

"CAN WE AFFORD A PRAYING MAN AS PRESIDENT?"

Can we afford a praying man as President of the United States of America?

First, let us turn to a significant item in this morning's Sidra. We read of the commandment to prepare and use the *חצוצרות*, the trumpets or clarions which were made of solid silver. According to tradition, the trumpets fashioned by Moses were sequestered immediately after his death. However, others were later made, and there are even pictures of the trumpets incised on the Arch of Titus, built to commemorate the destruction of the Second Temple at the hands of the Romans.

Two significant verses regarding the use of the trumpets read as follows: "And when you go to war in your land against the adversary that oppresses you, *והרעתם בחצוצרות*, ye shall sound an alarm with the trumpets; and ye shall be remembered before the Lord your God, and ye shall be saved from your enemies" (Numbers 10:9). The next verse reads, "Also in the day of your gladness (i.e., Shabbat), and in your appointed seasons (i.e., Festivals), and in your new moons, *ותקעתם בחצוצרות*, ye shall blow with the trumpets over your burnt offerings and over the sacrifices of your peace offerings..." (Numbers 10:10).

The plain meaning of these verses is that there is a difference in the way the trumpets were sounded at the occasion of war and at the occasion of the holy days. During the former, it was a *תרוצה*, the tremulous sound of nine short blasts, even as we have it on the Shofar of Rosh Hashanah. Hence, *והרעתם*. For the holy days, it was the single long blast, the *תקיעה*; hence *ותקעתם בחצוצרות*.

However, a completely different interpretation is offered by the Netziv (Rabbi Naftali Zevi Yehudah Berlin of Volozhin). He maintains that according to the Halakhah, each of these occasions required both a *תקיעה* and a *תרוצה*, and hence there was no difference in the sounds of the trumpets between these two occasions. Why, then, the difference in the verbs, the Bible using *והרעתם* in one case and *ותקעתם* in the other?

His answer is that *ותקעתם* refers to the actual blowing of the trumpet. *והרעתם*, however, refers not at all to a musical notation, but rather it means, "ye shall be aroused," with specific reference to prayer! It refers to the tremor of the heart as man beseechingly turns to God in his anguish and uncertainty, asking for Divine succor. (So apparently, must one interpret Maimonides in the Laws of *Taanit*.) Hence, *והרעתם בחצוצרות* means not that ye shall blow a *תרוצה* on the trumpets, but you shall pray while the trumpets are sounded. Whereas on holy days, although one must pray anyway, the prayer is not part of the commandment of *חצוצרות* when offering the sacrifices. In times of war, crisis, or danger, there is a special commandment to pray along with the sounding of the clarions.

Now let us return to the question at hand: can we afford a praying man as president of this country? Let me begin by honestly and forthrightly disclaiming any partisan political interest in the question. Frankly, I do not yet know whom I will support, and if I did I would not share it with anyone, especially from the pulpit. But I am concerned here not with the political issues, but with great social and cultural questions of the first order.

I detect an uneasiness in the general circles in which we travel, and most especially in Jewish circles, at the religious expressions of Governor Carter. What is it really that is feared?

If it is our uncertainty because of his stand on specific issues, including and especially the State of Israel, then that is a legitimate concern. In that case, we must press him and other candidates for their views -- although I am not yet convinced that any candidate's promises on Israel have any enduring value after he is elected. But all this has nothing to do with his religious confession!

If they fear that his and his sister's evangelical leanings are a threat, that they are out to convert Jews, I consider that a bit naive. Jews who come from Georgia do not report such missionary activities against them, nor are we aware of any special anti-Semitism by this candidate. We must be careful not to pillory a man because of his religious affiliation or commitment, and repeat the mistakes that this country made during the candidacies of Al Smith and Jack Kennedy.

I suspect the reason lies elsewhere, and it is not a pleasant thing to discuss. I suspect it lies in a dogmatic, doctrinaire secularism that is the dominant attitude in the Jewish community, and that cringes at the prospect that one who is, or seems, deeply religious will become president of this country, even if he is firmly committed to pluralism. (The charge that many Jewish intellectuals have an anti-Catholic bias is, to my mind, largely correct. I would extend that to say that the bias includes religiously committed Protestant fundamentalists as well. This is by no means racism, and it may well be a bias that has some historical justification. But it is a bias, and one that we ought to recognize and then do our best to rid ourselves of it.) I feel that it is this secularism which lies at the heart of our fear of Jimmy Carter. It is too much for the devotees of the cult of the secular to abide the symbolism of the highest office in the land being occupied not only by a president who prays, but by a praying president. Every president in memory has made the conventional gestures to religion, even to the point of having prayer meetings in the White House every Sunday. But here is a man who obviously means it -- although no one is qualified to judge the degree of his sincerity -- and it frightens those who conceive of the United States as fundamentally an established church of secularism which, nevertheless, tolerates private idiosyncracies of religion.

Now, to me, a man's professed piety is not enough to qualify him as president of this country. I am much more concerned about his view of the economy, defence, foreign policy, etc. But certainly the fact that a man is religiously committed and pious does not disqualify him. To the question "can we afford a praying man as president," my answer is an unreserved, "yes!"

Moreover, all other things being equal -- although they rarely are -- I wonder if we could afford *not* to elect a praying man as president! After Watergate and the like, it may not be enough to have a man in the White House who simply does not steal. We need a president whose probity is reenforced by spiritual dimensions. Something has got to be done to restore the integrity of the office of the presidency. The presidency, as we have heard time and again, is the most powerful office on earth. It cannot hurt to entrust the vast powers of this heady office to someone who knows that *he* is not God...

To an extent, I admit that I instinctively share the annoyance at the flaunting of piety in public by a politician. But on second thought, what are our alternatives today to this image of American leadership. Shall it be the extra-curricular activities of certain members of the House and the Senate? American can be more proud of Governor Carter's pleasure in praying than of Representative Hays paying for pleasure.

I am amused at the newspaper pundits and political observers and columnists who explicitly fault this congressman for spending government money on his own private erotic adventures, but hasten to add that their criticism is not directed at his actual deeds -- as if the private lives of our leaders do not have symbolic and pedagogic consequences!

Now, I would be the last man to suggest that some kind of vice squad be set up to test the morals of elected officials. But they must know quite clearly that if any private misdeed becomes public, they are guilty of sullyng the great office they hold. If American youth is "turned off" politicians, it is because of their ethical failures during the Watergate period. And if American youth does not abide by the highest standards of sexual morality, at least a part of the blame must be placed on the absence of a proper model in government leadership as well as academic, business, ecclesiastical, and professional leadership.

We do need some historical perspective. This country is largely based upon the First Amendment to the Constitution. But this Amendment does not require that its elected representatives be non-religious. It forbade the establishment of religion, it did not establish secularism.

I remember several years ago, that that liberal and literate writer, Norman Cousins, published a book called *In God We Trust*. He pointed out that most of the leaders of this country, the Founding Fathers, were men of genuine religious conviction. The fact that they did not want an established church, does not mean that they in any way discouraged religious expression.

I am for the separation of church and state. I am not for the separation of religion and American citizens. For too long, the Jewish community's official attitude was almost obsessively focused on the so-called "wall of separation" between church and state. This "wall" has become the secular version of the *כִּוּץ מִעֵרָבִי*, the Western Wall, so cherished by religious Jews. So powerful has been this propaganda, that any critic -- even a Rabbi -- runs the risk of excommunication by the secularist elders and media pundits.

So let me say: even against Governor Carter, I am *for* more religious expression in the public life of this country, even in the public schools. I am not for denominational prayers. I am certainly not for coerced prayers in public schools. But I would like to see the kind of situation (and here is not the place for going into details on this subject) which would foster more respect for religious life and more religious expression in American life.

In an age of *עַר הַצֹּדֵק אֲתֶכֶם*, when enemies and problems are never far off, we need *וּדְרִיעָתֶם*, and not only *וּתְקֵעָתֶם*. We need not only the political clarion-call and the trumpeting of new programs, but also genuine prayer and awareness of a Higher Power.

Insofar as Jewish fears of conversion are concerned, I believe it is important to perceive what our major threats are. It is true that *שִׁבּוּץ* or conversion by regular missionary groups are a problem for our community. But they are not the main danger. Our major threat does not come from the established Christian Churches, who themselves are worried to death by the erosion of their membership and influence. We face a greater danger from the exotic cults, from the Moons and the Maharajis and the Gurus and the Hari Krishnas, which suck in our young people who cluster around these contemporary idols in order to fill the voids in their lives, voids created by de facto secularism of the Jewish community. This secularism is not only an avowed one, but also often penetrates even Jewish homes which profess religious commitments. We may send a child to a day school, but if there is no religious experience in the home, he will never really be touched by a religious emotion and may well go astray after the lures of these exotic cults. And an even greater threat is -- the simple disappearance of thousands upon thousands of Jews, who do not even know that Judaism is more than a generalized political liberalism plus gefilte fish. Intermarriage, assimilation, demographic decadence -- these are by far a greater jeopardy to our survival than the number of Jewish souls which may be won over by Governor Carter's sister...

I return to the main theme: in times of danger we need **והרעתם**. Prayer is important for Jews. It is important for non-Jews, from a Jewish perspective; witness the approval by the Sages of the prayers of the non-Jews in the boat on which Jonah was fleeing from God. And it is important for us to encourage prayerfulness by non-Jews, because it sets the context and the tone for the whole of the community and country, and this will influence Jews as well.

Let me now return to the Netziv and conclude with a *devar torah*. I believe that the Netziv's interpretation, that **והרעתם** refers to prayer, can find support in a passage in Sifre.

One Tanna maintains that the commandment of **והרעתם בחצוצרות** will be completely fulfilled only in the days before the advent of Messiah, during **במהמת גג ומגג**, that final apocalyptic war which will herald the Redemption.

R. Akiba, however, is less inclined to such eschatological or legendary interpretations. He believes that the commandment is meant for contemporary times and in a very real sense. He therefore includes in **והרעתם** the following items: **שדפון וירקון**, **ספינה במטורפת בים**, **אשה בקשה ליד** -- crop failures, a woman experiencing difficult childbirth, and a ship coming to grief at sea. These occasions, all of them fraught with danger, are similar to **צד הצורר אתכם**, to being attacked by an enemy, and they require **והרעתם בחצוצרות**.

However, the truth is that I never heard of trumpets being sounded at such occasions. When in Jewish history did a farmer sound the clarion over rotting crops? And none of my colleagues who is a Jewish Chaplain in a hospital, ever blew a silver trumpet over a patient in an obstetric ward...

Hence, we must assume that the Netziv's interpretation is justified, and was anticipated by R. Akiba. He refers not to the sound of the trumpets, which is no longer applicable nowadays, after the destruction of the Temple, but to **והרעתם** as prayer. R. Akiba is authentically the voice of Judaism when he tells us that at all such occasions of emergency and crisis we must offer a prayer to the Almighty.

Life today, on this 200th birthday of the United States, is unfortunately described quite accurately by R. Akiba's illustrations.

We suffer from **שדפון וירקון**, from economic difficulties which, in their complexity, are probably unprecedented. We are in the category of **אשה בקשה ליד**: a new world is bloodily and painfully emerging from the womb of the present, and we cannot tell whether our world will survive, or whether the new one will be a healthy world or a monster... And we are much like a **ספינה במטורפת בים**: our society is largely a rudderless and leaderless ship, storm-tossed, uncertain and unsure.

At a time of this sort, all of us -- Jews and non-Jews, Americans and all mankind -- need **והרעתם**, we need true prayer.

Let us not reject a man merely because he subscribes to faith and because he prays. At this critical juncture in our national life, we need more spiritual presence, and perhaps out of this will grow a reaffirmation of our fundamental moral and ethical values.

For Jews the world over, for Israel, for all Americans, this is the way to the end of the verse: **ונזכרתם לפני ה' אלקיכם ונושעתם מאוביכם**, And you will be remembered before the Lord your God and you will be saved from your enemies.