

"BEYOND MITZVOT"

Our Haftorah for this morning, from the second chapter of Hosea, begins on a high optimistic note: "And the number of the children of Israel shall be as the sand of the sea, which cannot be measured or numbered." For a people which chronically suffers the status of a minority, this prophecy comes as a cheerful source of encouragement.

The verse seems simple enough. Yet the Rabbis of the Talmud (Yoma 22b) detected in this statement an apparent contradiction. The first half of the verse says that the number of the Children of Israel will be very large -- as great as the sand of the sea. That, indeed, is a large number; but it is not infinite. The second half of the verse speaks of the population of Israel being so great that it cannot be measured or numbered; this implies an even greater number of Israelites.

This is, of course, only an apparent contradiction, because the prophet wants to explain his metaphor and tells us that by the words "as the sand of the sea," he means that the people of Israel will be well nigh too many to count. But the question of the Rabbis, counterposing the idea of a finite with the idea of an infinite number, was meant merely to introduce the answer they offer: kan bi'zeman she'osin retzono shel makom, when Hosea speaks of the Children of Israel being beyond number he refers to a time when the Israelites will do the will of God; and kan bi'zeman she'ein osin retzono shel makom, when Hosea speaks of us being merely as many as the particles of sand on the sea-shore he refers to a time when we will not perform the will of God.

Now this is a strange answer. When one reads the beginning of our Haftorah, one finds himself in a mood which is favorable to our people who obviously are considered as deserving of divine reward. How, therefore, can the Rabbis maintain that the great promise that we will be as many as the

sand of the sea refers to a time when we do not do the will of God?

I should like to propose an answer, which, to my mind, touches the heart of the Jewish outlook on God and man, ~~and~~ contains an incisive and perceptive comment on the ethics of our Torah. The answer derives from a comment, in another context, by one of the most seminal of Hasidic thinkers, R. Zadok Ha-Kohen of Lublin. The Kohen, as he is called, distinguishes between two terms: retzono shel makom and mitzvato shel makom, the will of God and the commandment of God. All of the Halakhah, including the 613 Biblical commandments and the many more rabbinic commandments, represents God's mitzvah, His commandment, His directions, His demands upon us. These are the things that we must do in order to justify our existence before Him. But the mere performance of the divine commandment -- ^{His} mitzvah -- does not exhaust the relation of God and man. There is much that goes beyond mitzvot, an overplus of meaning, whole worlds that transcend the idea of mitzvah or commandment. ^{This} is the area of retzono shel makom, ~~the~~ will of God. God wants of us more than He commands us; His ratzon is far greater than His mitzvah. The divine mitzvah is something that every Jew can, with enough exertion, perform completely. But that extra something beyond the commandment, namely, the ratzon, is what each individual must strive to realize and actualize according to his own ability and talent.

For instance, the idea of mitzvah means that we are each of us commanded to be a decent member of the Jewish community ~~and~~ fulfill his obligations. But the will of God, the ratzon, is that we be far more than passive participants in the drama of Jewish life; it means that those of us who have any leadership ability must develop it and use it. The will of God, ~~is~~ that we not ~~only~~ give by get, that we not only belong ~~but~~ that we bring in others, that we not ~~only~~ react to others but that we act on our own.

One of the most obvious places where we may see the difference between commandment and will is the study of Torah. It is important to keep this in mind especially in contemporary times, when despite all our extravagant talk about intellectuals and sophistication, the study of Torah -- the real intellectual content of Judaism -- is honored more in the breach than in the practice. The Talmud (Menahot 99b) had already told us that one can get away with a minimum is heseo wishes: d'i ba'i mif'ar nafsheih bi'keriat shema shaharit v'arvit, merely by reciting the Shema, which is a portion of the Torah itself, one can really fulfill the requirements of studying Torah by day and by night. It is easy enough to abide by the mitzvah of the Almighty. But the function of man is to go beyond this, and to try to live up to God's will, His ratzon. And in this case, the Jew must realize the verse of Joshua who, speaking of the Torah said: ve'hagita bo yomam va-lailah, "you shall meditate therein by day and by night." The commandment of God may be confined to the recitation of two brief passages: the will of God is that we live in the study of Torah constantly, by day and by night, that every spare moment be devoted to the contemplation of the Torah.

Interestingly, both these interpretations found their way into the explanation of Rashi on the Mishnah in Avot which says aseih toratekha keva, that we must set aside regular times to the study of Torah. One comment in Rashi has it that we must study be'chol yom, every day; the other requires of us to study kol hayom, all day. The first is the commandment of God the second is His will.

With this distinction between mitzvato shel Makom and retzono shel Makom, we may understand what the Talmud told us about our verse in the Haftarah. Both halves of this verse are set in the

context of an Israel which is obedient to the Lord. In both cases, Israel accepts and performs the commandments, the mitzvah of the Almighty. The difference between these two halves is this: The first half, which speaks of Israel being rewarded by a large population, but not a very large one, refers to the time when Israel will perform only the commandments of God, but fail to live up to His will. Whereas, the second half of the verse, which promises an extraordinarily large increase in Israel's citizenry, refers to the time when the Children of Israel will perform not only the commandments of God, but, even more, retzono shel Makom -- His infinite will!

This distinction between mitzvah and ratzon affords us a new insight in Judaism that is relevant to us and our times. For one thing, it means that none of us, no matter how observant we may be and no matter how Orthodox we consider ourselves, dare ever submit to the temptation of self-righteousness. It means that no matter how great our religious accomplishments may be vis-a-vis others, we must always bear and conduct ourselves with the utmost of humility. We must always remember that loyalty to the Halakhah is not at all an expression of maximal Judaism, but merely minimum Judaism! To observe every last iota of the Shulhan Arukh is to live up to the mitzvato shel Makom. And that, most certainly, is not enough! If we observe Kashruth, Shabbat,

family purity, prayer, and all the other institutions of Judaism-- we have only reached the level of God's commandments. The real test of genuine piety and authentic Jewishness is when we can get beyond the mitzvah and reach out for the sublimity of God's ratzon! This will of God is far greater than His commandments not only quantitatively, but also measured by the standard of the kind of attitude we bring to the practice of Judaism. If we approach Judaism in the sense of mitzvah, then it becomes for us an ole ha-mitzvot, a yoke, a burden, an obstacle to our freedom. But when we live the Jewish life with a feeling that we are blessed thereby, that this is what makes us happy -- then we have gone beyond the commandments towards the will. The test therefore is: when we live Jewishly, do we feel deprived or privileged? Do we consider that the regimen of religion hampers us or hallows us?

Indeed, it was with reference to the study of Torah that our Rabbis (Midrash Shir ha-Shirim) tell us a remarkable story that illustrates our point. Ben Azzai was teaching Torah, when suddenly the people about him noticed a remarkable sight: a wall of fire enveloped him. They quickly came to R. Akiva and reported the incident to him. Whereupon R. Akiva hurried to Ben Azzai and asked him: Is it true what they say, that a wall of flame enveloped you while you were teaching Torah? Yes, answered the younger colleague of the great Tanna. Is it perhaps, asked

R. Akiva,,because you were studying the maaseh merkavah, the most mysterious portion of the Torah, that part which deals with the most divine secrets, and therefore it was the holiness of the subject matter which caused you to be enveloped in flame? No, answered Ben Azzai, it was nothing as remote and mysterious as that. I was simply studying Torah, Neviim, and Ketubim -- just some Humash, some Haftorahs,and perhaps reciting some Psalms. What, then, was so unusual about my study? It was neither the particular subject matter nor the amount of studying I did; rather, ha-devarim hayu semehim ke'yom netinatam ME)sinai, v'arevim ke'ikkar netinatam -- It is just that I was so happy, so overjoyed, so enraptured with the Torah, as if this were the very day it was given from Sinai. Therwords were as sweet and as precious to me as when they were given.

Indeed so! The study of Torah must not be considered merely an obligation which one must dispose of by doing it however reluctantly. It must be considered at all times as a joyous fulfillment of the will of God, as a reenactment of the drama of Sinai, far and above what is demanded of me, but rather in the realm of what is wanted of me.

This distinction has special relevance to the great Jewish institution of charity or tzedakah. If a man gives, no matter of the amount, he performs a mitzvaha-and a very, very great one. But the will of God goes far beyond this. To give a coin to a

poor man is to perform a commandment; to help him so that he does not become poor in the first place, that is the accomplishment of retzono shel Makom. To give by itself is a mitzvah; to give with love, with grace, with kindness and joy -- that is the ratzon of the Almighty.

Mitzvah means that I give what I normally do; ratzon is achieved when I give more than I can. Mitzvah means that I give to any charity which approaches me without discrimination; ratzon means that I use my Jewish intelligence to discern which are more deserving and which less. Mitzvah means that I give, no matter what the amount, because I feel I must -- whether because of reasons of conscience or social pressure or something I wish to achieve thereby. Ratzon means that I give unconditionally, without thought of personal benefit, and with full inner participation and love.

This difference between commandment and will with regards to philanthropy is beautifully reflected in a passage in the Talmud, Kosh Hashanah 4a: if one says I will give this coin to charity in order that my children may live, or in order that I may merit the life of the world-to-come, harei zeh taaddik gamur -- the man who gives in this manner is completely righteous. Such is the reading on our text of the Talmud. But it is a prob-

lematical one; can such selfish and egotistical giving be the work of a man who is termed a tzaddik gamur, a completely righteous individual? The commentaries on the Talmud struggle with that question. But an answer is provided by another reading of the same text offered by the great Rabbenu Hananel and Meiri. Their text reads harei zeh tzedakah gemurah, that this kind of philanthropy is considered complete philanthropy. In other words, it is a complete fulfillment of the mitzvah to give charity; but it does not at all characterize the one who gives in this manner as a tzaddik gamur. In terms of our own thought, this means that if one gives, but his giving is motivated by some selfish concern, then he has abided by the commandment of God but he is still very far from performing the will, the ratzon of God. The mitzvah was performed, the act was fully done in accordance with every particular of the law. But such giving is without compassion and without love, and therefore has failed to rise to the level of retzono shel Makom, for the will of God is to give without the expectation of any reward, even without a spiritual kick-back!

Now we may understand the words of our Rabbis in Pirkei Avot: aseh retzono ki'retzonekha, do His will as you would perform your own will, kedei she'yaaseh retzonekha ki'retzono, so that He will do your will as if it were His own will. Our will -- our demands of God -- are never minimal. We ask not for the material things which will keep us on a bare level of subsistence, but for the luxuries to which we are accustomed and for which we strive. We ask not that we be spared humiliation, but that we be accorded honor and dignity. We ask not that our children not abandon and revile us, but that they love and cherish us now and even after we have gone. We plead not that our children not intermarry, but that they marry well and Jewishly. We present God, as it were, not with a human mitzvah but with a human ratzon. We are not satisfied with the minimum; we strive for the maximum.

Therefore the Tanna tells us that we must respond not only to the divine mitzvah but also to the divine ratzon! If our material desires are maximal, so must our spiritual endeavors be maximal. Only when our gesture to God is on the level of His will may we expect that He will consider our will.

All this is relevant to a beautiful and revered custom of The Jewish Center at this time of the year. Our synagogue is one of the founders of the Manhattan Day School; it is our very own Hebrew Day School. At this time of the year, before the festival of Shavuot, it is our tradition to appeal to our congregation for support of this great institution of Jewish learning for young children. It is one of the finest schools of its kind in the length and breadth of this land; as chairman of the Board of Education, I know intimately the extreme value of the kind of education, both secular and religious, that the school is giving to its over 400 students. There are in our congregation young men and young women who have graduated from this school. There are more whose children now attend this school. The future of Orthodox Judaism in our community, depends upon the success of the Manhattan Day School. No school - not even Harvard, Princeton, or Columbia -- can ever survive on tuition alone. Manhattan Day School certainly cannot. It must rely upon our munificence.

Our appeal, therefore, is: it is a mitzvah to give to Jewish education. But this year let us go beyond mitzva. Let us outdo ourselves in an attempt to perform not only the commandment but the ratzon, the will of God. The school is about to embark upon great new adventures in the near future, It needs, desperately needs, our help in far greater proportion than ever before. If we want God to give us more than the minimum in the life we lead, we must give more than the minimum to His institutions. Even as we ask that He do our will, so must we now do His will -- and His ratzon is far greater than merely the mitzvah of giving charity!

Yihyu le'ratzon imrei fi, ve'hegyon libi lefanekha, Ha-shem
TRURI VE'SGALI. May the words of our mouths, and the thoughts of our hearts -- and, above all, our unstinting and ungrudging action of contribution to this great school of Torah -- not only fulfill the mitzvah but also the realization of the ratzon, Thy will, our God who is our Rock and our Redeemer, Amen/.