

"THE CURTAIN RISES"

What a year this has been!

In the past six months we have lived through centuries of Jewish history. In six days within this past year, we have turned full cycle: ha-zor'im be'dim'ah, be'rinah yiktzoru, those who sowed with tears reaped in song.

In April and May, the noose of encirclement tightened about the neck of Israel, and Jews throughout the world knew that if, Heaven forbid, the State of Israel falls, all of us are doomed.

In May the Government secretly ordered 30,000 sets of takhrikhim (shrouds) and consecrated seven new cemeteries in anticipation of frightful casualty rates. Many women are known to have prepared poison to take in case of an Arab victory and the inevitable consequences. Ha-zor'im be'dim'ah. But in June, victorious generals and toughened paratroopers wept tears of joy at the Kotel ha-Maaravi, no longer to be known as the Wailing Wall, but as the Western Wall. Be'rinah Yiktzoru.

In May, one Arab government after another promised to annihilate us, the international community ignored their threats and our danger, and one friendly government after another abandoned us. But in June -- God was with us. From tears to song, almost delirious song!

In May, a shudder passed over American Jewry as we dug in for possible tragedy, and our spirits sank. In June, we were ecstatic,

our spirits soared as never before, and we expressed our gratitude in the greatest outpouring of philanthropic funds in human history. Be'rinah Yiktzoru.

In May, the Shofar sounded in synagogues throughout the Holy Land to signal fast days proclaimed as an et tzarah, a time of mortal danger and national peril. In June, the Shofar was sounded joyously in Jerusalem, at the Temple Mount, to "proclaim liberty throughout the land and for all the inhabitants thereof." What a fantastic voyage from tears to triumph!

And now we are about to sound the Shofar again, as we stand before the Almighty God of Israel -- happy but humble; relieved, but not relaxed; grateful, but not arrogant; wiser than we were before, but still ignorant as to the real meaning of what has happened to us.

It is to this question -- the meaning of the historic events of this past year for this new year and those to follow -- that I address my words this Rosh Hashanah, the first one in 1,897 years that Jerusalem -- our Yerushalayim -- is returned to her sons and daughters. For if we do indeed reap in song, we must know what kind of harvest it is that we reap, and whereof we sing.

There are two important terms that the Bible uses to describe the relations between God and the Congregation of Israel. Both of them refer to the image of two partners in dialogue. When there is love and friendship between them, they face each other, address each other, and care for each other. When anger and hostility corrupt

this relationship, they turn their faces from each other, their eyes no longer meet; it is as if a curtain has come between them.

The first of these states, that of communication and love between God and His people, is called nesiat panim, the "turning of the face" of God towards us, as in the priestly benediction, yisa ha-Shem panav elekha, "May the Lord turn His face unto thee." In this state, Israel is dear to God and His providence does not leave us. He is accessible to our call and our prayer, and we are able with but normal human effort to experience His Presence in our lives. Our hearts possess the possibility of song.

The opposite state is the most ominous of all the Bible's warnings of doom and damnation. It is hester panim, the "hiding of the face" of God from Israel. It is the time that, because we have turned from Him, He has turned from us. A curtain descends between us, and He no longer looks at us or towards us. In the state of hester panim, God withdraws His hashgahah or special providence from His people. He abandons us to mikreh, to the accidents of nature and history. At a time of this sort, Israel is subject to the buffeting of the winds of time and circumstance, it rots in exile, and all communication or dialogue between the Jew and his God seems to have come to a halt. Even tears do not help. We call out and we pray -- and we feel as if the heavens were a thick metal sheet that causes our petitions to rebound to earth unanswered, unheard, unnoticed. Religious experience requires superhuman effort, and even then is

uncertain, for God seems to be in hiding, seems to have packed up and left us without so much as saying "Goodbye." The God of Israel Who spoke at Sinai and to our ancestors before us in the dim past, is now enveloped in a shroud of utter silence; and out of our terrifying loneliness we not only question whether He ever spoke to us, but we doubt our own identity, even our own collective sanity.

For at least twenty centuries, or more, Israel has suffered the torment of hester panim. Physically, we endured exile and incredible persecution. Spiritually, we kept faith, but it was a faith which often failed to provide us with the rich returns of genuinely uplifting experience; it was a faith based more upon what the Jew said to God than what he was able to hear God say to him. We observed the Torah, the record of what God once said; but we could hear Him no longer in current history. During the 1930's and 1940's, the hester panim grew blacker and denser than ever before. Our people was decimated in body, and assimilation crippled its soul. Even the establishment of the State of Israel did not break through the hester panim. It was possible for a skeptic to see this too as mikreh, as an accident (though a fortuitous and happy one) of human history and events, rather than as hasgahah, as a special divine act. With all the joy at Israel's revival, most Jews still could not hear any voice through the great silence. The curtain was still there.

Where, in the light of this analysis, do we stand now? Are we still in hester panim, or have we experienced nesiat panim?

Our own experiences and intuition tells us that some undefined change of enormous proportions has taken place. Reading the secular Israeli press tells one that the events of this year have left an indelible impression if not upon all citizens of the state, then at least upon an unusually large number of the most sensitive of the heretofore "irreligious." With Jerusalem in Jewish hands, and the doubters amongst us beginning to doubt their own doubts, we know that the Jewish people this Rosh Hashanah are not the same as the Jewish people of last Rosh Hashanah. We have, I submit, emerged from the kind of hester panim that has bedevilled us for centuries.

But are we then in a state of nesiat panim? No, we are not. Too many of the finest of Israel's youth was lost to qualify this event as an unmixed blessing, and who knows how many more sacrifices will be demanded of us? Three million Jews still languish behind the Iron Curtain. Some foolish Israelis consider it a mitzvah to import American mini-morals into the Holy Land. And American Jewry has yet to show that it has come to grips with the challenge of its own destiny. Despite the miracles, we still have not heard the devar ha-Shem, the word of the Lord, loud and clear. The geulah shelemah is not yet upon us.

How then shall we describe our condition in order to understand it?

The answer is suggested by the Talmud (Hagigah, 5a) where

Rava speaks of an intermediate stage between hester and nesiat panim, a transitional period between God being incommunicado and His full communication with Israel. Af-al-pi she'histarti panai mimenu, ba-halom adaber bo. The intermediate stage is characterized as a dream state. God does not yet call to us openly and unequivocally -- but neither is He silent; He speaks to us indirectly, as if in a dream. For this, as the Psalms taught us, is the way redemption will take place: be'shuv ha-Shem et shivat tziyon, hayyinu ke'holmim -- the reunification of Jerusalem and the return of Israel to Zion is symbolized by the dream. God addresses us, but we must make the effort to listen carefully and wisely. We are in a semi-waking state, emerging from the long night and preparing for the dawn of redemption. Our eyes have seen the silhouette of His Presence, and our ears have heard the rustles of His unfolding glory.

What does it mean to us to say that we are in this halom area, someplace in between hester panim and nesiat panim?

By the word halom, the Sages intended more than a poetic metaphor. They referred to a prophetic dream -- ba-halom adaber bo -- and therefore a means of divine communication. But a prophetic dream must be interpreted, for it is meant to tell us something. But what?

I suggest that we have been told in these six days to re-emphasize an old and all but forgotten theme: gevurah, courage or heroism. We have been told to abandon the quietism and passivity which has characterized our religious life for longer than we can remember. The halom instructs us to learn, from our recent national

life, how to be aggressive and active in our spiritual life. For most of our history in hester panim, we have been passive and withdrawn -- physically, politically, spiritually. With bowed heads, we submitted to the judgment cavalierly pronounced by people who pursued us from pillar to post, that we are a tragic nation, foredoomed to suffer. Religiously, Orthodox Jews were happy to keep what they had, willing to fight only against inroads into our ranks but not at all aggressive about asserting the beauty of Torah as something all Jews ought to share voluntarily. We have become shy and apologetic and introverted.

But now our people has changed, and the change began in the political and military arena. In the Warsaw Ghetto and in a number of death camps a historic decision was made: we shall no longer be a tragic people; we shall henceforth become a heroic nation, a people of gevurah! The State of Israel is based on that principle, and a generation has now been born into a heroism so profound that it can no longer understand how we were once a tragic people. The young lads who vanquished their enemies in six days again opted for heroism over tragedy; they preferred Fedorenko's harangue and Rusk's irritation and Brown's lectures and DeGaulle's august rebukes to polite eulogies by the world's leaders. We must learn from Dayan and Rabin and Weizmann and ~~Hod~~; for who knows whom the Almighty in His inscrutable wisdom chooses as His messengers? From them we must learn -- and that, I submit, is the content of this prophetic dream -- that even as Israel reemerged as a nation out of blood and ashes by

its own initiative; even as it asserted the triumphant integrity of its own existence alone against the entire world this past year by its own initiative; so must Judaism rise once again as a great faith -- as the religion of the world -- out of lethargy and apathy by our own initiative, by loyal Jews becoming spiritual activists and proclaiming the glory of God's Kingdom.

To take the initiative spiritually means not "dialogues" with the Church, which have proven such catastrophic failures, nor does it mean ignoring the rest of mankind. It means teaching to all the world that the God of Israel lives and what He demands of all humans.

It means not merely to "cooperate" with non-observant Jews in an elaborately polite but superficial manner, but to expose them in love and in respect to what is best and holiest and most beautiful in Torah. It means to be tough without being rough, to be aggressive without being belligerent, to be collectively proud and personally humble, to go on the offensive without being offensive.

But spiritual heroism first demands that we have the courage to change ourselves and our own directions. It means that we must educate our children in Torah in depth, not merely impart information in just sufficient quantity not to detract from their Anglo-Saxon polish, yet to qualify as a courtesy to our parents and curtsy to our own consciences.

Activity and initiative in religious life means that our praying must no longer be done in the boring routine of spiritual stupefaction. For our tefillah is too passive, too superficial, too

polite. A Jew on Rosh Hashanah must be one who storms the Gates of Heaven, who pounds on God's doors and who, if he is turned away, comes right back again to plead and demand the gifts of Peace and Forgiveness and Reconciliation.

It means that our love for Israel must be translated not only into philanthropic giving, but into aliyah by us and especially by our children. We must encourage not only tourism, but longer stays; every American youngster should study at least for one year in a Yeshivah or University or work in a kibbutz in Israel. And then, with this exposure, if God will help us, they will decide to stay there.

In the Musaf service, we recite a verse from Isaiah: ve'hayah ba-yom hahu yitaka be'shofar gadol; on the day of the final redemption, the Great Shofar will sound. But what is this "great" Shofar: is there, then, a "small" Shofar? Yes, implies the Yalkut, there is. The Great Shofar comes from the ram offered up by Abraham on the Akedah in place of Isaac. The Small Shofar is the one that sounded at Sinai announcing the revelation of God. And the redemption will be heralded not by the Small Shofar of Sinai, but by the great one of the Akedah.

What does this mean? The difference between the Akedah and Sinai (as Rabbi Soloveitchik avers) is this, that at Sinai God came down to man, and at the Akedah man rose to meet God. At Sinai, Israel waited passively and quietly for God to reveal Himself; that very morning of Revelation, as the Midrash so perceptively tells us, the

people overslept and had to be wakened by Moses. At the Akedah, Abraham rose early, very early -- va-yashkem Avraham ba-boker; and on that mountain when he forced himself to offer up his beloved only son, he broke his great heart -- and revealed its noble contents to God Who was the spectator in this drama of man's greatness. The Shofar of the Akedah is therefore the shofar gadol, the Great Shofar, for it summons man to rise to God with all his human might. The Shofar at Sinai, where Israel was the spectator at the drama of God's holy activity, was the shofar katan, the Small Shofar. And the Shofar that will herald redemption cannot be a shofar katan, a Small Shofar, the sign of man's waiting passively for God to perform miracles for him. It must be yitaka be'shofar gadol, a Great Shofar, jolting us out of our semi-sleep, galvanizing us to wake up, to act bravely and heroically, to bestir ourselves to new goals and new aspirations on behalf of God and Torah and Israel.

The Shofar that the Chief Chaplain of Israel's Army sounded at the Kotei-ha-Maaravi, the site of the ancient Akedah, was not a shofar katan, as was the Shofar we have been hearing every Rosh Hashanah until now. It was the herald of the Shofar gadol, the first fore-echo of the Great Shofar that will be sounded when the redemption is complete. It was the signal for all Jews that even as when we take the initiative militarily God helps us miraculously, so religiously, no miracles will come down from Heaven until we produce a few of our own here on earth. The Shofar gadol means that religious Jews must become more deeply committed themselves, more concerned

about the spiritual condition of their fellow men, both Jews and non-Jews. Only then will the hayinu ke'holmim lead us from ha-zor'im be'dim'ah to be'rinah yiktzoru.

We have now passed from hester panim on our way to nesiat panim. This period of ba-halom adaber bo is the summons to heroic response. The Shofar gadol is the symbolic expression of this prophetic challenge to courage. We must act -- boldly, bravely, becomingly. From slumber we have been granted dreams; now let us move from dreams to visions, and from visions to magnificent achievements.

When the Shofar will be sounded in but a few seconds, let us consider that this continues the Shofar sounded at the Wall of the Temple just four months ago, a sound which will be heard 'round the world when the Great Shofar of redemption will proclaim the geulah shelema, the complete redemption; when the curtain separating us from God, the curtain which has been lifted just a bit, will go up altogether, and for all time, and when God will turn to us face to fact: yisa ha-Shem panav elekha ve'yasem lekha shalom.

With that hope, with that faith, with that blessing, let us rise for the Great Shofar.