

"THE MAN IN THE MIDDLE"

The key verse in our Sidra, which introduces the entire subject of sacrifices, reads: Adam ki yakriv mi-kem korbon la-Shem, "When any man of you bringeth an offering unto the Lord." The Zohar, intrigued by the use of the term Adam, declares that by this word, man, the Torah means neither Adam kadmaah nor Adam betraah: neither the first man nor the last man. The Torah is concerned with the faith, the devotion, and the love of all mankind in between Adam kadmaah and Adam betraah, man at the very beginning and at the very end of time.

What the Zohar tells us is that for the first man and the last man devotion to the Almighty is not an extraordinary achievement. The first man, Adam, lived in Paradise, he had every indication of God's bounty, and his communication with the Lord was clear and direct. Certainly, it required no great moral effort for him to believe in and worship God. Man at the end of time, the Adam batraah, is one who will have experienced geulah shelemah, the complete redemption, and who will have enjoyed giluy shekhinah, the Divine revelation at the termination of history. For him, too, faith will not be an act of moral heroism, for he will have seen the hand of God acting in history. For these individuals, paradoxically, korbon is not a sacrifice, loyalty to the Creator is not a particularly noteworthy mitzvah. But it is for the man in the middle of the course of history, for the adam who flourishes neither at the beginning nor at the end of time, for whom korbon is a sublime accomplishment. For

man in the middle of the course of history, for whom certainties are elusive, for whom faith is so difficult, who dwells neither in paradise nor in a state of redemption -- for him korbon and emunah are an unexampled and unparalleled triumph of the human spirit.

(See "Ateret Mordekhai" by Rabbi M. Rogov).

The real mitzvah is accomplished when the korbon la-Shem is offered by man who finds himself in the middle of time and history, his horizons beclouded by uncertainty, his heart filled with fear, his innards pulled apart by anxiety, and his prayers doomed to frustration.

The period we live in is such a middle period, neither kadmaah nor batraah. We live in a time that the Bible has called hester panim, the hiding of God's face, when we yearn for some experience of His presence, but we are disappointed; when we strive to communicate with Him, but receive no answer; when we are willing to submit our very lives to Him, but we fear that He doesn't care; when He seems to have vanished from our midst without leaving a trace; when life appears meaningless and existence absurd. How easy for modern man, man living in the middle of hester panim, to yield to despair, to cease praying, to quit believing. And it is precisely because of this that it becomes his crowning achievement to believe despite doubt, to hope despite despair, to continue to pray despite divine silence. It is this high resolve of "Man in the Middle" performing the act of faith that makes of him, of us, a true adam, a true human being.

But I believe that the verse we have just discussed and interpreted is meant as more than a compliment to "the man in the middle" who retains his faith, and more than an encouragement to continue on his way. I believe that if we examine this verse carefully we shall also find in it the beginnings of an answer to the question of questions for modern man, the man in the middle: how and where shall we discover the sources of faith? How shall we acquire emunah shelemah, complete faith, in a world gripped by scepticism, in a society soaked in cynicism, in a civilization that has permitted holocausts and obscenities known as concentration camps? How shall we be adam in an age which is neither kadmaah nor batraah? How shall we offer ourselves up la-Shem when we dwell neither in gan eden nor in a state of geulah shelemah? How shall we emerge from bedeviling doubt into the fortitude of faith? What advice do we have for that man in the middle who would like to believe but finds that he cannot?

I believe we can find three suggestions that await us in our verse. Let us take them in the order in which they appear.

First, adam ki yakriv, if a man yakriv -- that word means not only to offer up, but also to draw close, to come karov, to God. Faith is not a gift that magically appears out of Heaven and graces the lucky individual. It is something which requires great and strenuous effort. Emunah is not a state; it is a process which demands study and experience and thinking and willingness and labor and diligence.

In Judaism, unlike other religions, we do not accept uncritically the apparently logical idea that faith must precede religious practice. On the contrary, Judaism prefers the psychological truth to the logical statement, and holds that emunah and mitzvah feed on each other, that often leading the right kind of life will bring man to the right kind of belief. It is possible for a man to believe -- and yet to live like a pagan. However, if man will live like a Jew, even if he thinks like a pagan, ultimately he will come to think and believe as a Jew should too.

In the Jerusalem Talmud, the Rabbis put, as it were, into the mouth of God some very bold words: halevai oti azavu v'et torati shamaru, "Would that the Jews abandoned Me as long as they observed My Torah!" That is, let the Jew hold in abeyance his belief in God, as long as he studies Torah, performs mitzvot, and leads a moral and ethical Jewish existence. For then, having experienced Judaism pragmatically, he will ultimately arrive at emunah: ha-maor she'bah mahaziro le'mutav, the inner light and luminescence and glory of Jewish existence will bring him back to God. In other words, adam ki yakriy means that man must take the initiative in reaching out to God; he must commit himself to Jewish living, in the confidence -- which Judaism promises us will be vindicated -- that this kind of life and these kinds of deeds will lead him to become karov, close, to Almighty God.

Now this refers not only to a commitment of deeds, but also to a commitment of emotions. I recommend that you read, if you have

not already done so, Elie Wiesel's Jews of Silence, his description of his visit to Russian Jewry. He describes the current generation of Russian Jews, young people who were never permitted to hear a Jewish word, to learn a Biblical verse, to hear a single tale or law of the Talmud. Their minds were filled with nothing but materialism and Marxism, and they consider themselves good Russian Marxists. Yet, they also prefer to be known as Jews, no matter what the risk. And how do they express this nascent and latent love of Judaism and the Jewish people? What is it that brings them back to the synagogue? Not the shofar on Rosh Hashanah, not even Kol Nidre or Neilah on Yom Kippur, but the singing and the dancing on Simhat Torah! We, in America, all too often take the festivities on this holiday in a sense of amusement, as a semi-humorous manifestation of levity. Yet, in Moscow, every Fall, on this day in front of the Great Synagogue, thousands of young Jewish Marxists gather together to sing and to dance their devotion to Judaism! Adam ki yakriv -- these are Jews, long alienated by the strong hand of Communism, who are drawing close by committing their emotions, by committing their joy and their happiness, to Judaism! No matter what they believe intellectually, no matter how they live the rest of the year, this commitment of their deepest and their most cherished emotions of Jewish joy is an indication that there survives in them the "pintele Yid," that precious dot of Jewishness that, with the help of God, will someday bring them completely back to Judaism and, it is our fervent hope, to the State of Israel.

The first means of rediscovering the sources of faith, then, is to live as a Jew, both in general conduct and in emotional attachments, and thereby return to full Jewish faith.

The second means is by remembering that faith, in Judaism, is not entirely personal and individual; it also reflects the experience of our whole people and its history. That is why we speak of ourselves not as individuals who, all together, constitute a people, but rather as individuated members of Knesset Yisrael, the congregation of Israel. That is why prayer is encouraged by individuals in their homes, but it is preferable that we worship in a minyan. Therefore, the faith that each individual Jew has or seeks can be strengthened by associating with other faithful Jews, so that all together will find strength in each other.

Thus, the next word of our key verse is: mi-kem, from amongst you -- adam-ki yakriv mi-kem. We can become the right kind of spiritual adam, only if we issue from the right kind of mi-kem, only if we seek our most intimate associations with people who have similar inspirations and aspirations. That is why our Rabbis commented on mi-kem -- ve'lo mumar, that this excludes the willful heretic, that in our Sanctuary we may not accept the sacrificial offering of one who rejects God with malice aforethought.

We have spoken often of the need for modern Orthodox Jews to view their fellow Jews, with whom they disagree and from whose opinions they dissent, with love and understanding, and that in general we must

open ourselves up to the modern world and the best of its culture. But that does not mean that we must break down all the defenses that life and nature permit us, that we must yield our most intimate lives to the pervasive non-Jewish influence of the great world around us. It means that we must seek out for our own closest friendships those who will serve to enhance our religious devotion rather than to detract from it. It means that we must create for ourselves the right sort of family environment, that we must seek the proper communal milieu, and live only in an appropriate residential area where we can enjoy the kind of society that will help us in our aspirations to find Jewish fulfillment in life. Only one who is possessed of foolhardy self-confidence can believe that he can survive with his Jewishness intact in a neighborhood or society where Jewishness is either ignored or derided; and such a person stands condemned of committing spiritual suicide. We must know in advance that we will not remain Jewish if we move into a literally God-forsaken neighborhood just because we prefer the social status of certain exclusive areas. So, we can have little hope for our children to remain in the Jewish fold if we send them to schools in remote areas where Jewishness is an oddity, and if we let them spend their summer vacations in children's camps where the word of Torah is never heard.

The third means to full Jewish loyalty I find in the next two words: korbon la-Shem, an offering to the Lord. I base this

idea on a discourse by one of the greatest teachers of Musar in the last generation, Rabbi Eliyahu Dessler, of England and Israel, ("Mikhtav Me'eliyahu", vol. I, pp. 32-39). We all know that man is by nature acquisitive. Psychology teaches it, experience confirms it, and we know it intuitively. From the moment man is born he begins to grasp whatever he can. What we do not sufficiently appreciate, however, is that there is another and opposite tendency that is indigenous to man: the desire to give as well as to receive. That man should possess this wish to give is, from the Jewish point of view, only natural. For our tradition teaches us that man is created in the image of God, which means that in many respects he resembles the Creator. And God has no need to take from us, He only gives. That is why one of His attributes is hessed, love or the capacity for giving of Himself. The very creation of the world, as King David puts it in the Psalms, is an act of hessed (olam hessed yibaneh), and the revelation of Torah is an act of giving and hessed as well. Therefore man, created in His image, resembles the Creator in possessing this inherent desire to give of himself.

Connected with this concept of giving is the fact of love. It is worth pondering, says Rabbi Dessler, which comes first or which is cause and which is effect: the act of giving or the act of loving? Does a man love first and then give to the beloved object because he loves, or is it perhaps reversed: that man gives and as a result he loves? That we normally bestow gifts upon those we love -- that is



fairly evident. What is less evident, but equally true, is that the act of giving itself enhances love and often creates it. When I give of my time and my substance and my talents to another human being, I feel I have invested in him or in her and therefore my attachment and my affection and love grow every time I give and in proportion to what I give. In this sense, the giving is the cause and the loving is the effect. The Rabbis of the Talmud taught us this same truth: im hafetz atah le'hidabek b'ahavat haverkha, hevei nosei ve'noten be'tovato (D.E. Zuta, ch. II), "If you desire to love your friend, do something for him!"

This advice is most pertinent for young couples about to be married -- or even married already. Whatever you do, do not make demands upon each other! It is the quickest way to frustrate the development of true conjugal love. This is one time that an Orthodox Rabbi pleads with his people not to live according to the "Shulhan Arukh!" It is a sad state of affairs when a couple must adjudicate their differences by reference to the Code of Jewish Law. The "Shulhan Arukh" elaborates the claims of a husband upon a wife and a wife upon a husband. And when a couple is reduced to legal action based upon mutual claims, it is in desperate trouble indeed. The ideal of Jewish married life is so to live that there shall be no need to resort to the arbitration of Jewish Law. Therefore, no demands upon each other -- instead, each partner must make it his or her business to give and give and give. It is the only way to trans-

form infatuation into love, momentary attraction into permanent bonds: give your time, give your loyalty, give your talent, give your affection, give pleasure and joy and happiness, give gifts, give attention and concern -- and from this there will blossom love and ultimately the fruits of profound and lifelong affection and loyalty.

Now the same principle should be applied to religion. We have spoken of faith, but that is an abstraction. Jews prefer to speak of ahavah, love, for that is a passion. More than believing in God, we are commanded to love Him. Judaism recognizes that the love for God is indigenous in the human heart; religion is not grafted on to us artificially from without, but pre-exists within us. The question is, how shall we express it and enhance it? And the answer is -- korbon la-Shem, you must learn to give to God. When we give of our time by getting up early to pray with a minyan, when we give of our substance to the causes of the Almighty, such as synagogue or school or charity, when we give our attention and our concern to Him and His people, then the process of giving enhances the love we bear for Him within. The more we give, the more we love. The man who would like to believe but cannot, ought to learn how to give -- then he will not only believe, but he will also love.

In summary, then, how does one become an Adam in this middle of time? First, he must commit himself, in action and emotion, to seek out God. Second, he must provide himself with a society and

environment of Jewishness. And third, he must first give of himself and of his possessions to the Almighty and His causes, and then he will learn to have love, which is even more than faith.

When we have done this, we shall attain the status of Adam, as genuine human beings in the middle of history. And then we shall deserve, in return, the attention and affection of the Creator. For the Midrash tells us that the word Adam has particular meaning; it is le'shon hibah v'ahavah ve'reiut -- the language of divine love and brotherliness and friendship.