

"WHO CARES ABOUT G-D?"

This night and the day that follows comprise the most sacred period in the Jewish calendar. During this time we shall turn our minds and hearts from our usual ~~contemplation~~ pursuits, towards Almighty God, and ask him for forgiveness for our sins, our guilt~~s~~, our shortcomings.

This theme of forgiveness is, indeed, the foremost of all the ideas and ideals presented to us by Judaism in the form of Yom Kippur.

Tonight let us turn our attention to this concept of forgiveness. More specifically, let us consider that aspect of forgiveness which, in the Hebrew, is ~~now~~ known as mehilah. For in our Yom Kippur service we shall mention several synonyms for the idea of forgiveness, and each one means something somewhat different from the other. The other terms used for forgiveness all refer to the relationship between man and God: man sins, God forgives. However, the term mehilah is used not only for the forgiveness for which we ask God, but also describes the forgiveness which one man extends to another who injured him. ^{Thus} ~~But~~, Jewish law directs a person who hurts a fellow man, to approach the ^{offended} ~~hurt~~ party and ask him to be meheil to him for his misdeed. ^{ah} Mehil, therefore, has not ^{only} a religious or theological, but also a social and human connotation.

Permit me to present to you this evening an ^{sight} ~~insight~~ into the nature of mehilah which was recently expounded by one of the greatest Jewish teachers of our generation, my own illustrious teacher Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik. It is an ^{insight} ~~insight~~ which will give us a new understanding not only of the theme of this holiday, but of all of life.

To begin with, we must understand that the relation of the Jew~~s~~ to God is not just that of creature to Creator. The Jew has never conceived of himself solely in terms of a lowly subject of a divine, remote, far-removed King. It is true that that is one aspect of our relationship to God: He is Infinite, Transcendent,

Beyond; we are mortal, finite, dust and ashes. But that is only one aspect of our relationship. There is also another side to the Jew's orientation towards his God. Often during these holy days we mention the idea of berit -- the covenant which binds God and Israel -- and a covenant or berit implies a sense of friendship and affection. Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch has already pointed out that we are the only people that could and have spoken of Elokenu, "our G-d" -- in a possessive sense. He is "our" God, in the sense that, so to speak, this man is "our" brother, another is "our" father, or "our" friend. Have not our grandfathers and grandmothers -- and sometimes we ourselves -- spoken of God in terms of the Yiddish gottenyu? -- a diminutive term of affection! There is, between the Jew and his God, a sense of intimacy which implies that God is not only a divine Ruler, but also a divine Friend!

Now when man commits a het, when he ^{sins} ~~sins~~, he not only violates God's will, he not only breaks God's laws, but he also disrupts that sense of intimacy and friendship. And therefore he must not only make up for the transgression of the law, but he also must do something to win back God's confidence. If a dear friend of mine destroyed my front lawn, I expect him not only to pay for the damages, but also to show, in some manner, that he wants to win back my friendship; because het, ~~sins~~, implies not only injury, but ^{also} ~~insult~~. By committing the sin, we have offended God, we have caused ~~him~~ ^{him} anguish, we have destroyed the sense of confidence that existed between us.

Mehilah, therefore, means not only to make up for the loss, not only to promise not to repeat the error ~~which~~ which we confess, but also in some way to make an effort to resume the intimacy which characterized our relations in the past.

However, mehilah must not be granted until it is deserved. One who~~s~~ is offended by a friend does not reⁱⁿstate their former ~~kind~~ of friendship until and unless he ~~knows~~ notices that his friend really and sincerely and truly wishes his friendship and does something to indicate that he regrets the past and that he has learned from the experience to avoid it in the future.

The most beautiful and the most powerful expression of this concept of mehilah as we have explained it takes place in the Joseph story. You recall that Joseph, the brilliant and handsome young dreamer, was hated and envied by his brothers. And when they caught him alone in the ~~field~~^{field,} his ten older brothers, hesitating between killing him and letting him go, decided to sell him into slavery, and told his father Jacob that he was devoured by a wild beast. After a series of adventures in Egyptian prisons, Joseph reaches the highest station that one can aspire to: second only to the Pharaoh, the most powerful position in the entire world at that time. When famine strikes the rest of the near East, and only Egypt has enough food ~~to~~ -- because of the wisdom and foresight of Joseph -- he, Joseph, is placed in charge of selling Egyptian supplies to foreigners. When Jacob sends his sons to Egypt for food, they appear before Joseph, who ^m they do not recognize; but he recognizes them.

And then comes the drama which has made the Joseph story one of the greatest in all the world. Instead of taking revenge upon them and instead of revealing himself immediately, he makes them go ^{through} a long and agonizing process. He accuses them of being spies; and withholds from them their brother Simon as ^{a hostage} ~~ransom~~. They then returned to Canaan, with instructions from Joseph to bring back their brother Benjamin. They do return, with Benjamin. Then when they leave, Joseph has his royal cup placed in the sack of Benjamin, and then sends pursuers to overtake them and accuse them of stealing it. He then demands of the brothers that Benjamin -- who is Joseph's full brother and the half brother of the others -- be placed under arrest or put to death.

Why all this? Why did Joseph feel it was necessary to put them through all this anguish? Surely it could not be for revenge, for we read at one point during the story: ki nikhmeru rahamav, that he was so moved by compassion and mercy and love that he had to leave the room in order to weep. Joseph is, after all, known as Yossef ha-Tzaddik, Joseph the Pious. If it was not vengeance, what then was it that motivated Joseph to pursue this policy?

And the answer is evident if we understand the nature of mehilah; for the entire

story was the process of Joseph's forgiving his brothers, in the sense that mehilah is granted only when it is deserved.

For what was the background of the sin of the brothers? What was it that led them to the crucial point where they could feel free to sell a brother into slavery and break the heart of a father?

The answer is - they did not care. They had no feeling of ahvah, of brotherliness. They did not appreciate the brilliant young brother who, although perhaps an irritant, was an unusual personality. They were not sufficiently grateful to Almighty God for the gift of a large family. Instead, they thought: we are all brothers without him; who needs him? And so they paid him no attention, they were not concerned about him, until he got in their way -- and then they merely got rid of him. No brotherliness, no ahvah, no care and no concern. And that is why they saw fit to sell him down the river.

When his brothers first appeared before him, Joseph was moved to reveal himself immediately and forgive them. But he understood very well that forgiveness for the crime itself is easy to give; it is much more difficult to achieve the resumption of friendship and intimacy, the bonds of family and love, that were so cruelly disrupted by the crime of selling Joseph. This mehilah could be granted to them only if they would now prove worthy of it, only if they could show by their actions that they now well understood the ~~fact~~ value of ahvah, of care and attention to a brother. And so he took from them their brother Simon, hoping against hope that they ^{will} ~~would~~ show that they had learned their lesson: that they would not move without taking their brother back with them. Instead, they leave Simon in Egyptian jails, and return home to Jacob. Joseph saw that they had not yet learned their lesson.

And so he waited. He had told them that they may not return without Benjamin. In his heart was the prayer that they would not ~~return~~ ^{bring Benjamin back with them;}; that they would not risk the life of another brother merely for more food or supplies. But he is disappointed. They return, and Benjamin is with them.

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So he devises a plan of placing the cup in Benjamin's sack, and exposing Benjamin to death or slavery. He sends them on their way, and then sends the King's men to pursue them and bring them back.

In his heart there is a gnawing feeling that they will fail again. He is overcome by doubt and perplexity, by heartache and anguish, feeling that perhaps he shall never be able to forgive them, to grant them mehilah, and therefore never reveal his identity to them. And so when they return, he confronts them with ~~the / alternative~~ ^{his plan:} leave Benjamin to my mercy and the rest of you may go.

But here ^a ~~the~~ sudden change takes place. The leader of the brothers, Judah, steps forward. This is the same Judah who, when he had the ^h choice of either killing Joseph or letting him go, callously and unfeelingly offered a compromise solution of lekhu ve'nimkerenu la-yishma'elim - let's sell him to the Ishmaelites. This was the brother who could have avoided the tragedy, but did not. And now the same Judah, the same brother who was so callous before, stands up to the Viceroy of all Egypt and says: no, we shall not leave ^{Benjamin} ~~Benjamin~~ here. V'ata yeshev-na avdekha tahat ha-naar - if necessary take me as your slave, and I shall remain forever in Egyptian prisons and jail, but Benjamin must go free. Under no circumstances shall we surrender a hair from the head of our younger brother!

And this, this is what Joseph had been waiting for! The brothers who never understood ahvah, now understood it so well they were willing to risk their lives for a brother. And so, ve'lo yakhol Yosef le'hitapek, Joseph could no longer contain himself. He ordered all strangers out of the room, and revealed ^{his identity} ~~who he was~~ to his startled brothers. And he cried out to them, significantly, ani Yosef ahikhem, "I am Joseph your brother." I am not only Joseph, the Joseph about whom none cared, but I am Joseph your brother -- for now you have demonstrated to my satisfaction and to the satisfaction of Almighty God that you understand what a brother is, you appreciate how important ^{ant} ~~ant~~ he can be, you have shown that you have love and affection and intimacy and care and ahvah. Therefore, v'ata al te'atzvu, now you need not worry. V'ata, especially now, ^{now} that you have revealed your newly

acquired appreciation of ahvah, now you may feel sure that I have for you the love I did as a youth so many many years ago. Now I grant you, with all my heart and all my soul, mehilah: true and complete forgiveness. We are friends -- & brothers -- again.

It is that kind of mehilah which all of us seek from our ^Father in Heaven this night? For our sins, our crime, our guilt, is also one of a lack of ahvah, not caring sufficiently. Throughout the ^{year} ~~year~~ we have not cared enough about our fellow Jews. We have not cared enough about Jewish institutions. We did not pay enough ~~s~~attention to our God in Heaven. We were so overly concerned with ourselves and our petty and trivial interests, that we failed in our friendship ^{for} ~~from~~ God and man.

Now therefore we ~~may~~ return to God and we ask for: mehilah. We want a forgiveness which will resume the friendship, the warmth, the loveliness that once characterized a Jew's relationship with Almighty God. We want God once again to be Elokenu or Gottenyu.

How can we make sure that that feeling of ahvah between Jew and fellow Jew and between Jew and God is reestablished in our midst? Travel through the length and breadth of this country and you will see that the only institution which can assure it ^{is} ~~is~~ -- the synagogue. It is about the synagogue that all Jewish activity is centered. Without the synagogue, Jews would disintegrate as a community and each Jew would be a little island unto himself, without any relation with anyone else. For whether we like it ^{or} ~~not~~ ^{not} it is the synagogue which is the cement that binds Jews together, and the link between the Jew and God.

And if this is true throughout the country, it is doubly true for New York, especially for our own section. There are so many individuals in one city block, that we ~~may~~ sink into anonymity, we threaten to lose our identity as Jews -- if not for the synagogue! Whether you come every day, once a week, or three times a year -- it is through the synagogue that you are reminded about your heritage, your fellow Jews in Russia and Israel and throughout the world, your duties and your obligations to your heritage, your past, your God.

And therefore on this day that we ask meḥilah of God, we must show that we have avoided the mistakes of the past. We must demonstrate a great, ready, and able willingness to resume that closeness. And that can be done only through the synagogue.

It is therefore that, as is traditional on this night, we appeal to your support for the Jewish Center.