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THE PREREQUISITE FOR GREATNESS

Now that the debates are all over and the smoke from the verbal battles of the recent campaigns has cleared, we can begin to seriously analyze some of the moral overtones of what has been thought, said and done. One issue which can stir the imagination of a religious teacher is that of "greatness". Both candidates have been described as "great" even by their opponents. And both have spoken reverently of the "greatness" which is the future of America.

May I use this issue not as a text, but as a pretext; I wish to discuss with you not the greatness of nations but the striving for greatness in individuals and in institutions. No man worth his salt, and no institution worthy of its members, will ever be satisfied with remaining mediocre, half-baked and only half-good - because half-good means also half-bad. A real man will, in all humility, strive for greatness. This desire for greatness may be only a dream, but it is human to dream. No animal or machine ever dreams, or daydreams. Shakespeare writes: "But be not afraid of greatness: some are born great, some achieve greatness, and some have greatness thrust upon them". This morning we are not going to discuss those who are born great - for that is a gift of G-d. Nor are we going to discuss those who have greatness thrust upon them - that is the gift of society. We are more interested in the second class: those who achieve greatness. And our problem is, how does one achieve greatness? Or better, realizing that greatness is not something that happens to you suddenly, but acquired slowly and painfully, we should ask: how does one mature into greatness? In short, what, according to religion, is the prerequisite for greatness?

Our Rabbis found the answer to that question in today's Sidra; and they had some remarkable things to say on that matter. Remember how G-d, in that dramatic revelation, promised Abraham a son; well, Sarah bore that son unto Abraham, and the child was called Isaac. And then, the Torah tells us: "Vayigdal hayeled vayigamel", usually translated as: "And the child grew up and was weaned". Our Rabbis, however, gave another meaning to that verse, and they indicate that it means not that Isaac became a big boy, but that he became a great man; that "vayigamel" means not weaned, but matured. The Bible, believe the Rabbis, is not speaking about infants growing into childhood, but about men maturing into greatness. In fact, some of our Rabbis thought that that event referred to what might today be called graduation from a university. For, they said, Abraham had written many books on "Yichud Ha'shem", about the unity of G-d, and Isaac had spent many years studying them. "Vayigdal hayeled vayigamel" refers to the completion of this intensive study by Isaac, and the beginning of his own creative work. So, then, the Rabbis see in this verse a reference to the maturing into greatness of Isaac. And how was this accomplished? How did he become great?

A Palestinian Rabbi of the Midrash, commenting on our text, supplies an astonishing solution. He says: "vayigdal hayeled vayigamel - she'nigmal mi'yetser ha'tov le'yetser ha'ra". He was weaned from the "yetser tov", from the Good Desire, to the "yetser hara", the Evil Desire. The sign that that Isaac had become great was that he developed a strong yetser hara, a powerful Evil Desire. What a remarkable statement to come from a great Rabbi! Is acquiring a Yetser Ha'ra really a sign of greatness and maturity?

And, my friends, lest you think that his is an isolated opinion, or that there must be some printing mistake, listen to this statement by another great Sage: commenting on G-d's reaction to the world He created as "hineh tov meod", he adds: "hineh tov - zeh yetser tov; hineh tov meod - zeh yetser hara". G-d said "Behold, it is very good", and this Sage added, "it is good" refers to the Yetser Tov; but when G-d says "very good" He refers to the Yetser Hara. And when the other Rabbis expressed astonishment at this remark, he explained:

וְיִגְדַל הַיֶּלֶד וַיִּגְמַל מִיֵּצֶר טוֹב לְיֵצֶר רָע
וְיִגְדַל הַיֶּלֶד וַיִּגְמַל מִיֵּצֶר רָע לְיֵצֶר טוֹב

"If not for the Evil Desire, men would not build homes, they would not marry and they would not engage in business activities".

^{our} What ~~are~~ Rabbis meant is obvious, and it bespeaks a brilliant insight into human nature. When they refer to the Yetser Hara, to the Evil Desire, our Rabbis do not intend the doing of evil; rather, they refer to the energies and the zeal and the enthusiasm spent in pursuing those evil goals. If a man took the initiative which he uses to build a reputation, the passion with which he pursues physical pleasure and the drive he uses for business and profit, and he used all that energy for good and constructive purposes, then "hineh tov meod", then that is indeed "very good" - it is superb! That Yetser Hara has such tremendous power, such infinite might, that if only a portion of it were used properly, the world could become a wonderful place to live in. Imagine what would happen if our scientists and military men would use their tremendous zeal for creating bigger and better atom bombs for the purpose of combatting disease. That Yetser-hara-power would probably find the cure for cancer in a year. Imagine what would happen if the finest brains at the U.N. would use the energies of their Yetser-haras for finding a real formula for Peace - why we would be the luckiest generation in the world.

The tragedy is that for medicine, for peace, for learning, for all constructive matters, we use only our Yetser Tov. The word "tov" means not so much "good" as "goody-goody". There is no human being who would not declare himself in favor of good health or world peace. But how many people are there who would be willing to offer more than their lip service; who would be willing to offer, for it, their most powerful drives and passions and initiative? Every Jew likes a synagogue, but how many Jews are willing to work for it with the same Yetser Hara with which they work for their own profits? Every Jew thinks that the study of the Torah is good. But how many are willing to apply the same Yetser Hara to education that they do to studying the complex tax-laws which affect them personally? The Yetser Tov will not do; it is too lazy, too apathetic, too indifferent. Maturity and greatness require the giant forces of the Yetser Hara.

It is this awakening of the Yetser Hara and harnessing it for constructive purposes, what the psychologists call the "sublimation of the libido", which is the prerequisite for greatness. It was this Yetser Hara, expressed as stubbornness and unrelenting determination, that made Isaac rise to the occasion of the Akedah, the attempted sacrifice atop Mt. Moriah. It was the Yetser Hara, in the form of arrogance and pride which made Mordecai stand up to and defy a Haman. It was this Yetser Hara, as contempt for danger and passion for country, which created a Satae of Israel. The Yetser Tov would never have sufficed; only the Yetser Hara can accomplish such things.

I remember, several years ago, when I first began to study under the famous Rabbi Soloveitchik at Yeshiva University, that he one day gave his opinion on a matter of Halacha or Jewish Law. No one of the students questioned him, we readily accepted the scholar's verdict. The next day he came to class and announced that he had made an obvious and glaring error, and he was extremely irritated at our failure to notice it; and, in a moment of anger, he rebuked us and said, "the trouble with you is that you come here with your Yetser Tov and you check your Yetser Hara at the door. Never mind the Yetser Tov, I want the Yetser Hara here". The Sages of the Talmud, similarly, said: "Ha'gadol me'chaveiro, yitsro gadol heimenu" - he who is greater than his friend, his Yetser Hara is also greater.

My dear friends, on this, my first official Shabbos with you, I come armed with dreams of greatness. Not for me, not for you, but for us. From now on, our destinies are linked, and the growth of one will parallel that of the other. And I regard it as my mission, therefore, to awaken with us the untapped sources of the Yetser Hara. The Yetser Tov, with its "goody-goody" indifference and lethargy, cannot and will not do. In order to achieve the "vayigdal...vayigamel", maturity and greatness, we must be prepared to outgrow our yetser tov and exploit the latent powers of the yetser hara. There is an ancient Talmudic maxim, "Im paga bach menuval zeh, mushchayhu le'beis hamidrash", if you meet that scoundrel, the Yetser Hara, pull him into the synagogue. Yes, draw him into the synagogue, but to convert him and put him to work, not to get rid of him. For no Beis Midrash, no synagogue, no center can grow and mature into greatness without the Yetser Hara. Pull him into shul, and let the passions previously used for business and profit and pleasure be used "lehagdil Torah u'le'haadirah", for the furtherance of the Torah and Judaism.

To that purpose of awakening and harnessing the Yetser Hara, to that end of galvanizing and electrifying ~~our~~ and shaking our fellow Jews out of their long sleeps, must we dedicate ourselves today. I can do no more than pledge that I shall do my utmost to accomplish this prerequisite for greatness. And I ask you to join with me on this great adventure. For this is the time for greatness. Pettiness and smallness should find no harbor with us. Great opportunities beckon ~~to~~ us on to, with G-d's help, a future - filled with greatness.

BENEDICTION:

Our Great G-d,

We offer to Thee our prayers that Thou will bless this nation with its new government with the wisdom to marshall its mighty powers and forces to acheive that greatness for which we so fervently hope. Amen.