

"ALIYAH AND HITALUT"

In terms of goals it had set for itself, the recent World Conference of Orthodox Ashkenazi and Sephardi Synagogues was undoubtedly a success. It must be stressed that this Conference was neither -- as the American press implied -- an assembly called for the purpose of excoriating and villifying Conservative and Reform Jews, nor was it -- as the extreme right wing had accused us -- a nefarious gathering of subversive modern Orthodox to plan for fraternization with and invite the infiltration of the same Conservative and Reform elements. It was, rather, the first opportunity of our times for Orthodox leadership of countries throughout the world to meet with each other, take measure of each other, counsel with each other, share problems and solutions, and encourage one another. In this respect, the Conference achieved its goals eminently well.

What emerged from these deliberations were two centers of concern, which we might designate by two Hebrew words which have one common origin: aliyah and hitalut, both of which come from the Hebrew root, aloh, which means: to go up. By this we mean, that the dual concerns of the Conference were Aliyah, the problem of literally emigrating to Israel from all over the world, and hitalut, the act of self-improvement, self-transcendence, self-elevation in Jewishness and in loyalty to Torah.

It is interesting that both these concepts, of Aliyah and hitalut, are discovered by one commentator, Abarbanel, in one word of today's Sidra. When the Pharoahs of Egypt became anxious about the growth of the Jewish community and its prosperity, they decided to scheme against the Israelites for fear that they were growing too strong, and because of the suspicion that in case of war they would join the enemy and v'alah min ha-aretz, which literally means: "And he will go up from the land." Normally, this is taken to mean that the Pharoahs feared that in case of crisis the Jews would leave Egypt and go on Aliyah to the Land of Israel, much in the same way that the Communist commissars of Soviet Russia are today worried that if they will open the doors and allow the Iron Curtain to part, that most of the Jewish community of Russia would similarly emigrate to Israel. Abarbanel, while agreeing with this interpretation, adds one other insight. He maintains that v'alah min ha-aretz can also be interpreted as "they will rise beyond the rest of the land." He interprets the word min not as derivative, "from," but comparative, "than." The concern of the Pharoahs was not only that the Jews would perform Aliyah and go up from the land of Egypt, but that they would experience hitalut and that they would rise in their stature and in their quality beyond the rest of the population, they would become greater than the rest of the Egyptian population.

What bothered the Pharoahs, bothers us: the twin problems of Aliyah and hitalut.

The foremost impression that one takes away from even a brief tour of the State of Israel, provided that one has paid attention to not only to seeing places but also to meeting people, is the seriousness with which Israelis take the entire question of Aliyah. There is little doubt in my mind that we have paid far too little attention to it, assuming unconsciously that when the Israelis speak of Aliyah they are engaged in a kind of ritualistic war dance in which they do not really mean what they say. But that is clearly not the case. The Israelis desperately need us; and we need them even more.

Only 17% of world Jewry now lives in the State of Israel; yet it is there, to use the current colloquialism, "where the action is." Chief Rabbi Unterman was quite right when he told the Conference that whereas the rov minyan of world Jewry is in America, the rov binyan is in Israel; that is, that while the majority quantitatively resides in the United States, the qualitatively weightiest group, which will decide the destiny of our people, is the Jewish community of the State of Israel. Jewish history will be written, and is being written, primarily there, not here. And no one should be so self-effacing and modest as to confine himself forever to the margins and periphery of the arena where history is being forged and molded.

I have no solution to offer on the Aliyah question; our best minds have not yet devised a proper answer to the question. I know that if the tables were reversed, and we would be in Israel and demand

of the people now in Israel to come on Aliyah, they would have the same hesitation and reluctance that we experience because of practical matters. But that does not and should not allow us to escape confronting the problem squarely and acknowledging that we must give great weight to the challenge, especially as Orthodox Jews. We dare not cut down our ideology to conform to the limitations of current circumstances, we dare not develop a theory of Jewish life which will do away with Aliyah in order to satisfy practical considerations -- for then we will no longer be Orthodox. Great deeds are demanded of us, deep thinking is the challenge of the hour. We must no longer treat Aliyah as a pipedream not deserving of our serious attention. It may be true that it is unlikely that the generation now ensconced in the business and professional life of this country will perform this mitzvah; but this does not excuse us from so raising the next generation that it will be possible for them to perform Aliyah without the difficulties that face us.

From the first problem, that of Aliyah, we proceed to the second center of concern, hitalut. The most dramatic case of hitalut, or Jewish improvement, I find in Israel itself.

I confess: there was a time when I all but despaired of the secular majority in the State of Israel. Religion had been so subject to the extreme politicization that is endemic to the country; anti-religiousness was rampant to such an extent; the belligerence against Torah was so doctrinaire; the machinery of Israel's religious estab-

lishment was so antiquated -- that there was little reason at all for optimism or encouragement. I saw the major, if not the exclusive, hope for a Jewish renaissance in the United States.

I have now revised my opinion upward. I know that all is not well. Those in Israel who are spiritually insensitive will probably remain obtuse and coarse. The religious establishment is, unfortunately, still largely ineffective in reaching out to the great majority of the alienated Jews of Israel. But I detect a new spirit these last six months, a sense of apocalyptic fulfillment, a feeling of the imminence of Messianic days, an awareness that we have passed a threshold in Jewish history, that we have crossed a watershed in the story of our people.

Great opportunities are ripening for a mature and enthusiastic approach -- by an Orthodox Jewry which does not want to segregate itself but wants to live in this world -- to the heretofore alienated Israelis.

Permit me to share with you an experience that I had only last Monday which, in a manner of speaking, was even more moving than that fabulous Friday night Kabbalat Shabbat at the Western Wall.

Quite by accident, we took advantage of the opportunity to pay a visit to Kibbutz Yiftah, which is probably the northernmost outpost of the State of Israel, on the Lebanese and not far from the Syrian border. The terrain is mountainous and rough, and this agricultural kibbutz must work hard and long hours in order to prosper. Our conversations for these several hours were held with a few

people, especially one who was "the old man" of the kibbutz, who had celebrated his 40th birthday only two days earlier. All members of this kibbutz, which was founded only eighteen years ago by young men and women in their late teens and early twenties, were the children of anti-religious socialist idealists of the kibbutz movement. But in this particular kibbutz, the children had moved beyond the sterile positions of their parents.

For instance, this kibbutz is non-kosher; but they use only kosher meat. Only recently they had introduced a kind of Kabbalat Shabbat service, which included the recitation of va-yekhulu and the communal reading of the parashat ha-shavua. At this time we tried to persuade them to include the Kiddush as well; I believe they will accept this recommendation. The members of the kibbutz encourage only religious ceremonies for their weddings. Within recent weeks they had received two mezuzot, and invited us, their Orthodox visitors, to help them affix the mezuzot to the doorposts. The kibbutz now, as a matter of course, takes their thirteen year old children to nearby Safed for their Bar Mitzvah, and they have developed the charming custom of informing each child on his Bar Mitzvah day of his whole family history, as far back as it can be traced into the glories of the Jewish past.

Perhaps most interesting, though tragic to relate, is the following illustration of the difference between the two generations: about a month ago one of their members had been killed by accident

by a guard who mistook him for a Syrian infiltrator. He was the first person to be buried on their cemetery. The father of the slain kibbutznik, himself a member of an older, well established, thoroughly anti-religious kibbutz, refused on principle to recite the Kaddish at his son's funeral. However, his younger son, who was likewise a member of Kibbutz Yiftah, as well as his friends, did recite the Kaddish!

The finest indication of the truly religious mood of this young generation is the attitude they evinced in the conversations. A question they persistently directed at us was, b'aizo zekhut nitzahnu -- how is it that we were privileged to achieve such a victory? Study that question well. Usually, when Jews turn to a Rabbi with a question of this sort it is just the reverse! "Rabbi, why did God punish me so much?" But these young and brave men and women put the question the other way around: "Rabbi, why was God so good to us?" This is clearly indicative of a profoundly religious stirring that deserves our utmost attention.

So there is a remarkable hitalut in Israel, and it is obvious in this small portion of the population, those who live on the kibbutzim, but who are the most sensitive idealists and pace-setters for the rest of Israel.

Does this mean that I have given up on the Golah? No. I disagree with those Israelis who have despaired of the future of Judaism in the Diaspora. I do not believe that love for Israel and

the encouragement of Aliyah to Israel should be dependent upon a negative view of Jewish life in the Diaspora. On the contrary, only if there is true hitalut amongst Jews in the Diaspora, can we ever expect a substantial Aliyah of these Jews to Israel. If our contacts with the Israelis at the World Conference showed their hitalut, the very fact of the World Conference was an indication of our hitalut. Organized Orthodoxy in the United States has come of age, in that it has finally seen fit to meet with Orthodox Jews of similar disposition throughout the world, despite all the opposition which at times was ugly. We broadened our horizons. We learned to appreciate the different circumstances in different Jewish communities. The element of hitalut was evident to anyone who saw the impression that was made upon the large and influential French delegation, or upon the courage that was given, for instance, to that lonely young Rabbi of the dwindling Jewish community of Athens.

There is a great need for further such contacts and more such meetings, without fear and always with dedication. Without ever neglecting our local needs, we must strengthen our bonds with the Jews all over the world, and they are the bonds of Torah. But especially important is the continuing interplay and interaction between American and Israeli Orthodox Jews. Together we must strive for spiritual hitalut and for actual Aliyah.

In the interesting debate between God and Moses, when God

gives Moses his prophetic mission and Moses is reluctant to accept it, God tells Moses that his brother Aaron is coming towards him and that when Aaron sees Moses, ve'raakha ve'samah be'libo, "And he will see you and he will be happy in his heart." Aaron will experience inner joy upon meeting his beloved brother Moses. Yet the Rabbis found an oblique aspect of criticism of Aaron in this verse. They say, illu hayah yodeia Aharon she'ha-katuv makhtivo, be'tupim u-vi'meholot hayah yotzei likrato, if only Aaron had known that the Torah would record for all posterity his emotional reaction upon meeting Moses, then he would not have been satisfied with experiencing joy in his heart, but he would have greeted Moses with a whole band of drums and fifes.

We live in a time of ha-katuv makhtivo, of Biblical proportions and Scriptural dimensions. The challenge to us is historic and will be recorded for all times. Good will and fine intentions about Israel and Judaism are simply inadequate. Ve'samah be'libo, inner happiness, simply will not do.

There are times when history turns a telescope upon a particular period. At such times, our actions, our movements, our achievements, are meaningful only in the perspectives of the great flux of world events which have their origin in the dim past and their climax in the remote future; but these actions and movements by themselves, in a small segment of time, are fairly inconsequential

and meaningless.

But there are times when history turns not a telescope but a microscope upon a particular epoch. At such times, every action, every gesture, every deed, almost every word, assumes gigantic proportions. In a period of this kind, whatever we do is invested with enormous significance by itself for all of history.

Today is a period of history's microscope. Ha-katuv makhtivo -- it is almost a period of Biblical magnificence, when all that we say and do and achieve is of the greatest significance, when our failures are catastrophic and our successes are enduringly illustrious.

One can hardly blame us, in this first year of Yisrael Ha-shelemah, the "Whole Israel" of historic dimensions, for experiencing great joy in our hearts. But this joy must not remain in our hearts. It must rise up out of the heart, and pull us up with it. It must rise to the occasion.

We must take counsel on how our community can literally rise to Israel in Aliyah, and all of us must rise to a life of Torah and mitzvot and Jewish spirituality in every increasing hitalut.