

"ALL THE WORLD'S A WEDDING"

Each Jewish holiday has its own tone and style, and offers its individual insight into the relationship between Israel and God.

Thus, Passover presents God as the Liberator, and Israel as the newly-emancipated and grateful freemen. Shavuot shows us God as Teacher, and Israel as disciples. On Sukkot we look to God as the great Protector, and Israel as the protected. Yom Kippur shows us God as the merciful Father, and we as his pitied and forgiven children.

What insight does Rosh Hashanah offer into this relationship? Usually we envision God as the awesome and majestic King, and we as His loyal and worshipful subjects. That is true. However, it is not the entire story. It represents only the insight of the first of the three themes of Rosh Hashanah, that of Malkhuyot, the celebration of God's royalty or sovereignty over the world. But the second theme, that of Zikhronot, which speaks of God's awareness of and concern for humankind, gives us an entirely different insight. Here we see God as the Lover and Israel as the beloved, God as the divine Husband and Israel as the loving wife. Notice, as you recite the words, the marvelous emphasis in the Zikhronot passages on the word ahavah, love. Even Noah of flood fame, who was a righteous but not

necessarily likeable character, is remembered by God be'ahavah, in love.

Thus, it is that the composer of the Zikhronot prayer

quotes the famous verse from the Prophet Jeremiah:
 פה אמר ה' זכרוני
 עק חסד ילדותי אהבתי פלאותיך עביתך אחרי אמצאך בארץ

"Thus says the Lord, I remember your youthful devotion, the love of your bridal days, how you followed me through the wilderness, through land unsown" (Jeremiah 2:2). "The love of bridal days" -- a touching and insightful metaphor that characterizes the relationship between Israel and God. This is, indeed, a classical prophetic

theme, and one which reaches its highest expression in the words of the Prophet Hosea:
 ארשתיך עולם - וארשתיך עולם
 ארשתיך עולם ורחמים. ארשתיך עולם ויבוא

"I will betroth you to Me forever; I will betroth you to Me in righteousness and in justice, in kindness and in mercy. I will betroth you to Me in faithfulness; and you shall know the Lord" (Hosea 2:21-22).

It is appropriate, therefore, on Rosh Hashanah to speak of the metaphor of God as a loving spouse and Israel as the beloved one. And if we follow through on this metaphor, we find that we can interpret the entire Jewish religious commitment in terms of -- a wedding.

That this is so can be seen -- though it is far from self-evident -- from a remarkable Talmudic passage. The Talmud (Eruvin 54a)

tells of the Amora Samuel counselling his younger contemporary Rav Yehudah hatof ve'ekhol, hatof ve'ishti, d'alma d'azlinan mineih ke'hilula dami -- hurry and eat, hurry and drink, for the world we are leaving is like a wedding. What an unusual simile: all the world's a wedding!

What did the Talmud mean by that? According to some commentaries (Rashi and others), Samuel offered some sage and brooding advice: enjoy yourself with legitimate pleasures as long as you can because life is all too short, it is like a huppah which is put up and then quickly put away again; the wedding party doesn't last forever.

There is, of course, much wisdom in that remark. Some of us tend to put off enjoying life's bounties, we begrudge ourselves God's gifts to us. We keep on saving for a rainy day, so intensely that we fail to enjoy the sunshine. What the Talmud means, then, is that what the Torah permits us to benefit from ought to be accepted cheerfully and happily. It is good Jewish doctrine.

However, Samuel's advice still sounds a bit too Epicurean for a Talmudic Sage. I therefore prefer an interpretation by the great Hasidic teacher, Rabbi Jacob Joseph of Polonne, one that goes back to the metaphor of God as Lover and that illuminates not only an obscure passage in the Talmud, but an obscure aspect of our passage through life. All the world's a wedding. At a wedding there is much going on: food is eaten, drink is imbibed, cigars are

smoked, toasts are exchanged, there is dancing and music and camaraderie and posing for photographers and enjoying floral arrangements... a great deal of motion and activity. All of it is enjoyable and exciting. However, all of this is meaningful only if there is a groom and a bride and he says to her harei at mekudeshet li, "you are hereby betrothed to me." If there should be no harei at, if there should be no act of marriage, then all the rest makes no sense; it is a matter of going through grotesque, empty motions. Then the guests have come in vain, the eating is gluttony, the comradeship is irrelevant, the toasting is a meaningless gesture, the dancing is weird. With the harei at, everything makes sense; without it, nothing does.

So is all of life. It is filled with all kinds of diverse activities of every description. We work, make money, spend it, socialize, build families, experience joy and sadness, join groups and are active in politics. Does all this make sense? Does it have any meaning? The answer is: the world is ke'hilula dami, like a wedding. If we are conscious, throughout all these activities, of an ultimate purpose, of a goal, then that purpose unifies all our deeds and gives them meaning and inspiration. Without that purpose, we merely go through motions that are incoherent, dull, and utterly insignificant. We may be expert at our particular individual activities, but yet we remain, from an over-all view, madmen -- for the paranoiac too is brilliant in individual insights but lacks an integrating factor and a sense of unity in his life.

And what is that ultimate purpose? It is -- the same as in a wedding -- a marriage formula. Like the formula expressed by groom to bride, harei at mekudeshet li, "you are hereby betrothed to me," so the Almighty has betrothed the people of Israel with the word li, "to Me": in the words of Hosea, v'erastikh li le'olam, "I betroth you to Me forever!" The wedding of God and Israel, the intensely close and loyal relationship that finds its fulfillment through Torah and the Jewish way of mitzvot, that is the purpose of all life. And if that purpose exists for us consciously, then all else we do somehow fits into the picture of a meaningful life. Without it, we have a life that is like a wedding party without a bride and a groom, without a wedding.

It is no exaggeration to say that especially we of the 20th century stand in great need of this teaching that alma ke'hilula dami, that life is worth living only if it makes sense, that it makes sense only if there is a purpose, and that the purpose is loyalty to God, the wedding of our talents and substance and destiny with the will of God as taught in Torah. For we moderns have developed as never before the perfection of means -- science, the exploitation of nature, is a highly refined skill; business, commerce, trade are complicated arts; communication and transportation are effected with consummate speed. We know how to do things like never before. The trouble is, we do not always know why we are doing them. We have an elaborate technology in which we are so intoxicated with

means that are efficient, that we have forgotten the ends. Never before have we been able to go so fast; never before have we been so unsure of where it is we want to go. We can land a man on the Moon, but after having done so triumphantly, we begin to wonder what we are doing there in the first place. Proof of this uncertainty of goal despite the perfection of technique is the fact that after man landed on the Moon, our country was flooded with all kinds of diverse and sometimes contradictory explanations of why we went there. As Shakespeare said, "methinks the lady doth protest too much." We simply had the capability and we exploited it -- but we did not really know why.

Indeed, all the world's a wedding! -- and in our ever-smaller world of this century we have elaborate caterers, fabulous photographers, the most gifted musicians -- and we have neglected to inquire whether a wedding is taking place. The Groom is absent, and the harei at mekudeshet li and the v'erastikh li le'olam are nowhere heard.

It is told of the great Hasidic master, "The Holy Yud," that he accosted a man in the marketplace and asked him to accompany him to the synagogue and there recite the Psalms and study Torah. The man was honored by the Rabbi's request, but refused, explaining that he was busy making a living. But, the Rabbi asked, what do you need to make money for? Why, of course, answered the man, I have to make money to provide for my children. The Rabbi seemed satisfied

with the answer. Some twenty years later, he again accosted a young man and the same conversation ensued. Suddenly the Holy Yud recognized that the young man was the son of the very man with whom he had had an identical conversation two decades earlier. Whereupon the Rabbi raised his eyes to Heaven and said, "Almighty God, when will I meet that man for whom all the generations have labored so strenuously!"

Certainly, we are engaged in ^{frantic} ~~hectic~~ activity, and invent transparently senseless goals, simply postponing from generation to generation the consideration of what we are doing in life and what our real purpose is on this planet.

That is what Torah and Judaism can and should mean to us, and what in effect does mean to those who are committed and practicing Jews. It is the one element that makes all the rest of life livable. It is the wedding formula that makes all of the motion and the movement sensible. It is the response to God's proposal of, "and I will betroth you to Me." If we hear that divine proposal, and we respond with an appropriate kind of life, then the entire adventure of living is a happy and purposeful one. But, if there is no God, no Torah, no mitzvot, then all our efficiency, all our wealth, all our achievements, are like the macabre dance of an intoxicated guest who dances in a darkened hall where the wedding has been called off.

What, more specifically, is it that Judaism considers the purpose of life? The verses from Hosea, the wedding formula between

God and Israel, present us with a three-stage definition of this purpose. They represent a systematic method for the modern Jew to arrive at Jewish purpose in his life, a consummation of the wedding of existence.

The first thing Hosea asks us to do is to respond to God's proposal of, "I will betroth you to Me forever." The emphasis is on "forever." I interpret this as a simple commitment to Jewish survival, regardless of the quality of that survival. I identify myself with those modern Jewish thinkers who have maintained that after Auschwitz simple survival becomes a great mitzvah, for by saying "Yes" to the perpetuation of the Jewish people, we are saying "No" to Hitler and Stalin and all the anti-Semites. In a world in which our people has been decimated by genocide and threatened by assimilation and intermarriage, the simple desire that we continue our unhampered existence becomes a religious imperative. It is the first step in defining a purpose in life. "Forever."

The second step is, "I will betroth you to Me in righteousness and in justice, in kindness and in mercy." This means that, as Jews, we must approach the problems of life and society with a commitment to the ideals of righteousness and social justice and compassion and pity for the underdog and the disadvantaged. It means that we must not rush, in the irrational panic of feeling threatened, to undo the general traditional Jewish values of humanitarianism and concern for the poor, the wronged, the underprivileged. It means that our espousal of justice and righteousness must not

be of the American Civil Liberties Union kind, not of the political liberal, but of the practicing Jew, whose advocacy of these concepts and these attitudes is firmly engrained in his faith and in his tradition.

Finally, the highest and most critical and most vital step: "I will betroth you to Me in faithfulness and you shall know the Lord." Faithfulness for the Jew means the response to God by the performance of mitzvot, by the observance of Jewish life in all its respects. It is something we cannot do unless we first "know the Lord." That means that we must betake ourselves to a study of the sources of Jewish tradition and Jewish history -- to Talmud Torah, the study of Torah.

This is the way a Jew in the 20th century can restructure the purpose of his life and find that all of it, in all its manifold aspects, truly makes sense.

Let Rosh Hashanah and the theme of Zikhronot, the love-relationship between God and Israel, inspire us to ever greater loyalty to Judaism, so that all else will be touched with grace and endowed with meaning. Through Jewish survival, through Jewish compassion and justice, through Jewish faith, we will achieve a purposeful life.

Then our year, and years without end to follow, will be blessed with mazal tov, with good fortune and happiness as befits a joyous wedding. Hatof ve'ekhol, hatof ve'ishti, let us eat and drink

and in every way enjoy the bounty of God's goodness to us -- but
let us never forget that alma ke'hilula dami, that all the world's
a wedding.