

"IS IT WORTH TRYING?"

Is it worth trying?

That question occurs to all people some of the time, and to some people all of the time. Parents are concerned about children; everything they do seems to go wrong. A young man or woman is struck by a dangerous disease at the height of life, and it is something that cannot be wished away. An elderly person, after a successful and even brilliant career, sees his life's work turning into ashes. All of us today are caught up in massive economic displacements, and we feel at the mercy of powers that we do not understand. So everyone is inclined to ask: is it worth the struggle? Or is our future sealed, and the whole drama already written, no matter what we do? Do the effort and struggle really make a difference? Shall we continue to work on our children, to go to the office every day, to keep the family running, to continue medical treatment and the guise of normal life, to conduct business, to concern ourselves with synagogue and community? Is it worth trying?

We read the overwhelming problems confronted by Israel, its long-term strategic disadvantage; the terrible dangers of the oil situation; its rapidly depleting resources of friends; its gray mood internally. Is it worth trying?

In Jewish terms, we must recast that question and ask: are things in God's hands or in man's hands? Are prayer and faith and trust the only proper attitude? Or, are work and labor and sweat the correct stance according to Judaism? Do our efforts at helping ourselves have any validity, or must we leave it all to God?

In religious thought there are two basic attitudes, two fundamental philosophies diametrically opposed to each other. They are called quietism and activism. As their names indicate, the first attitude is that man must remain quiet in the face of the omnipotent God, and the second is that God wants man to be active and to forge his own destiny. In the Middle Ages, Jewish philosophers called these two views שקטנות and התאבדות.

Quietism is the humble submission of man to divine power, and the consequent idea of the nihility or nothingness of human effort. This past week we read the book of Kohēleth which abounds in quietistic notions. הבז הבזים אמר קהלת הכל הבל, "Vanity of vanities, said Kohēleth, all is vanity." Everything is useless, simply useless.

-- התאבדות היא תכלית



Rebbe, who continues the tradition of the Rabbi of Muncacz, who held that the whole Zionist effort was by its very nature diabolical, because man asserted himself in the presence of, and hence against, God.

Activism or השתדלות is based on the idea that the world was created incomplete, that man was created as a partner in God, that as the "image of God" man must carry out and continue God's creative efforts. Therefore, man must work to make a living, and must resort to medicine in order to restore his health.

What of the view of Koheleth, who told us that it is not worth trying? The Talmud relates:

בְּקִשּׁוֹ חֲכָמִים לִגְנוּז אִתּוֹ סִפְרוּ קֹהֵלֶת עַיִן שֶׁמֵצֵאוֹ בּוֹ דְּבָרִים מִטֵּיִן אֲצֵד צִיּוֹת

the Sages wanted to sequester the Book of Koheleth -- to exclude it from the cannon or רגל -- because they found heretical expressions in it, such as the very verse we quoted, that all man's labor and work simply is of no use!

What of the Talmudic statement that חיי בניי ומלונאי (longevity, children, business) depend not upon merit but upon luck? The Meiri tells us that this is the opinion of one individual, but that it goes against the whole grain of normative Judaism!

What are some of the consequences of activism?

It has enabled Jews to survive in the Diaspora, in a milieu which was almost always hostile. It has inspired Jews to build up their communal institutions, beginning right after the destruction of the Temple, when the synagogue took its place. It is responsible for almost every great Jewish achievement, from the Yeshiva movement to the UJA. It is probably responsible for the renowned business prowess of Jews throughout the world. It has contributed greatly to the large number of Jews who are committed to one form of political meliorism or another, to movements which seek to better man's condition. And above all, it is responsible for political Zionism and the effort to create an independent Jewish state, culminating in the State of Israel. Activism has given the Jews self-determination and pride.

But it has negative results as well. Activism often afflicts us with a blindness to man's marginality, to the futility of his efforts, to the ubiquity of failure and vulnerability. It leads to secularism, with its teaching that you do not need God to solve problems, that technology and science have taken over that function, and the consequent apotheosis of man. America is traumatized today, because it has grown up in the rather naive faith of activism, that we can do without our lives whatever we wish; and

today we discover that we are at the mercy of a few miserable oil sheikhs. In Israel, this activism and the self-confidence it breeds was responsible for the excessive self-reliance to the point of arrogance, of which Israeli and American Jews alike were guilty, and which left us unprepared for the Yom Kippur War. Modern man, for all his sophistication, is seized by an infantile myth of omnipotence -- at the very time that his world is disintegrating; at the very time his technology is poisoning his atmosphere; at the very time his unlimited growth is plunging in an unlimited fashion. His inner tensions and anxieties are getting worse as his intellectual arrogance is increasing.

How are we to react? If both quietism and activism lead to undesirable results, what alternative is there? Is it or is it not worth trying?

The answer is that we must avoid an either/or response, but, judiciously, opt for both. We must keep away from either extreme. Each extreme must modify the other. We must avoid both paralysis and arrogance, lack of confidence and over-confidence. We must never allow ourselves the fatalism of "bashert," but always be willing to work to effect changes. And we must never allow ourselves to undertake any great effort or project, without humility and the awareness that we may well fail.

If I had to give a direct answer to that question, "Is it worth trying?" my answer would be, "Yes, but..."

It is worth it -- but there are no guarantees of success. There are no promises that our efforts will even make any practical difference. But we may not desist from trying, because, first, our efforts may make a difference and may truly help. Second, we have no moral right to give up, because we are charged with continuing the divine work of creation. Third, even if we fail in the eyes of the world, we must retain inwardly our own dignity and honor which come from trying as hard as we can. Despair is disgraceful, shameful! It is worse than failure. So it is worth trying. Never give up, no matter what the prognosis!

During this week of Sukkot, which is concluded today, we read every day the line הושיע נא גולה וסורה דמתה לתמר  
This is usually translated as, "help, we pray, (Israel) who is exiled and abandoned, and compared to a palm tree." What is the relationship of a palm tree and being exiled and banished?

One of my favorite Hasid thinkers, the author of "בני יששכר" gives us an entirely different and eye-opening insight. תמר does not mean "palm tree" in this context, but rather refers to the woman by that name of Tamar! Tamar was the daughter-in-law of Judah, whose first husband died, then, according to law,

was entitled to marry the next relative. She therefore married his brother, and he too died shortly thereafter. When she wanted to marry the third son, Judah sent her back to her father's house, fearing that she was a source of ill fortune for his family. So he told her to leave and wait until the younger son grows up. She left and waited, and waited, and waited. She then realized that she would never be permitted to marry this son. And so she disguised herself as a harlot, seduced Judah himself, and ultimately married him. What she did was, of course, entirely according to the law, although the methods she employed were rather unorthodox.

Consider how Tamar represents the perfect blending of quietism and activism, of *בטחון* and *השתדלות*, of using first one technique and then the other in order to attain her desired goal. She waited, she accepted the decision, she returned to a life of passivity and trust and hope. She prayed that what was her right would be given to her. Many years did she wait. But soon she realized that the quietistic attitude, admirable as it is, was not going to fulfill her life. She had one over-arching ambition: to merge her life with *זרע אברהם*, the life of the Israelite people. She wanted to be the wife of the grandson or son of Jacob, the descendants of Abraham and Isaac. So when she saw this was not go be given to her, that waiting and hoping and praying were not enough, she took her destiny, her life, and her future into her own hands, and she plotted, even playing the harlot, in order to marry Judah and become part of the Israelite family. So she represents to us the ultimate synthesis of quietism and activism!

We are a people who *דעתה לתמר*, we are like Tamar. We must be like Tamar. And remember that she became the ancestress of Boaz, who was the great grandfather of David, and who in turn is the ancestor of the Messiah who is yet to come.

Redemption requires both activism and quietism; dynamic initiative, and the awareness of limitations and prayerful waiting for divine help; prayer and perspiration; knowing when to march and when to stand still; *בטחון* and *השתדלות*; the *אני* of dignity and the *אין* of humility.

Without action, the Messiah simply won't come. With activism alone, we are at the mercy of a host of false messiahs, whose arrogance is devastating.

When we combine both, when we know which to choose, when we keep away from either exclusive extreme, the redemption will yet come, and God will answer our prayer of *הושע נא*, help us, by bringing us the Messiah and the full redemption.