

"AT SUMMER'S END"

The summer is over, and we observe today the last Shabbat before Rosh Hashanah. As the last syllables of the dying year fade away, we shall begin, tonight, the Selihot -- the appraisal of ourselves, our failures and our successes, and our petition for forgiveness as we look forward towards the new year.

How do most of us respond naturally when we challenge ourselves to this self-appraisal, to evaluate the year we are now ushering out? What have been our attainments and our accomplishments? No doubt, the majority of us and those in our social class, in this economy of abundance, will be able to record an impressive number of achievements and feel a warm glow of satisfaction. Business, I am told, has been good, our reputations have been upheld or enhanced, we have made progress on almost all fronts.

And yet -- if that is our attitude, it is the wrong one with which to end the old year and begin the new. Listen to how the prophet Jeremiah sums up what ought to be our mood on this threshold of the changing years. Avar katzir kilah kayitz ve'anahnu lo nashanu - "the harvest is past, the summer is ended, and we are not saved" (Jeremiah 8:20). For the prophet, the dominant mood at summer's end is not one of jubilation and satisfaction, but one of disappointment and frustration. He turns to his contemporaries, in the agricultural society of those times, and tells them: you may have had a good and bountiful harvest, you may be pleased with yourselves at the in-gathering of the summer's fruit; but that is not what really counts. Ve'anahnu lo nashanu - "we are not saved."

Those are hard words, words with a cutting edge, words that etch like acid on the flabby and complacent heart. Yet without these words and the attitude they summon up, we remain blind, out of contact with reality, caught up in the euphoria of a dream world. Our sacred tradition prefers that we end the old year and prepare for the new year with the heroic self-criticism of a Jeremiah -- with a confession of frustration. We look back over this past year and we think we are well off. Yet for

all our work, for all our victories, our triumphs in business and social life, our attainments and profits that we have entered into our ledgers and accounted for, for all that we have done and all we have harvested -- we have a nagging sense of futility and helplessness! Ve'anaḥnu lo nashanu - "and we are not saved!"

If we follow our natural instinct and pamper ourselves with self-gratulation, we will never grow; honesty is sometimes cruel and devastating, but it is indispensable. Without acknowledging our failures of last year, we can never avoid them in the coming year. The parent or child, congregation <sup>or</sup> ~~the~~ family, ~~or the~~ community or nation which rejects reproach and criticism, is like the businessman who prefers to ignore his accountant's stern rebuke as to the conduct of his affairs.

The feeling of frustration, of being dissatisfied and unredeemed despite our harvests, is most appropriate for this season of summer's end. Every man must ask himself: have I been a good husband this year, or have I been indifferent to my wife, taking her for granted? Each woman must ask: have I been the proper kind of helpmate, or have I allowed my selfish concerns to interfere with the harmony of our home? Those of us who are blessed with parents -- have we acted towards them with honor and love, or have we allowed the excuse of our busyness to deny them the companionship and affection and feeling of importance that they crave? Have we acquitted <sup>ourselves</sup> well <sup>in</sup> our responsibilities towards our children -- or have we so involved ourselves in "activities" on behalf of our children's welfare that we have overlooked the most significant element: the direct relationship of ourselves with our children?

At summer's end, after the fruits of our labors are harvested, we concentrate on the discrepancy between the real and the ideal, and we emerge with the self-judgment: va'anaḥnu lo nashanu.

Indeed, Moses, in today's Sidra, experiences the same frustration, in an even more tragic sense. Hinkha shokhev im avotekha -- "behold, you are going to die," he is told by the Lord. What kind of harvest is Moses to reap at the end of 120 summers of utter dedication, toil, often bitterness and anguish? Ve'kam ha-am ha-zeh ve'zanah aḥarei elohei nekhar ha-aretz -- This same people to whom you

gave your life, whom you taught the worship of the One G-d, will immediately upon your death forget all about you and go astray after the local pagan deities. What a come-down! What a bitter harvest! Va-anahnu lo nashanu!

Unless the words we recite in our Selihot prayers, which we shall begin reciting tonight, are merely empty, automatic, rote prayers, we must be prepared to translate them into relevant, contemporary terms. If the Selihot means anything at all, then it means that at this season we must cease the bombastic little ritual of proclaiming in public "I am proud to be a Jew," and acknowledge in private, amongst ourselves, that occasionally "I am ashamed as a Jew." We shall say those words tonight: Ashamnu mi-kol am, "we are more guilty than any other people"; boshnu mi-kol dor, "we have incurred more shame than any other generation." Perhaps, indeed, our greater guilt is the result of the fact that we have more to be ashamed of than any ~~other~~ generation of Jews that preceded us.

Shall we not be ashamed to the core of our souls when every time we read statistics about the religiosity of the American people, the Jews always trailing the other major religions in the degree of their religious devotion? What Jew is not embarrassed by the fact that the leading peddlers of smut, and their most articulate defenders, <sup>have intensely</sup> Jewish names? Or, that the most disgraceful and degenerate novels are by Jewish authors about Jewish life? Boshnu mi'kol dor, how disgraceful!

Or what shall we say to the blasphemous abominations of a member of the Supreme Court of Israel who compares our Talmudic laws, which declare a child to follow the faith of its mother, as ~~one kind~~ with the infamous Nurenberg laws of the Nazis? If this is the fruit of the summer's end of fifteen years of independence, if this is the harvest of all our tears and toil and hopes and work and sacrifice, then Jeremiah is right: ve'anahnu lo nashanu - indeed, "we are not saved," we have a long way to go!

How dreadfully frustrating and devastating to learn that pious Jews, so-called, with all the outward appurtenances of Old World devoutness, are arrested because of illegal dealings on an international scale. What a sense of frustration <sup>for</sup> all of us who devote our lives to teaching that Judaism leads to a different kind of conduct! What bushah!

This week another event occurred which cast doubts about the quality of our religious harvest at this summer's end in Israel. You probably read about the raid by over-zealous students on the Christian Mission schools in three cities in Israel. This was understandable, but inexcusable. Understandable, because the missionaries, despite all their denials, have been feeding on human misery and exploiting human anguish to achieve their nefarious ends. They have bribed poor, underfed, underclothed children of large and penniless Oriental Jewish immigrants, "Accept Christianity and we shall feed you" -- as simple as that. If that is the only way Christianity can win converts, then it is a commentary on the weakness of that faith as well as the unscrupulousness of its adherents; especially if, in these post-Hitler years, it finds it more important to destroy more Jewish souls than to atone for Christianity's historic crime of conscience, its sin of silence during those terrible years. If Christians want to know where they ought to propagate their faith of love, any of us could easily direct them to fertile fields -- such as the Archdiocese of Argentina. Understandable it is; provocation was there -- but utterly inexcusable! Lo zu ha-de ekh -- this is not the way! For religious youths to break windows and commit violence is unforgiveable. No one has the right to perpetrate a hillul ha-shem, and a lawless attack even those unworthy individuals is a desecration of G-d's Name. The harvest of all our religious educational efforts in Israel must not include the fruits of violence; otherwise, va'anahnu lo nashanu.

At a much lower level of agonizing disappointment, but still in the same pattern and spirit, each and every congregation must pose before itself the same question. What kind of year have we had? Most synagogues and temples can probably ~~readily~~ produce impressive figures and overwhelming statistics: increased membership, more people, greater attendance, more activities -- a wonderful congregational harvest! And yet, if they are honest, then the rabbis and leaders and members of a congregation - any congregation! - must be ready to admit that to a large extent ve'anahnu ~~anahnu~~ lo nashanu, we are yet unredeemed. As long as our people do not translate affiliation into the observance of Shabbat, membership into greater honesty and

integrity in their business and social lives, participation in "activities" into greater dedication to Jewish education, dues-paying into an increased sense of responsibility for Jewish philanthropy, then much of the fruit of our harvest must go to waste and the summer must end on a frustrating note. "The harvest has past, and the summer is ended, but we are not saved." To a large extent we have tilled the wrong field, planted the wrong seeds, harvested the wrong fruit. Last year's harvest was plenty -- but a good part of it was, like gourds, outwardly attractive, but inedible and unable to sustain life.

Do I mean to say that the picture is all black? Heavens, no! There are many shafts of light that cut across the gloom, there are many reasons for healthy and realistic optimism. More of our youth is returning to Judaism, Orthodoxy is achieving a greater prestige, our educational institutions are increasing. In fact, one can say that the last several years have been a decided improvement and an upward trend.

What I am emphasizing is that there is a time and place for everything. We American Jews have silently accepted a new dogma: that you must always assume that this is the best of all possible worlds, that to admit less than success is neurotic and bad business, and <sup>that</sup> to congratulate yourself is to keep in the spirit of things. This dogma may come from Madison Avenue, but certainly not from Mt. Sinai. And at this time of the year, at summer's end, in the season of Selihot, we turn the eyes of our mind and our heart to our failures, our inadequacies, our shortcomings.

Such an admission of error, of frustration, of spiritual poverty amidst material wealth, of having pursued the wrong goals and succeeded in the wrong ambitions, can be wonderfully creative -- but it requires courage, guts, backbone. The weak, the immature, the incompetent - they cannot abide anything but compliments and blanket surface-optimism. The strong, the mature, the stable -- they can face up to the truth even if it be unpleasant, they can bare their hearts and acknowledge failure. For they know that the road to ultimate triumph in the things that really matter is paved with the cobblestones of little failures freely acknowledged and lovingly corrected.

Now we begin a new year, and if we realize the mistakes of the past we can prevent them in the future. Now we must plant new seeds of the spirit, of Torah, and above all of love: love of G-d, love of Israel, love of mankind. Let us plant them with care, with devotion, with tenderness. And if the planting is marked with tears for the failures of yesteryear, may they end this next year in a song of joy for a harvest of happiness. Ha-zor'im be'dimah be'rinah yiktzoru - may those who sow in tears, reap the harvest of all their efforts and their work in joy and in happiness.