

"THE PLOT AGAINST JACOB"

There is an important and apparently ancient theme in the Agadah concerning the episode of Jacob and his children that is both intriguing and disturbing.

The Scriptural tale is well known. The brothers decided to sell Joseph as a slave, removed his "coat of many colors" and dipped it in blood, and then showed it to their father Jacob. Jacob was convinced that the blood-stained coat indicated that Joseph had been devoured by a wild beast. He went into mourning for Joseph, and refused ever to be consoled.

For 22 years, Jacob did not find out that Joseph was still alive. So many people knew the truth, but the secret was never revealed to the old patriarch. Was this a plot against Jacob?

Indeed so! It was a true conspiracy!

The Agadah tells us that the brothers, in order to protect themselves against the wrath of their father, pronounced a קללה or excommunication against anyone who would reveal the true story to Jacob. They even included God, as it were, in their ban! And the Almighty went along and agreed to be bound by the excommunication uttered by the brothers. Thus, the Agadah states, God withdrew His שכינה or Presence from Jacob, and it did not return to him until he learned, over two decades later, that Joseph was indeed alive. (Thus, ויהי רוּחַ יְעֻבֵּל אֲבִיהֶם, "and the spirit of their father Jacob lived again," is interpreted as referring to the "spirit of God" or the presence of the שכינה). Joseph himself did not contact his father during this time. Moreover, the Rabbis interpret the words וַיִּבֶךְ אִשָּׁרַל אָבִיו, "and his father wept over him," as referring not to Jacob weeping over Joseph, but to Isaac weeping over Jacob! At this point, Isaac was still alive, and he knew that Joseph had been sold by his brothers. He wept bitter tears over the anguish that his son Jacob was going through, but he did not reveal the secret to Jacob מִפְּנֵי כְבוֹד הַשְּׁכִינָה, "out of respect for the divine Presence," arguing that if God wanted to keep the secret from Jacob, he had no right to break the confidence.

So we have the makings of a true plot. The members of the cabal were Jacob's sons and his daughter, Joseph himself, his own father Isaac, and even God!

Why this strange and apparently heartless plot against the old man?

Many answers have been offered in explanation. The brothers' action is unquestioned, because what they did was in their self-interest. But why did God, as it were, cooperate in this conspiracy? Some answer that it was a punishment in kind (*מדה כנגד מדה*) for Jacob's neglect of the commandment to honor his father, when for the 22 years that he was in exile, fleeing from Esau, he made no effort to contact Isaac.

But there is one special answer which I would like to bring to your attention and which I consider most troubling and most enlightening.

This response (offered by the author of *שפת חכמים*) was that the conspiracy was used by God in order to move all participants to a goal that none of them was able to discern at the time. God had promised Abraham *כי גר יהיה זרעך*, that his descendants would be strangers, exiles in a foreign country, and only after this period of exile would they emerge to become not only a family or a tribe, but a great nation. First they would have to endure the pain of exile, and only then could they be redeemed to the dignity of nationhood.

Therefore, Joseph had to go down into Egypt and have enough time available to him to become second to Pharaoh. Only thus would Jacob and his children later come into Egypt to begin the Israelite exile, later to leave and make their way to the Promised Land. But in order for this to be accomplished successfully, the secret had to be kept from Jacob, for had he known, he would most certainly have moved heaven and earth to get Joseph back. He simply loved Joseph too much, as a father, to sacrifice him for all that time in order for the promise to Abraham to be fulfilled.

Thus, the plot against Jacob was the entrance into *גלות* (exile) for the purpose of a greater *גאולה* (redemption); a *ירידה לצורך עליה*, descent for the sake of ascent, pain for the sake of greater pleasure, suffering for the sake of more exquisite bliss. It was part of the growing pains of a chosen people.

This is what the conspiracy teaches us: that often it is necessary to endure a lesser evil for the sake of a greater good. And it reminds us that at the time that we are suffering, we must have a measure of confidence that

כָּל מַה דְּעָבַד רַחֲמָנָא לְטוֹב עָבַד , "all that the Merciful One does is for the good" -- even if we do not realize or appreciate it at the time.

Who knows but that this same principle was operative in our own times! The Yom Kippur War has revealed the ghastly loneliness of our people. It seems as if there was a plot against Israel, when all her former friends have become her enemies, when we sometimes feel that, כְּבִיכּוֹל , the Almighty Himself was against us!

If so, we must appreciate that this suffering we have endured is defeat for the sake of triumph, loss for the sake of greater gain. Its purpose was to improve us, to make us worthier, better, nobler, and more deserving of the greater dignity that awaits us.

What exactly can we learn from the Yom Kippur War, other than the need for a better evaluation of military intelligence reports? What may we learn from it on a larger and more meaningful level?

I offer the following analysis in fear and trepidation. I hope I will not be misunderstood, although I probably will.

Why this hesitation? -- Because who are we to criticize Israel? And is it not ungracious and presumptuous to sit here, in the comfort of the Diaspora, and pick out faults in the character of Israel when it has suffered so grievously?

Nevertheless, I shall proceed, and shall say what I genuinely believe, both here and in a week or so אֶהְיֶה in Jerusalem, because we are one people, sharing one faith and one destiny. I shall say it, despite my own hesitation, because I have already said these things much before the Yom Kippur War, and have said them in Israel, to the people most directly concerned, the military academies. I shall say it because I love Israel, and to love means to refuse to be indifferent to flaws in the beloved, but always to seek to improve the beloved.

In the course of our long stay in the Diaspora, we have developed an unhealthy Galut-complex. Jewish character developed the traits of timidity and self-abnegation, self-blame and a sense of helplessness, a passion for invisibility and an aversion to "making waves." In order for the State of Israel to be born and to survive, Zionist leaders consciously

had to change that image. Deliberate efforts were made to inculcate in Jews a sense of pride and self-determination, resolve and autonomy, a do-it-yourself attitude to life.

These efforts were successful -- too successful! We disengaged ourselves from the Galut complex so well, that we went to the opposite extreme. From 1948 through 1956, through 1967 and up to the Yom Kippur War, we developed a national psychology that was unhealthy, unrealistic, and ultimately un-Jewish.

Unquestionably, Israelis developed some character traits that were noble, beautiful, and admirable. Israelis fought difficult wars, and yet never hated their enemy. They administered the occupied territories in a manner that will forever be a model for other nations. They demonstrated an exemplary openness to immigrants that is unprecedented in human history.

Yet, certain mass attitudes that have developed in Israel are less than lovable or liveable with. Self-reliance has merged into self-confidence, with a remarkable lack of humility. Israeli leaders quite unself-consciously preached a doctrine against which Moses warned us in the Torah: the illusion that כוחי ועוצם ידי עשו לי את כל החיל הזה, that all my success is the result of my own power, strength, and wisdom. Israeli leaders do not tire of the old litany, that "we can rely only upon our own strength, sometimes including the financial cooperation of American Jews." We have now learned that that is not enough! Israel's own strength was simply insufficient in this time of crisis. They had to rely not only on their own strength and the UJA, but on the good will of the government of the United States. And, perhaps, did God too have something to say about all this? Have we not yet learned that reliance on God is not a sign of weakness? That humility can be a sign of inner strength?

At bottom Israel is or was obsessed by an exaggerated and extravagant notion of עצמאות, independence. I have always faintly disliked that word, although it is a thousand times better than the obsequiousness that characterizes Diaspora Jewry. Modern Jews began to act as if national independence is not simply a desirable political state, but that it is all that counts, and that it is an absolute. We made a fetish of independence, and some of us declared our independence from God too.

But is "independence" really an absolute value? Is Israel all that independent? Indeed, who is completely independent

today? The Arabs -- who need the U.S.S.R.? The U.S.S.R. -- which needs American know-how and trade and most-favored-nation status? France and England and Japan and the United States -- which need Arab oil? Let us face a fact of life: we are all of us dependent, beggars, even sycophants. There is no absolute independence. All of us are caught in a cycle of dependency.

Of course we must fight unto death to retain our political integrity and national independence. But we must never make a psychological or ideological or theological absolute out of it.

For centuries, Jews were militarily impotent. In the past 25 years, we have demonstrated the exemplary qualities and bravery of the Israeli soldier. כל הכבוד לצה"ל -- Full honor to the Israeli Armed Forces! But does that warrant the attitude that Zahal (the Israeli Defence Forces) is the culmination of Jewish history, for which all the ages labored? Does it warrant the attitude of pity-cum-contempt by the Sabra for the victims of the Holocaust? Does it warrant the smugness and over-blown self-esteem which too many Israeli military officers have evinced? Does it warrant the vague threat of militarism -- as in the over-production of generals who are going into government and industry in Israel?

Religious Jews have not fared much better. The dominant ideology of Religious Zionism in Israel by and large presses the idea that the State of Israel represents a Messianic stage, the ארתחלתא דגאולה, the first stage of Messianic redemption. I have always been annoyed by the pre-emptuousness and the arrogance in this dogmatic certainty that we know what God is doing in the great perspectives of history, that we can even dictate to God the scenario of redemption. For with it had come the tendency to absolutize politics, to endow conquered territories with sanctity, to make popular ideas (and even policies of the State) immune to criticism.

And we Diaspora Jews? If anything, we have sinned more. The great majority of American Jews, from 75%-80%, have given not one penny to UJA or bought one Bond! Does it mean that our majority does not sympathize with Israel? No, they certainly do! What then? They are satisfied to sit on the side and talk glowingly about "tough, little Israel." So, it is tough and can fend for itself without our help; and it is little -- so it is too small for me to visit for more than once or twice during my lifetime, certainly too small

for me to want to live there. And so American Jews develop a vicarious thrill in the national machismo of Israel, a thrill which comes very very cheap.

The Yom Kippur War has changed all that. It has smashed more than one myth which has victimized us. The war was *ירידה לצורך עליה*, a shock which will make us better. On the pattern of the conspiracy against Jacob, it was the prelude to national greatness.

The Yom Kippur War has made us humble, without making us timid; made us more aware of the limitations of independence and the perils of self-confidence. We have learned that we can fight and fight brilliantly, but that we are not omnipotent; that our leaders are often wise, but never infallible; that we must be strong, but we cannot put all our faith in our strength; that we do need others, and we may even be in need of *סייעתא דשמיא*, the help of Heaven.

Was it worth twenty five hundred young lives, of the best of our youth and the flower of our people, to learn this bit of humility? Absolutely not. But we are not asked; it is not for us to negotiate the price in advance. Jacob suffered 22 years of agony, and more after that, so that his descendants would experience *גאולה* and nationhood. Yet unquestionably Jacob would have given all that up in order to get back his beloved son Joseph -- and it is for this reason that the conspiracy was necessary in the first place.

What I am saying, then, is that events are not always what they seem to be, and that it is uniquely Jewish to exploit adversity and find in it the *ניצוץ* or spark of hope. The silver lining on the cloud indicates the sun shining above it. The Agadah on Jacob teaches that we must not give up hope or faith, that we must never despair!

Up to this past Yom Kippur, we (and especially the Israelis) were too self-confident, too smugly optimistic. Now we (and, again, especially the Israelis) are too fearful, too depressed, too pessimistic. A little more true emunah (faith), proper Jewish trust in the Redeemer of Israel, would have counseled us against the illusion of

כוח וועוצם ידי עשה לי את כל החיל הזה, that our own power and wisdom caused us to succeed, and does now summon us to greater hope and confidence in the future.

We have suffered a setback, yes, but defeat -- no!

חַס וְחֵלִילָה , Heaven forbid for anyone to assert that our present difficulties will lead to חִסּוֹל הַמְּדִינָה , to the undoing of statehood. Jacob lived to proclaim עוֹד יוֹסֵף חַי , "Joseph lives yet!" and his children reported to Joseph עוֹד אֲבִינוֹ חַי , "our old father still lives."

We shall do the same. עוֹד יִשְׂרָאֵל חַי -- Israel lives and will live, and not only will it live but it will live on as a greater and stronger people, as a finer and nobler people, as a people worthy not only of political wisdom and military strength and economical well being and scientific progress, but also of exemplary character and moral discipline.

In a word, we shall yet become
וְאַתֶּם תִּהְיוּ לִי מַמְלַכְתָּ בְּהַנִּיִּים וְגוֹי קְדוֹשׁ
a holy nation and a kingdom of priests.