

"PRIDE AND VANITY"

The quality of pride has almost always been scorned. It borders on arrogance, and has therefore been considered false, contemptible, presumptuous, and a mockery of man's frailty. Thus David prayed, al tevo'eini reggel gaavah, "let not the foot of pride overtake me" (Psalms 36:12).

Yet, remarkably, it is on a holy^a day as Rosh Hashanah that we pray for this very element which we ordinarily deprecate: U-ve'khen ten kavod ha-Shem l'amekha, "Now, O Lord, grant honor to Thy people!" If pride is so reprehensible, is it right for us to implore God for Kavod -- for honor and glory?

Evidently it is. And the burden of my message to you this morning is that nowadays we must no longer treat pride with derision. On the contrary, it is today not only not a blemish of character, but a positive good, a condition of our survival as civilized people and as loyal Jews.

In our generation the stock of pride must shoot upwards, for the simple reason that the supply is short and the need great. For what is it but lack of pride that makes whites fearful of their future if civil rights will be granted to those of darker skin? What but lack of self-respect allows black men to destroy the hard-earned victories of their most eminent leaders by indulging in orgies of civil wrongs? What is it but contempt for human-kind that permits us to speak so casually of "overkill," and even the "limited" use of mass-destructive nuclear weapons? And it is nothing but the feeling of human worthlessness that tolerates the enshrinement of pornography as art, and the disgusting proliferation of lurid books and low^{ew} shows and advertisements that teach our children to leer before they can look and sneer before they can speak.

It is the pride of being human, of being a creature of God and created in His image, that must be reasserted if man is to prevail over the many negative

features in his environment. David was right in fearing "the foot of pride," for pride is dangerous when it is centered in the foot, when it is used to step on others and trample upon their feelings and sensitivities. Otherwise, if it is pride in the neshamah, in the divine spirit within our hearts and minds, pride in being human, then it is a blessing. It is this kavod and glory in which we revel and for which we supplicate God, in u-ve'khen ten kavod.

In pleading for more pride, I do not mean vanity, but pride in the sense of self-respect, which is fully consonant with true humility. I mean an ego that is neither inflated nor deflated, but one that is solid. I mean that we must neither strut across the scene of history, nor crawl, but that we march. It is only this kind of pride that can lead us on to great achievements.

A century ago, a very perceptive Frenchman visited these shores, and his observations have the ring of truth even today. The historian De Tocqueville wrote of the American: "The same man who cannot endure subordination... has so contemptible an opinion of himself that he thinks he is born only to indulge in vulgar pleasures. He willingly takes up with low desires without daring to embark on lofty enterprises of which he scarcely dreams." Indeed, without pride in his humanity, a man is condemned to become the lowly vision he holds of himself!

And if this is so for man in general, it holds true a hundred-fold for the modern Jew. What but lack of pride in one's Jewishness allows a man to go through an entire day and month and year without a word of Torah or prayer? What but a failure of pride permits him to eat as a Jew ought not, to speak and dress and work and drink as a Jew ought not? U-ve'khen ten kavod ha-Shem l'amekha!

There are those whose failure of pride leads them to morose predictions as to the future of Judaism. And they marshal reasons to support their feeling that little can be done about the situation. A national magazine writes about "The Vanishing Jews of America" -- and it is dangerous to dismiss it as journalistic nonsense. A declining birth-rate and rising intermarriage represent a perilous combination.

Our college youth is largely alienated from the sources of Judaism. Jewish chastity and sobriety, long heralded as the examples for the rest of the world, are gradually yielding to the national averages. In the face of growing assimilation, am ha-aratzut run rampant, and perpetual confusion, there can be detected amongst all too many of us a creeping fear, a paralysis of the will, a seepage of courage, ~~and~~ With some of us this lack of pride and courage and confidence is full blown. With others it is, at best, a series of vague fears and doubts, like weeds pushing up through the cobblestones.

But this attitude, this self-abnegation, is a lie from which we must purge ourselves as we stand before the Almighty on this holy day. We are the wealthiest Jewish community, in history -- wealthy in terms of financial resources, of power and influence, of talent and education. And this places a terrible responsibility upon us. Let me explain by referring to a story told by the Rabbis of the Midrash, in which they anticipated our modern condition. The prophet Elijah was once walking when he was accosted by a gruff young man who ridiculed him and hurled insults at him. But the old Prophet was no ordinary old man. He turned his fiery mien to the insolent young man, fixed his gaze upon him, and ~~hurled insults at him,~~ ^{in a clear and steady voice} and said, Mah tashiv le'yotzrekha le'yom ha-din? How are you going to answer for this to your Creator on Judgment Day? The young man was taken aback, realized his error, and apologized, saying, binah ve'deiah lo nitnu li, I do not have the necessary intelligence and wisdom. I have neither learning nor tact, therefore I sinned against you. My son, countered Elijah, how do you earn your living? Tzayad ani, answered the young man; I am a fisherman. Ah, cried Elijah, to know how to spin the flax and weave the nets, to know the currents of the sea and the habits of the fish, to choose the bait and learn how to knot the ropes, to study the market and know when and where to sell, for that you have binah ve'deiah, knowledge and understanding; but for the words of the Torah about which it is written ki karov elekha ha-davar me'od be'fikha u'vi'levavkha la-asoto, that it is exceedingly close to you, within your mouth and your heart --

for this you have no binah or ve'deiah, talent, no patience, no wisdom, no ability? You have skill only for catching fish, but not for catching an idea of Torah, of its moral teachings of respect for others and derekh erez for your elders? Here you suddenly lose pride and confidence in yourself, turn meek and diffident, and plead inferiority? What indeed will you answer to your Creator on the yom ha-din?

My dear friends: as we stand here on this yom ha-din, on the threshold of a new year, the words of the prophet ring to us from across the centuries: mah tashiv le'yotzrekha le'yom ha-din, how shall we answer for our failure to do for Torah as much and as well as we have done for ourselves? We shall certainly not be able to put on the mask of false humility and argue binah ve'deiah lo nitnu li, that we haven't the capacity for it. That is a spurious argument. As a community we have performed ^{herculean} ~~harder~~ tasks that have made history. Each of us in his own endeavors and in his own career knows the ropes and has managed to land some pretty big fish. We have much to be proud of: wisdom, shrewdness, tact, talent. Why then not use it for Judaism too? Why not the proper pride in our spiritual competence?

Consider the immense amount of talent that goes into the making of a modern businessman: skill, techniques, perceptiveness, foresight, the ability to work with such diverse parties as customers, competitors, unions, and a big organization. Such qualities are prerequisite for him to be able to catch the big fish in business and commerce. Academically, American Jews have attained the highest level of education and professional competence, from ^{disciplined} ~~lawyers~~ to skilled physicians, from eminent jurists and famous scientists to government leaders and distinguished ¹ academicians. Our women, whose grandmothers some 3 or 4 generations ago were barely literate, are today unusually well-read, cultured, often university-educated. We cannot argue, therefore, that we lack in binah ve'deiah. How then can we explain that we have not done nearly enough to utilize these same talents for building a more vital religious Jewish community, especially more and greater Jewish schools, to dispel the abysmal ignorance that envelopes our community?

It is true, that we have achieved much, very much, in the past decades; members of this synagogue have had a major share in these historic accomplishments. The support of the State of Israel, the great Yeshiva University, the growing network of Day Schools, more Orthodox synagogues, are all to our credit. But more, so very much more, remains to be done, and so much more that could and should have been done! Dare we, who have so much to be proud of in our secular achievements, offer the pale excuse that we lack the ability to do it, that binah ve'deiah lo nitnu li? Dare we balk at our own adult study of Torah, and feel ourselves so inferior, so weak, that only by means of gimmicks, "name lecturers," collations, and entertainment, can we be attracted to adult Jewish education, which is karov elekha ha-davar me'od, which is of the essence of our own characters and roots and very being? Mah tashiv le'yotzrekha le'yom ha'edin, how shall we answer for this false humility which keeps us chained in ignorance of Torah?

This last year or so we have had an especially agonizing example of the abdication of Jewish kavod, of our communal pride and natural self-respect. I mention this on Rosh Hashanah ^{despite my reluctance,} because it affects each of us, because the destiny of our community is involved, and because there may still be something that can be done to remedy the situation. Jewish organizations vied with each other in coming to the attention of the Vatican, and Jewish leaders competed in pilgrimages to Rome and audiences with the head of the Roman faith -- even if such meetings took place on Shabbat! The ~~new~~ ^{new} papers were deluged with reports of the Church's willingness to absolve Jews for supposedly killing the prophet of Christianity. How excited our Jewish secularists and non-Orthodox leaders became! A new era was to be ushered in, not by Mashiah, but by decree of the Ecumenical Council. By a stroke of the pen, /society was going to be transformed, anti-Semitism wiped out, and old hatreds buried. So all warnings by Orthodox spokesmen about safeguarding the dignity of Judaism and about latent missionary motives of the Church were dismissed as Old World suspicions and superstitions. And people who should have learned from the epics of ~~Wisdom~~ ^{the} Warsaw Ghetto and State of Israel what Jewish pride means, that you don't go begging for what is just and proper, and that you

do not place your national concerns or religious future on the auction-block or negotiating table, people ^{who} have the binah ve'deiah or worldliness and international diplomacy and tact ^{misled} us! And so, after pleading for exoneration from the stupid and cruel and pagan accusation of deicide, the latest and most authoritative reports show that our premonitions and forebodings were correct; that the Church's aim is to wean Jews away from Torah; that they seek "the reunification of the Jewish people with the Church,"; and that the new and weakened instructions not to blame modern Jews for the death of their prophet 2000 years ago is not because of reason or logic or love or justice or liberalism, but because this perverted accusation may interfere with the missionary goal of converting the Jews! So our abdication of binah ve'deiah has failed to help us. In ingratiating ourselves, we have lost part of our self-respect. To our impoverished leadership, and to all of us who followed in misguided weakness, the old Prophet's question has a special, terrible relevance: Mah tashiv le'yotzrekha le'yom ha-din? How will you answer for this? How will you explain away the unconcern for the fate of Judaism in this hysterical obsession for acceptance? How will you explain on this yom ha-din that we emerge from the whole affair with nothing but communal chagrin, embarrassment, indignity, and humiliation? Let us all of us learn, for once and for all, that the view of Torah as enunciated by Torah ^(not irrelevant) scholars is not out-dated, ^(me'od) is not myopic. Ki karov elekha ha-davar I say this not, Heaven forbid, in a spirit of recrimination, but in sorrow over our dignity that has been compromised; and in the hope and with the prayer that u-ve'khen ten kavod ha-Shem l'amekha. We need the true glory and honor of Israel -- Torah and Tradition -- which is the source of our pride.

Never again must we allow our humility to become debility, our meekness weakness, our inferiority feelings to engender true inferiority. We are haunted by ghosts conjured up by the prophets of fear who do not share the faith that Israel and Torah ^{can and} will survive and flourish. It is about time that we had the maturity, the pride, the confidence, and will-power to banish these spacious

spectres and set our minds to the high tasks to which our generation has been called.

The greatest yetzer hara or temptation, said R. Shelomoh Karliner, is for the prince to forget that he is the son of a King. How can our pride be re-asserted? By remembering who we are. And that is what the Jewish tradition says to us through Zikhronot on this day: remember who you are. You are the princes of the spirit, the ambassadors of God, descendants of the House of David. You are heirs to the most glorious and magnificent tradition in the annals of mankind. You are the children of martyrs and sages, of teachers and thinkers, of pioneers and heroes. In your bones is the marrow of prophets and poets and philosophers, of singers and saints. In your veins courses the blood of Hillel and Akiva, of Maimonides and Rashi, of the Vilna Gaon and the Baal Shem Tov. In our heart beats the rhythm of the ~~hammers~~ of great builders of the Holy Temples, of a Holy Land, of a State of Israel, of an immortal culture, of builders of synagogues and schools and institutions of philanthropy. The very sound of the shofar recapitulates the immense spiritual fortitude of our forbears, Abraham and Isaac, who were willing to sacrifice their most precious possessions and loves for the selfless ideal of kiddush ha-Shem; and shofar reminds ^{us} of our greatest source of pride: the divine wisdom granted us through Torah, the giving of which was accompanied by Shofar. Binah ve'deiah are of the substance of our lives, our souls, our minds and our hearts. Never, never can we deny it.

Nor ought we deny it. The knowledge of that ancient and ever-renewing wisdom endows us with pride, not vanity. As we approach the divine Judge on this Day of Judgment, let us affirm that we shall use that greatness that inheres in us and our people for Torah; and through Torah, for the world. May that be our proud yet humble answer to our creator on this Yom ha-din.

U-ve'khen ten kavod ha-Shem l'amekha, ~~tehillah li'amekha~~, tehillah li'rayekha,
ve'tikvah tovah le'dorshekhon. "Now, O Lord, grant honor to Thy people, and glory to those who revere ~~the~~ Thee, and good cheer and hope to those who seek Thee." Amen