

"STRANGE MEDICINE"

The biblical account of the revelation at Sinai begins by informing us that it took place during the third month after the exodus from Egypt: ba-hodesh ha-shelishi le'tzet bnei yisrael. The Children of Israel left Egypt in the middle of Nisan, and the Torah was revealed to them at the beginning of Sivan.

The Rabbis of Midrash Tanhuma wondered why God waited all this time before giving the Torah, and did not present Israel with the Five Books of Moses immediately upon their leaving the land of their servitude. The touching answer they give is couched in warmth and charm. It can be compared, they tell us, to the son of the King who had been very ill. When he recovered from his illness, his father said, in royal indulgence: I shall wait for three months to give my son the opportunity to recuperate, and only afterwards olikhenu el ha-rav li'l mod Torah, will I lead him to his teacher in order to have him study Torah. In the same way, when Israel left Egypt, there were amongst them many baalei mumin, people who were deformed and crippled because of the oppressive work of Egypt, and therefore the Almighty said: I will wait until they are completely recovered and only afterwards will I give them the Torah.

The great Kotzker Rabbi, whose challenging insights are always relevant to every age, asked the following question. In a previous passage, the same Midrash Tanhuma quoted approvingly the words of King Solomon in his Proverb^s, and applied them specifically to Torah: rifut tehi le'sharekha, ve'shikui le'atzmotekah, "they shall be healing for thy body, and marrow for thy bones." Now if Torah is considered by these Rabbis as a medicine, as a health-giving substance, then why was it necessary to wait for these three months? On the contrary, just because Torah is considered a medicine it should have been given immediately, to assist in the spiritual recovery of the Children of Israel.

9 The answer that the Kotsker Rebbe gives is of extreme importance to all of us today. Torah is a medicine, he agrees, but a strange medicine: it works only if the patient knows that he is sick. It is effective only if the patient agrees that something is wrong with him which needs correction. And the situation of the Children of Israel was especially calamitous because they did not even recognize that they were baalei mumin, that they had absorbed terrible impurities from the ^{abysmal} ~~low~~ spiritual ^{climate} ~~level~~ of Egypt and its slavery. Hence they had to wait for the third month, for during this time they learned that there was something wrong with them, and only then might Torah be effective as the medicine which would heal them.

So that Torah is a strange medicine. Like certain kinds of psychological therapy which are effective only when the patient has attained insight, Torah is effective only if the patient knows that he needs it, that he cannot live without it.

It may have occurred to many of us often to wonder: here we are, having worked so hard and labored so diligently for Torah in this country. Yet, while Orthodoxy has achieved much, we are so very far from our goal! How often we seem at the point of utter frustration.

May I suggest the reason for the lack of proper returns on all our investments of time and energy, of money and worry: and that is, that the patient -- American Jewry -- did not know that he was sick! And if the patient thinks that all is well with him, Torah cannot help much. It is a rule in the business world as well: you may have the best product in the world, but if the public feels no demand for it, you cannot sell and stay in business.

May I also suggest that in recent months, or even weeks, something dramatic has occurred which, frightening as it is, gives us new hope that American Jewry now knows its true condition, and hence Torah may yet become the medicine which will save American Jewish life.

No doubt most of us have either heard of or read that sensational and much discussed article in Look magazine entitled, "The Vanishing Jews of America." The burden of this article was that, considering the progressive assimilation of American Jews into the general environment, particularly as a result of inter-marriage, the entire American Jewish community is threatened with gradual extinction. Now, Look has been roundly criticized by a number of Jewish leaders and spokesman for national Jewish organizations. It is true that the gloomy forecast by the magazine may have been exaggerated for the purpose of selling more copies. Also, there is no doubt that the article, appearing in a popular weekly, was not annotated in scholarly fashion and supported by long columns of statistics. Nevertheless, it cannot and ought not be denied that the major contention of the article is unfortunately valid!

Only a few months ago, in a much more profound and well documented article, a major researcher writing in the American Jewish Yearbook for 1963 warned that the alarmingly high rate of inter-marriage combined with the depressingly low birth rate of American Jews threatened our entire future in this country. Public relations problems aside, I fear that we are confronting the truth in this warning about our future.

And yet I believe that we ought to welcome these reports; not because, according to the article, Orthodoxy is least affected by the plague of inter-marriage -- that is little consolation for us. Rather, we ought to welcome this news because of its shock value. Perhaps this will wake up some of our sleeping brethren who slumber in their own little cocoons of official optimism.

We ought to welcome what has now been told to the entire world, because this confirms sadly what we who stand uncompromisingly in the Jewish tradition have been warning our fellow Jews not for three months and not for three years but but for over thirty years -- that without Jewish education, without Shabbat, without mitzvot, the community must assimilate and ultimately disappear.

For too long now ours has been a lonely voice in the wilderness crying out: you will not be able to keep the Jewish people alive and surviving merely on an ethnic basis; a young man or woman with academic training will, if not thoroughly grounded in the total religious experience of Judaism, refuse to accept that it is necessary to continue to be a Jew merely ^{because of} ~~on~~ nationalistic or racial grounds. *Reasons:*

Above all, we welcome this revelation because with this new realistic awareness of our own condition, maybe something will be done. Now that American Jews begin to realize how sick our community is, perhaps we will be ready for the beneficial therapy of that strange medicine called Torah. Perhaps now efforts at teaching Torah to our generations of American Jews will become more effective. Maybe with the growing realization that our community is filled with baalei mumin, with those who are sick and deformed for having ignored Judaism, for having decimated its principles and Halakhah and for having foresaken the heritage of parents and grandparents, maybe with this realization the medicine of Torah will work.

By a remarkably coincidence, this past week has seen another report that is very important. And perhaps those who are weary of statistics will have more faith in the insights of a distinguished American sociologist. Prof. Robert MacIver, with whose purposes we totally disagree but whose analysis we accept as valid, addressed the American Council for Judaism on a theme which seemed to bother both him and his hosts: the "continuing alienation" of Jews from the rest of American society. Put in other words, this means that both the good professor and the American Council for Judaism are disturbed at the slow rate of assimilation! Whose "fault" is it that we have not assimilated completely at this late stage of American Jewish history? Prof. MacIver blames: the "distinctiveness of Jewish culture" as expressed in such phenomena as Shabbat, "food taboos" (for which read: kashruth), and the Jewish strictures on inter-marriage. He blames, in addition, the idea of separate Jewish schools, i.e. the Jewish Day School system, and the tendency to form special Jewish organizations for matters of general interest

(probably referring to organizations such as the Association of Orthodox Jewish Scientists).

Is the professor right? Yes, he is! Would that our non-Orthodox Jewish friends listened closely to what he says. He notes well what it is that has saved us to this day. And they are not the solutions that have been offered by our deviationist fellow-Jews -- whether the half-Reform or quarter-Reform or completely Reform, whether Yiddishists or Hebraists, whether secular Zionist or any others with pet solutions for our problems. No mere "adaptation"^S can heal the sick heart of American Jewry. Not even fighting an ever-diminishing anti-Semitism with an ever-growing budget, which seems to be the peculiar blessing of our "defense organizations," will accomplish much towards saving American Jewry. Israel is important, Yiddish is important, Hebrew is important... but these alone have not helped and cannot help. At best they are tranquilizers, at worst merely placebos. You cannot treat a serious medical problem with a couple of aspirins!

This we must all recognize -- especially those who want to juggle the Jewish destiny: being not completely Jewish, yet not completely non-Jewish; not traditional Jews, yet not assimilated Jews. In the long run, this is an impossible task, foredoomed to failure. Now we must recognize not only that we are sick, but that there are certain forces that have kept us alive and well, and that we must do all that we can to reinforce those healthy elements: Shabbat, kashrut, the ban against inter-marriage and inter-dating, and above all education, and more education! Perhaps, to take up the hints of Prof. MacIver, there should be Sabbath-observing young Jewish professionals who will form organizations for social workers and lawyers, for architects and behavioral scientists, equivalent to that of the Association of Orthodox Jewish Scientists. Above all else, it is time that we recognized our spiritual illness and our need for Torah. Then, and only then, will Torah become, as Solomon put it, rif'ut tehi le'sharekha, ve'shikui le'atzmotekha -- healing for our body and marrow for our bones.

9 If these revelations will shock American Jewry to an awareness of its own impoverished spiritual condition, then our timeless messages will become more effective than it ever was before. Then all of us will begin to build more Day Schools. Then we shall begin to emphasize more Hebrew Day Schools on the High School level -- and let us take a leaf from the book of our Catholic friends who now realize that High School and College education is religiously far more significant than elementary school education. Then we shall begin, as a community, to pay more attention to Yeshiva University.

Then, above all, we will begin to devote more attention as well to Jewish youth on campuses throughout this country. There are in our country, at present, some 300,000 Jewish college students, representing about 75% of the college age youth of the Jewish community. In a short time this is expected to rise to 90%. Now there is an organization by the name of Hillel which is devoted to the welfare of the Jewish student. But the solution we have in mind is more than what most Hillel groups ^{do} offer or can offer. What we mean is Torah and the study of Torah above all else. It is therefore an indication of the new opportunities opened to us to learn that a group like "Yavneh," which started out only about five years ago with a handful of students at Columbia University, has now spread to about seventeen campuses throughout the country and in the short space of five years now numbers some twelve-hundred students -- who, in order to belong to this organization, must undertake a regular program of Jewish study for which no college credit is offered! Imagine if Yavneh were given the proper support by the adult community -- they might today number not eleven-hundred but perhaps eleven-thousand members!

In summary, then: this new realization of how far we have gone downhill may make us ready to return and climb once again to the summit of Sinai. We have achieved, to use the words of the Midrash, the ad she'tashuv nafsho min ha-ḥoli: we have recuperated enough to appreciate how sick we were. Now is the time to take the next step: olikhenu el ha-rav li'lmod Torah, the return to the house of the teacher to study Torah!

Now is the time when we can achieve greatness, when every effort can produce unprecedented results. It is in dedication to this kind of commitment that we turn our thoughts to the past, entertaining memories of devoted parents and teachers, and promise to consecrate ourselves to a greater, brighter, and holier future for us, our children, and all Israel.