

"A CALL TO CONFIDENCE"

Permit me to share with you a psychological reaction that is fairly prevalent. ✓  
Recall the last time you were engaged in a conversation with a strong-minded person. The firmer he is in his ideas, the more brash in expressing them, the more <sup>in</sup> opinionated and self-assured -- the weaker you become in articulating your own, opposing ideas, and the more equivocal in maintaining your own position. It happens to the best of us: when our own delicate and refined feelings are confronted with a person possessed of infallible certainty, our lesser confidence is overwhelmed and almost crushed by the greater confidence of the other. And if your conversationalist is exceptionally aggressive, if he sneers at any opinions other than his own and considers them unthinkable, if he stamps his foot and raises his voice, you become even more disconcerted, more apprehensive and intimidated, more hesitant and doubtful about your own feelings. It is something probably all of us have experienced: when you meet someone who thinks he has all the answers, you begin to question yourself.

This is not an unusual reaction, but it is an unfortunate one, because you permit brashness to take advantage of good manners and courtesy. It is a phenomenon that might not be worthy of extensive comment were it not for the fact that it can have important consequences in a person's whole life. For, in facing an adversary on questions of principle, on matters of emunah and religion, on issues of the spirit -- the reaction to the self-confidence and smug certainty of the cynic is of crucial significance.

These thoughts come to mind because this kind of situation is prefigured in the story of Amalek which we read this morning -- Amalek, that ancient wild tribe that attacked Israel and remained forever after the symbol of anti-Semitism, of cruelty, of blind and baseless hatred. In the collective character of Amalek, as it reaches us through the pages of the Bible, there is no sign of hesitancy or self-doubt. Amalek is supremely confident: ve'lo yarei Elokim, he did not fear

the Lord. There is no diffidence in Amalek's mind: no questioning, no debating, no wondering. He is arrogantly certain that there is no God, there is no justice, there is no one to whom one must answer.

The rabbis in the Yalkut declared that Amalek domeh li'zevuv, Amalek can be compared to a fly. The author of Keli Yakar points out that the zevuv, or fly, is often symbolic of evil in our literature. Thus the evil inclination, the yetzer ha-ra, is also compared to a fly. In fact, the fly is something of a universal symbol. One thinks of the modern French playwright, Jean Paul Sartre; one of his important plays is entitled "Les Mouches," or: The Flies. Whatever the fly may symbolize elsewhere, in Jewish literature it is always -- evil. Why is that so? Our commentator answers: because the fly does not sting on its own. Rather, it settles on a wound in the body, a place of pus or dried blood, wherever there is a cut. The fly attacks by looking for an opening, searching for a weakness in his victim. That is why God told Cain la-pesah batat rovetz, "sin <sup>t</sup> crouches at the door." Sin never attacks a person who is perfect and whole. It always looks for an opening, some sign of weakness in man. Thus, Amalek looked for this kind of opening in the life of Israel. Like a fly, it did not attack until it noticed that Israel itself was beginning to weaken.

But what was this sign of weakness? What was the nature of this "opening?" I believe it was more than mere disobedience. The weakness that Amalek discovered was Israel's lack of self-confidence, its deadly self-doubt<sup>b</sup>. For the words va-yavo Amalek, and Amalek came (to attack Israel), follow immediately upon the Torah's description of Israel's failure: ha-yesh ha-Shem be'kirbenu im ayin, "Is the Lord amongst us or not?" Note that this is not a matter of theological debate, there is no religious scepticism implied: does God exist or not? Rather, it is a matter of doubting one's self: is God be'kirbenu, in our midst, amongst us? Are we worthy enough to have Him with us? Israel did not question God; it questioned itself. It is precisely at this time, that Amalek attacked. For Amalek recognized this elementary human principle: when a powerful self-confidence is opposed to diffidence and self-doubt, then the one who has the greater confidence will win.

Amalek was certain of its policy of hatred and injustice; its contempt for law and decency; Israel was uncertain of whether God was with it or not.

Hence, Amalek attacked. No wonder that, as one Rabbi pointed out, the gimatriya or numerical value of the word "Amalek" is equal to the Hebrew word safek, doubt! For the strategy of Amalek is to look for the opening of doubt in its victim; that is where it unleashes the full force and fury of its faith in its own nefarious and and perverse principles.

So it is with us as individuals, especially when we represent and advocate our faith in Torah and in the viability of Judaism against the sneer of the cynic and the certainty of the confirmed am ha-aretz, the remarkably self-possessed antagonist whose prejudices cannot be shaken by mere facts.

But what is the answer? How do we reply? The answer is: with self-confidence in ourselves, in our own cause, in Torah and its relevance for all ages, and in the ultimate triumph of truth over falsehood.

Of course I do not mean that we should become pugnacious or offensive. Just as we resent cynicism and arrogance in others, so must we keep these negative qualities away from ourselves. But I believe it is possible to be definite without being dogmatic; strong-willed and tough, but not close-minded and rough; clear but not cavalier; firm in our beliefs, but not belicose. One can have a strong spine without a sharp tongue.

We Orthodox Jews have reached the point where we may have that confidence in our own position. Not that we have<sup>been</sup>/infallible; Heaven knows we have fumbled and stumbled foolishly more than our share. Nevertheless, we have already outgrown the early onus of an immigrant culture. Our educational system is second to none in this country or throughout the world. We have not been corroded by the curse of inter-marriage to the extent that others have. We therefore ought to be able to counterpose our own confidence in Torah against the confidence of the cynic in his cynicism.

It is a source of gratification to all of us that we Orthodox Jews have finally begun to exhibit a bit of that self-confidence. Thus, for example, it was a good sign for our own self-identity when all the Orthodox Rabbis of our country united -- and even with the tacit consent of non-Orthodox groups -- in declaring that we will not abide a ship that flies the flag of reborn Israel to violate Jewish law on its premises. Individuals may do as they please; but that flag for which Jews have spilt their blood, and which may well represent the beginning of the culmination of our millennial<sup>n</sup> hope, may not be associated with anything that is repugnant and repulsive to Torah.

Another example comes to mind: the behavior of Chief Rabbi Nissim during the recent visit of the head of another religious communion to Israel. His note and his announcement were courteous indeed. But his stand was firmly based upon Jewish dignity; as a representative of Judaism he refused to bow and scrape before representatives of other faiths.

We ought all be happy that our country has finally demonstrated a clarity of purpose and firmness in the cause of peace, justice, and international morality. A spokesman for our State Department recently affirmed quietly but strongly that our country will not abide any aggression in the Middle East. It was a self-confident statement of a just position against the united arrogance and collective intransigence of the Arab countries. The United States and the administration acted with commendable firmness and resolve.

Unfortunately, it was not always so in the past. One thinks back only a few years ago to the time when our country projected its own inner hesitations and confusions upon the world scene in the matter of the Suez Canal. As a result of our uncertainties, the canal was handed to the Dictator of Egypt and of all countries in the world only Israel is to this day denied permission to use the international canal. It is dangerous to try to identify the workings of God in the world. But, hazardous as it is to define the mysterious workings of providence, we might venture that we have seen in our own lifetime the realization of the principle of midah ke'neged midah, "measure for measure." We showed moral weakness in the

matter of a canal, and now we have on our own hands the problems of another canal, this time the Panama Canal! Nevertheless, we must be happy that now, at long last, our country has expressed itself in clear, confident, unequivocal, and unambiguous terms.

That this must always be our policy, in all circumstances, is abundantly clear from a passage of the Rabbis on the same matter of Amalek. Our Sidra tells us: va-yomer Mosheh el Yehoshuah behar lanu anashim ve'tzei ve'hilahem ba-Amalek mahar, Moses said to Joshua, choose for us people and go out and do battle to Amalek tomorrow. And the Rabbis asked: lamah leih le'yehoshuah, why did Moses send Joshua? After all, in all the great issues that faced the Jewish people, Moses went out as the head of his people. Whether it was to receive the law or to obtain for them food or to do battle to enemies, it was always Moses who did things by himself. Why, when confronted with the arch-enemy of Israel, Amalek, does he suddenly delegate this important responsibility to his lieutenant, Joshua? The Rabbis answer: amar leih: zekenekha amar et ha-Elokim ani yarei, u-va-zeh katuv ve'lo yarei Elokim, yavo ben beno she'amar et ha-Elokim ani yarei ve'yipara mi-mi she'ne'amar alav ve'lo yarei Elokim. Moses maintained; Joshua is a descendant of Joseph, and it was Joseph who, as a young lad just taken out of prison and facing the royal splendor of Pharaoh and his whole imperial court, proclaimed to them in clear and uncertain terms et ha-Elokim ani yarei, I fear God! He was confident in his own religious position. Now, Amalek is confident in its own irreligious position: ve'lo yarei Elokim, it did not fear the Lord. Therefore, said Moses, let Joshua who has a family tradition of staunchness and moral strength be the one to lead our people in battle against Amalek! The answer to the strength of Amalek is the strength of Israel; to the certainties of evil, the certainties of good; to the unquestioning ve'lo yarei Elokim, the unquestioning et ha-Elokim ani yarei.

Let us then stand with courage for our convictions: as Americans, with the knowledge that the world has always looked ~~at~~ to our country for fairness and justice; as Jews, firm and happy in the knowledge that lo alman Yisrael, that our faith will persevere. To the loud arrogance of the adversary, let us counterpose our soft-spoken

but unshakeable verities; to his fearsome self-confidence, our faithful resolution.

If we hesitate, if we allow the flies of Amalek to suck at the wounds of our self-doubt and inner-confusion, then we shall surely be defeated. Instead, with the spiritual strength of a Joshua, let us proudly reaffirm the declaration of his grandfather Joseph; et ha-Elokim ani yarei, in confronting the forces that the Torah describes as ve'lo yarei Elokim.

Let us, above all, be men -- as Moses commanded Joshua, behar lanu anashim, "choose for us men" -- and declare, in thought and in word and in deed, that we stand resolutely, confidently, nay remorselessly, for God, for Torah and for Israel; and for their eternal and unshakeable teachings of peace and justice for all men.