen, shrewd merchants, pragmatic scientists, and men of affairs cannot be accused of naiveté. And yet -- the charge is true. It seems that there is a strain of collective naiveté that runs through our history like some spoiled gene that had fastened itself on our chromosomes. It expresses itself not merely in idealism -- often done to excess -- but in an ingenuousness that borders on dangerous ignorance about the nature of man.

The trait was already noticeable in the ancient Persian period. The key verse of the *Megillah*, the Book of Esther, concerning this problem is: **והעיר שושן נבוכה**, "the city of Shushan (that is, its Jewish population) was perplexed." The word "perplexed" is too weak. Perhaps "overwhelmed" is more accurate. Persian Jewry was completely unprepared for the possibility of genocide. In Persia, Jews thought that "it can't happen here." Surely, civilized men and a cultured society cannot suddenly be transformed into beasts. The Jews of Persia were comfortable in their society. They felt at home in the Empire. The Tradition, commenting on the story of the opulent oriental banquet which opens the whole Book of Esther, maintains that the reason the decree of destruction was issued against the Israelites of that generation was **שנהנו במסעודת אותו רשע**, because they participated in the banquet of the wicked Ahaseurus. Rabbi Meir Shapiro, of blessed memory, the great founder of the Yeshiva of Lublin, sees in this talmudic dictum more than the mere assertion that the Jews were punished for eating non-kosher. The Rabbis did not say that **שאכלו**, but **שנהנו**, which means they benefited from or enjoyed the meal. The Rabbis were pointing to the whole psychological attitude, the total social outlook that characterized the Persian Jews. The latter saw in that banquet of the Emperor to which they were invited not a meal but a symbol, a symbol that they were on par with all others of the 127 provinces of Ahaseurus. They were being entertained in the "White House" of the Persians and the Medes. Hence, they were accepted as citizens of the Empire, subjects of the King, and they would not stand out as Jews.

Probably, when Haman ascended to his office as Prime Minister, they thought that despite his tendency to extremism, his secretiveness, his reputation for aggressiveness, he would be good for the Empire and especially for business -- and therefore for themselves. And so, their naiveté left them vulnerable, exposed to the sudden and climatic awareness of human bestiality and degradation. **והעיר שושן נבוכה** -- the bitter truth came as a traumatic revelation, and their naiveté left them incredulous and defenseless.

Even Esther herself seems to have shared this naiveté. When she heard that the Jews of Shushan were plunged into mourning, we read that **ותתחלה המלכה**, she was siezed by convulsions. Esther panicked. No doubt, she had thought that "if a Jew can rise as high as I did in this Empire, surely we are safe." Thus, when the truth was revealed to her, **ותתחלה המלכה** -- she was traumatized.

But this was not true of Mordecai. True, **וישב שק ואפר**, he donned ash and sackcloth, the traditional Jewish expression of mourning and grief. But he did this not because he was surprised, not because he was fooled. Rather, it was a demonstrative act, to summon Persian Jewry to action, to snap them out of their lethargic naiveté. For himself, **ומידכי ידע את כל אשר נעשה**, "and Mordecai knew all that had been done." It was only because he was not naive that he was able to direct the affairs of the people in this crucial and dangerous period.

*this theme was partially suggested by a Purim-lecture delivered by Rabbi Soleveitchik in 1974.

Whence this Jewish weakness, this propensity for childish trust? My teacher, Rabbi Joseph B. Soleveitchik שליט"א, locates the source of this naiveté in the great Jewish faith that man was created in the "image of God." This sublime principle lead Jews to delude themselves that, therefore, man is incapable of senseless evil, of cruelty, of absurd atrocities, of irrational malice.

But this deduction from the concept that man is created in the Divine Image, that therefore man is intrinsically and unqualifiedly good, is a distortion of the whole idea. It is simply not true! The creation in the "image of God" means that man has a *capacity* for good, the *potential* of moral heroism and saintliness. Every individual, by virtue of his being a member of the human race, has a certain minimum core of worthiness and value which derives from the Creator whom he resembles.

But it does not mean that left to his own resorts, man will do the right thing. No such romantic conclusions may justifiably be drawn from the concept of creation in the image of God. For man also has another facet to his complex personality, that of evil. כִּי יִצְרָה לִבְךָ הַדָּמָיּוֹת לֵךְ בְּיַנְיֻוֹרָו, "For the imaginations of man's heart is evil from his youth" (Gen. 8:21). When we forget this, when we ignore the demonic potential of man, we slip into a naive faith which leaves us vulnerable. And that is downright dangerous.

This occurred not only in ancient days. In modern times too, we have been shocked when we experienced the horrifying phenomenon of man turning into monster. And, in our naiveté, we Jews forgot that when this occurred, when the demonic in man comes to the forefront, his first victim is usually -- the Jew! We forgot that all humans are capable of such unreasonable hatred -- not only peasants and ignorant red-necks, but also poets and philosophers and statesmen, regardless of social or economic or political or religious or intellectual class or status. We forgot that the evil side of man is often couched in idealistic and Utopian visions, and in humanistic rhetoric. And so through the whole modern period of Jewish history, large masses of Jews were taken in by those who detested them.

Perhaps the best -- or maybe the worst! -- example is Marxism, whether in its Communist or its Socialist version. Millions of Jews joined the Bund, affiliated with various movements of Democratic Socialism in Western Europe, joined the Labor movement here in the United States. Of course, in Israel, since its very founding, the Labor Party has been a majority and the Government has been Socialist or Marxist. There have been those who, in their innocence, have thought that Jews and Socialism go hand in hand, that they form a kind of natural alliance. Yet, in two recent issues of the distinguished British weekly ENCOUNTER,* the authors of the two articles inform us of the anti-Semitism of the founders of international Socialism. It is scandalous, one of them writes, that it is almost impossible to get a hearing for the evidence that *all* international socialism -- in *all* countries -- was infected by the anti-Semitic virus! This does not, of course, mean that all Socialists are anti-Semites. But it is a shocking revelation of how despicably anti-Semitic the very founders of Socialism were.

Marx and Engels, for instance, considered the Jews "the filthiest of all races," and accused Jews of nothing less than robbing churches, burning villages, and beating innocent Poles to death. Engels delivered himself of such lines as, Jews are "the full embodiment of profiteering, miserliness, and filth." Marx equated "abolishing the essence of Jewry" with "abolishing the inhumanity of today's practice of life." In his old age, the same Marx -- who was also an anti-Black racist -- wrote of his resort hotel complaining: "too many Jews and fleas." One researcher who had delved into French Socialist literature for his attitude to Jews, apologized to his readers for failure to find even one kind word for the Jews.

*W.H. Chaloner and W.O. Henderson in the July 1975 issue, and M. Geltman in the March 1976 issue.

One of the writers asks why it is that so many Jews "flock to the tainted banner of Socialism" when the evidence showed that "no branch of the movement, whether reformist or revolutionary, 'scientific' or 'Utopian,' national or international, held out any other promise for them but Total Assimilation or Death?" He offers two answers. The assimilated Jews, he says, welcomed the opportunity to disappear into the general mass. And the masses of European Jews simply were never told the truth.

I would add a third explanation -- that Jews never wanted to know the bitter truth! They preferred to delude themselves with their classical naiveté as to the darker nature of this political, redemptive vision which they clutched to their hearts. They preferred their ignorance to the shock of *הנהגת ישיבת* -- that was to come, sooner or later, anyway. Therefore, Jews who translate everything ever written by Marx have not to this day translated into English his hideous essay on the Jewish Question, in which he called for the utter disappearance of Jews from the face of the earth.

Perhaps we ought to bear this in mind the next time we feel inclined glibly to repeat the cliché about the three Jews who contributed so much to the modern world, and mention Marx as if we were proud of him. This *meshumad*, self-hating grandson of two Orthodox Rabbis, is an execration for our people, and the only real surprise is that so many Jews have still not learned it -- especially in Israel.

There is yet another fact that Jews in their naiveté tend to forget about anti-Semitism, this demonic excretion of man's evil dimension -- and that is, that it is a group hatred that strikes out at every Jew, observant or non-observant, nationalist or assimilationist, no matter what his perceptions and his commitments. Some assimilated Jews naively thought that only "Jewish Jews" are victimized by anti-Semitism, and that they would be safe. What a blow to them was that famous trial that was a watershed of the whole modern period in French history -- the Dreyfus case. Assimilated French Jews suddenly became aware of how their fellow Frenchmen perceived them as Jews no matter how much they tried to escape the onus of Jewishness. They saw their most celebrated heroes turn against all Jews with a venom. And poor Captain Dreyfus himself, the victim of all the false accusations and the calumny, pathetically protested to his last days that he really was a good Frenchman above all else...

More than the City of Shushan-Paris was perplexed or overwhelmed as a result of the Dreyfus trial. Many Jews who thought they could escape their confrontation with their own Jewishness suddenly were shocked into the realization that they could never do so. As a result, many Jews "came back," including Herzl. But permit me to draw your attention to one Jew of that period who originally came from a semi-Orthodox home, then strayed from the path until he almost embraced Christianity. But when the Dreyfus trial took place, he personally experienced the *התחלת שבת*, the convulsive shock and realization of what had happened, and as a result he returned not only to Jewish nationalism, but to the Orthodoxy that his grandparents had known. This man was a great writer and poet in France, Edmond Fleg. I remember him well. When I was a college freshman at Yeshiva, he came to speak to our French club, "Le Cercle Français." He was a rotund man, with ruddy cheeks, white beard, and a beautiful smile -- and what a magnificent poet! He wrote a book called, "Why I am a Jew," which was translated into English in the 1920's, but has been reissued by Bloch Publishing very recently in a revised edition. It appears in paperback, and I recommend it strongly -- for you, and for your friends who may need it even more. It is a preventive antidote to Shushan-shock.

This naiveté, issuing from such a noble source, has bedevilled us again and again. During the second World War, many Jews failed to escape because they could not bring themselves to believe that anyone could really be that evil that they

would destroy men, women, and children in one fell swoop. In the very concentration camps and in the ghettos, our Jews, our dear, poor Jews, were mesmerized at the horror of it all, and they could not believe that the human form could sink so low. They simply would not accept that the "Final Solution" meant what its author said it did, and that the world would remain silent.

Today, after the bloody encounter with the Amalek of the Holocaust, we should have been cured of this naiveté. Yet, if we were -- why the surprise when we learned, this week, that an ex-SS man is the sole nominee for the post of World President of International Rotary?

As American Jews, I suspect that we are even more prone to naiveté than other Jews -- because we are Americans, who share a similar ideological and personal bent. Hence, the almost universal Jewish childlike trust in Franklin Delano Roosevelt. Masses and masses of Jews, almost without exception, worshipped at the feet of this man, accepted him as a beloved father-figure, ascribed to him all that was good and saintly, and were incensed when anyone would dare to suggest that he could make a mistake, much less that he was capable of genuine evil. When we learned the bitter truth -- *ותתחלת הצננה*, we were thunderstruck and incredulous.

It is for the same reason that I suggest that we must refrain from the apotheosis of any political or diplomatic figure, anywhere and anytime. Harry S. Truman, for instance, is one whom we ought to admire and to whom we owe a great deal. But never let us speak of him with the hushed reverence that we used to mention the name of FDR. Truman had his anti-Semitic moments as well as everyone else. On the whole, we owe him much. But no more worship! No more idolatry that comes from excessive naiveté!

Perhaps this is the appropriate season to remember that as politically conscious citizens of this great democracy who cherish Israel and Russian Jewry, we have the political right and perhaps obligation to reward our friends and punish our enemies. But without illusions! Without naiveté! Without any self-induced hypnosis about the incorruptibility of any candidate, any office-holder, any society, any culture, any civilization, any nation! It can happen here -- it most certainly can!

As Jews, we shall never give up our belief in the *צגם אנקים*, the Image of God in which man was created. Without this belief, man may not be worth redeeming, and life not worth living. But we must accept it realistically, not childishly.

The reading of this Shabbat, of *Parashat Zakhor*, reminds us that man, created in the image of God, can well degenerate until he becomes an Amalek.

זכור את אשר עשה לך עמלק -- "Remember what Amalek did to thee." What is it that Amalek did that was so dreadful? Not only that he attacked us in a vulnerable moment, but that he shattered our respect for the Godly image of man, he undercut our faith in humankind.

The Torah tells us that the Lord conducts an eternal war against Amalek, and *תמחה את זכר עמלק*, we are to blot out the memory of Amalek. And we are to do this especially *בהגות לך*, when things go well for us, when we have established a minimum degree of national security and collective safety. Then, when things are looking bright, when we have reestablished our confidence in man and his benevolent nature, then and specifically then, when we might be at the mercy of this horrible fallacy, must we recall that man has the propensity for the demonic, that man is potentially an Amalekite. Only by means of such vigilance can we bring on that great day, the day of the Messiah, when the Jewish faith in man, in his image of God, will ultimately be vindicated fully and completely.

Only with such realism wedded to idealism, with such faith without naiveté, can we aspire to the day when never again shall we experience *והעיר שושן נבוכה*, but rather *והעיר שושן צהבה ושביחה*, we shall be happy and joyous, confident and serene. *כן תהיה לנו*, so may it be for all of us.