

"TRIUMPH WITHOUT TRIUMPHALISM"

The downing of the Libyan jet over the Sinai desert by Israeli forces some weeks ago has by now been surpassed and overshadowed by other traumatic events in the turbulent Middle East. Nevertheless, it is worth discussing that incident at this date, because of the instructive reactions that it evoked in the Jewish community at the time.

Two extreme positions immediately crystallized in the Jewish community throughout the world. The first was a breast-beating, humanitarian apology loudly offered by a number of Jews, especially in Great Britain in letters to the British press, and in the United States, as was evident in a number of articles which appeared in Shma, a journal of which I am one of the editors. This vocal group was embarrassed and announced their shame and chagrin at what Israel had so brutally done. The other group was just the opposite in its point of view: it quickly latched on to the first faltering explanations given by the Israeli Defense Forces, and staunchly proclaimed that Israel was completely in the right, as if implying that Israel is always right. In time, common sense prevailed, and the world -- all the world -- recognized that a tragic error had occurred, one that was perhaps unavoidable in the context of the political and military tensions in that area of the world.

Yet, the reverberations were quite significant. These two polar attitudes that so quickly emerged are indicative of two basic Jewish attitudes regarding the State of Israel in its contemporary predicament.

At the very outset, let me say that I dissociate myself completely from the so called "intellectuals" who are mostly New Left Jews, who are more concerned with Israel's image than its survival, with abstract principles other than with the facts and reality.

But the burden of my message is that I am also not enamored of the opposite stance: the feelings of many Jews, both in Israel and in the Diaspora, that the essence of Jewishness is the picture of the efficient, technologically competent, clever, bright, and always victorious Jew. Too many UJA and Bonds speakers, too many Israelis, even too many ordinary American Jews, talk of peace, and really mean peace -- but act as if they are celebrating the emergence of the New Jew: someone who

is sinewy, pugnacious, tough, unsentimental, a born winner.

Passover is the season of our triumph. We celebrate the Exodus from Egypt, the ten plagues visited upon the Egyptians, the crossing of the Red Sea. But our tradition had carefully guided and guarded us, and taught us to avoid the trap of triumph corrupting our character, of permitting a national indulgence in gloating and self-gratulation. Thus, the Rabbis taught us that in constructing the Haggadah of Passover

אנו חללים, we must begin by relating our own national shame and disgrace and humble origins. We do not proclaim that our history began in 1948 as "tough little Israel," but as אנו ערומים, as a band of slaves -- ignorant, weak, humiliated, diffident.

אנו פגאנים -- we began not as sophisticates, not as people of culture, but as primitives and pagans. אבותינו לא היו אבות, our first fathers were not the last word in efficiency and competence, but bumbling, wandering, lost.

As a people, we have not been tested by triumph for some two thousand years. Yet all during this time the Jewish tradition developed in us a sensitivity in how to handle triumph. Thus we were told that at the Seder we must spill a drop from the cup for every one of the ten plagues -- indicating that though triumph was justly ours, we do not lose sight of compassion for the slain foes. Our tradition taught us that when the angels sought to sing a song of celebration as the Egyptians were drowned, God reproached them and said to them: אבן יצא מן הים, how can you sing when the work of My hands, the Egyptians, are drowning in the sea? It is for this reason that during the last days of Passover, when we celebrate the crossing of the Sea, we do not recite the whole of the Hallel prayer.

Perhaps most instructive in this regard is the reason given by the רמב"ם (Rama), Rabbi Moses Isserles, the famous commentator on the Shulhan Arukh. Rama cites the tradition that after the Haggadah is read, the first thing we eat at the meal of the Seder are -- eggs. What is the reason for this? The answer is that eggs are אבן יצא מן הים, the symbol of grief and mourning. Thus, when mourners return from the cemetery, their first meal consists of hard-boiled eggs. But why should these symbols of mourning be present at the Seder? Here Rama tells us that according to tradition (by the הלכות code), the night of Passover determines the night of Tish B'av. Thus, if this year the first night of Passover is on a Monday, then the coming Tish B'av will begin on Monday night as well.

The Midrash hints at this relationship in its comment on the verse in Lamentations. ^{השביעתי בצרות יריאני}
 "He filled me with bitterness, He sated me with wormwood." On the same night that we are filled with ^{ארורי}; bitter herbs, on that night -- on the ninth of Av -- we taste ^{ארו}, wormwood, i.e., we experience the grief of national destruction. Therefore, because of this association, we eat hard boiled eggs, sign of grief, on the night of the Seder.

But this still does not tell us why we should preserve this symbol of bereavement on this happy night of Passover. What, after all, is the deeper relationship?

I believe that there is a most significant and germane teaching behind this custom. Recall what tradition teaches about Tisha B'av. According to rabbinic tradition, it was first ordained that Tisha B'av would be a day of national grief not when the First Temple was destroyed, but much earlier, when the Israelites were still in the Desert. At that time, they received the two reports of the twelve spies they had sent out to investigate the Land of Canaan. The majority report was discouraging, urging them not to attempt to go up to the Land of Israel. ^{ויבאו היום בלילה ההוא}, "and the people cried that night." The Rabbis tell us ^{מילא הלילה אשר באו היה}, "that night" was the ninth of Av, and their crying was an expression of despair, it evinced a lack of faith and confidence in God who had promised them that they would be able to conquer Canaan. It was therefore considered an act of betrayal based upon their own weakness. In anger, the tradition continues, ^{אמר להם הקב"ה אלמא בטחם בטחם של היום ואני קראו להם בטחם לצרות}

"because you cried purposelessly and unnecessarily, I will give you good reason to cry in the future." Then and there, the Almighty declared that that night, the ninth of Av, would be one marked for grief recurrently throughout Jewish history.

What the tradition is telling us is that defeatism constitutes a terrible sin. Tisha B'av was marked for defeat precisely because we initiated it with an act of defeatism.

And that is why we remember this at the Seder table -- because the equation reads both ways. The same night of Tisha B'av is Passover. And just as Tisha B'av warns us against defeatism, Passover warns us -- against triumphalism! Defeatism is the illusion that we can never succeed; triumphalism is the illusion that we can never lose. Triumphalism is the egocentric deception that might makes right, that victory over our enemies

entitles us to arrogance, to a feeling of moral superiority, to superciliousness and boasting and conceit.

And so, the eggs at the Seder table reminds us to avoid either extreme. They recall the disaster of Tisha B'Av, and tell us that we are a people who can survive defeat provided we learn to do away with defeatism. And they tell us that on Passover we must also concern ourselves with the opposite moment, that we are entitled to every just triumph, but never must we succumb to triumphalism. It tells us to be strong; not to fear friend or foe; not to worry about the reproach of even the entire world, if we are right; to attack the enemy in his home ground before he does it to us -- but not to let victory corrupt our spirit, foul our faith, transform our Jewishness into the bragging of a moral bully.

I am therefore especially distressed at the form that the planned celebration of the 25th anniversary of the State of Israel is to take next month. I am disturbed that the government has seen fit not to take the advice of its many friends, both within and without the government, and has planned a military parade as its expression of the 25th anniversary of the State. But why a military parade in Jerusalem? What purpose can it serve? The Arabs are already afraid of the Jews, and the Russians do not scare so easily. A military parade can only serve to subvert the meaning of the State, the destiny of the people, and the nature of the nation.

By all means let there be a parade in Jerusalem. Let the parade demonstrate the *מלחמה ופיתוח* and the many peoples from all the corners of the world who have streamed to the Land and constitute the State. Let it parade the agricultural technology that Israel has developed, and its other products as well. Let it show off the books published in Israel, the schools and libraries established -- and its military progress too. But a military parade alone? Is that all we have to show after 25 years? Only an army and nothing more? Is it not enough that our young people in Israel have to spend at least three years in the army, that parents have to listen regularly to the news worrying all the time about their children in the armed services -- must we hammer in the point that this is the totality of the Israeli experience? Is the Sabra so humble, so modest, so self-effacing and lacking in self-confidence that he needs this military exhibitionism to bolster his ego? It is unworthy of the State, it is undignified, and is a source of deep regret.

For purposes of perspective, let me point out that Israel is far better than most other countries in this respect. The army is a civilian army. I am personally far more worried by the Far Left's pacifism than by the Right's militarism. ^{But} I am concerned that the mentality of a militaristic state will begin to seep in to the very fabric of its citizenry. I am distressed when a Ben-Gurion dismisses two thousand years of Jewish history as a blank space, and decides that the whole concept of ^{אבותינו} ^{אף}, the Chosen People, reaches its culmination in -- ^{הצבא}, the Israeli armed services. I am delighted that Israel has shed the galut-mentality, but when confidence turns to cockiness, when security turns to smugness, I consider that a danger sign.

And a symptom of that quasi-militarism and that collective blindness and bluster, is when a whole generation of Sabras is raised to feel distance, criticism, even shame at the European Jews who perished in the Holocaust. They cannot understand -- in the parochial and provincial self-centeredness that sometimes characterizes a small and beleaguered people -- how European Jews did not fight back. They had no conception of what it means to be alone, without a government and an army and an organization, surrounded by cruel and bestial anti-Semites. They have no sense of historical perspective.

And therefore, we must eat, and ponder the significance of, the eggs at the Seder table! If the Children of Israel, and contemporary Jews of the Golah, sinned with ^{אין לה נאמא}, with giving up too easily, with defeatism, Israeli Jews must beware of the opposite -- of ^{אין לה אלק}, of extravagant self-confidence, of triumphalism.

^{הצבא} ^{ההגדא} ^ה -- all honor and glory to the Israeli Armed Forces. But their military parade does not belong in Jerusalem, the city of ^{איהל אלה}, of peace and Torah. Even King David, who founded Jerusalem as the capital of our nation, decided not to hole up in that fortress and fight against the rebellion by his son Absalom, but would rather abandon Jerusalem and flee in order to spare it the ravages of battle. Military parades do not belong in ^{ירושלים}, the Holy City, especially not when they serve no real purpose. The swagger of the soldier is simply unsuited to this sacred city.

I want Israel to triumph in the tests and trials with which it is confronted. But I do not want traditional Jewish character to be lost in the process. And it need not be. If it be true

that gentleness, peacefulness, courtesy, politeness, gratitude, modesty, mind over muscle, are galut qualities, then I vote for these qualities to prevail -- in redemption and independence. Unlike Nietzsche, we do not regard compassion and gentleness as the mark of weakness, the symbols of a slave morality or woman's mentality, but of strength wedded to spirit.

Jews have fought and fought valiantly in the past and in the present. By all means let us have great fighters as our heroes. But our special pride always was and always should be our scholars more than our soldiers, Rabbi Akiva more than Bar Kokhba, morality more than machismo.

My revered teacher, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik ^{רבי יוסף ב. סלוביטשיק}, offers a wonderful explanation of a midrashic interpretation of a verse in the Song of Songs. In Shir Hashirim, which we shall read this Shabbat, the beloved exclaims

וַיִּשְׁכַּבְתִּי וַיְהִי בְּעֵינַי וַיִּזְכַּרְתִּי אֶת-אֱלֹהֵי אֲבוֹתַי, "on my bed at night I sought him whom my soul loveth." Here the Midrash offers the following cryptic indentifications:

וַיִּשְׁכַּבְתִּי בַּלַּיְלָהַּ וַיִּזְכַּרְתִּי אֶת-אֱלֹהֵי אֲבוֹתַי
וַיִּזְכַּרְתִּי אֶת-אֱלֹהֵי אֲבוֹתַי

the "night" refers to the "night of Egypt"; him whom my soul loveth" is -- Moses.

What does this mean? Rabbi Soloveitchik answers: the "night of Egypt" refers to the night that we celebrate on Passover, and at that night we indeed seek Moses. We read through the Haggadah on the night when we speak of the great redemption. And we meet in it all kinds of characters, all kinds of people, from the great founder of the Jewish people -- Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob -- to the foul villains who pock-marked our voyage throughout history. We find Pharaoh time and again, we read of the Egyptians, Esau gets into the act, and even Laban worms his way into the Haggadah. But we look unsuccessfully for mention of the one man who did most to help us out of Egypt -- Moses. On my bed at night, on the night of the Haggadah, when we recline on our couches in the spirit of freedom, we seek him whom our soul loveth -- Moses, our great leader. But we find him not. Everyone is there, hero and villain, major character and minor character, but not Moses. He is a forgotten man. How cruel, how heartless! That man who so loved us and whom we repaid with hatred; who so cared for us, and to whom we returned only fear and suspicion -- he is missing. Is this not a historic injustice?

And the answer is that on Passover Moses filled the role of -- a general. But generals have a way of aggrandizing their personality

And on Passover no generals, not even a Moses, can ever play the role of the redeemer. For there is only one Redeemer -- the Holy One of Israel. *ה' אלהינו ה' אחד* -- it was God alone who redeemed Israel: God and not an angel, God and not a Seraph, God and not a messenger -- not even His most important messenger, Moses. If we had celebrated Moses in the Haggadah, then this table of triumph would have become a testament of triumphalism. Affection for Moses would have been raised to a personality cult, and we would have dragged him along with us in an outburst of self-congratulation and ego-mania. Had Moses been high-lighted, we never could have been *אנחנו*, begin the narrative with our own lowly origin. And so we do not mention Moses at all, to avoid the trap of triumphalism. But it is not because we are ungrateful to Moses. For his true eminence is not that of Moses the general, but of *אדונינו*, Moses the Teacher. I am tempted to say: not Mosheh Dayanenu but Mosheh Rabbenu!

So when we eat eggs at the Seder table, we relearn the lesson of spiritual balance and equipoise. We learn once again to avoid both defeatism and triumphalism.

And even as on Passover we have learned the secret of triumph without triumphalism

*ה' אלהינו ה' אחד
אשר לא יתנו לנו
אנחנו אלהינו ה' אחד
אשר לא יתנו לנו*

So, O Lord our God, may we be privileged to enjoy other holidays and festivals in which we shall be triumphant -- or, even better, in which we will have achieved the great vision of peace,

אשר לא יתנו לנו
happy in the rebuilding of Thy city Jerusalem and rejoicing in Thy service.