

"CONFRONTATION: WHEN, WHERE & HOW?"

A distinguishing mark of our age is what has been called "The Politics of Confrontation" -- the face-to-face encounter with forces considered immoral and corrupt, an encounter which leads to a test of will and endurance until one side wins.

This replaces the older and more enlightened, more patient, and more rational methods that have generally made our democracy viable and famous: persuasion, compromise, petition, accommodation, and majority rule with minority rights.

The forces of confrontation have abandoned these moderate ways in places such as the Democratic Convention in Chicago, on the campuses, in public schools, between Black and White, principals and supervisors, students and administrators, police and civilians, labor unions and the public -- everywhere, indeed, that society tries to hold the line against civic chaos. Internationally too, the world has suffered from a series of confrontations throughout its history, and even today we are threatened by confrontations between Israelis and Arabs, in Vietnam, and in Czechoslovakia.

Jewish life too has its share of confrontations -- if not in its full violent form, then in a modified manner as noisy demonstrations. Thus, the lunatic fringe (or perhaps more than "fringe") demonstrating at the U.N. against Israel and for DeGaulle, or worried and betrayed Jews demonstrating in front of the French Consulate for

Israel and against DeGaulle, or unthinking hotheads demonstrating in front of a Manhattan Synagogue on West 86th Street against the choice of a director for an Israeli hospital.

At times it seems that Confrontation is a gap over which the generations are divided. Strange clothing, long hair, and outlandish appearance may shock and annoy elders and certainly exasperate parents. But parents should not take it as a tragedy, because it isn't. Indeed, assuming that the garb is modest and moral, who is to say that our esthetic standards have any greater claim to objective validity than those of the new generation? Why shouldn't fashions change? This is something that should not really bother us too much. The real problem is not style, not even ideals and goals, but methods. Is Confrontation really superior to accommodation? Does force -- whether indirect as obscene invectives and provocation or direct as violence -- produce better results than accommodation, civil action, education and petition? Indeed, is Confrontation ever right?

I want to suggest the beginning of a Jewish attitude from the material available to us in our Sidra. I hope to offer several guidelines, and leave it to the mature judgment of all of us here to apply these guidelines to the various individual cases I mentioned, and many more.

From the Torah, the answer to our last question becomes immediately evident: there are times when Confrontation is legitimate and desirable. It is simply untrue that established power must never be challenged. The Torah taught us, through the events in Egypt, that it disapproves completely of the ancient myth of the "divine right of kings." There are times when Confrontation, even expressed in the extreme as revolution and violence, is morally and religiously acceptable.

Indeed, Moses, whose challenge to Pharaoh represents a turning point in human history, was no newcomer to the Politics of Confrontation. He began his career on that note. He saw an Egyptian striking an Israelite, and *ויבן פה ופה*, he looked to and fro, expecting the agencies of justice in Egypt to right the wrong. But *ויאמר אין פה*, he saw there was no response, there was no relief from the Egyptian establishment for injustice, and so he took matters into his own hands and confronted the Egyptian with his moral outrage: *ויכה את המצרי*, he smote the Egyptian. It is no accident that over 3,000 years later, the people of Moses, when subjected to wanton destruction and terrorism, *ויבן פה ופה*, looked from one world bloc to another, from one world capitol to another, from the Vatican to the World Council of Churches, *ויאמר אין פה* and heard no response, no complaint, no protest, and therefore: *ויכה את המצרי*, they smote the Egyptians -- and the Iraqis and the Syrians and the Lebanese.

It is our Sidra which contains the bulk of the story of the Confrontation of Moses with Pharaoh and Egypt. It teaches us that when there is no alternative to Confrontation save defeat and surrender, then Confrontation, despite its destructive nature, becomes a creative tool for change and it is a mitzvah to be disruptive.

This positive value of Confrontation has been expressed in a beautiful symbolic manner by a great sage of modern times. Our Rabbis of the Talmud categorized the entire period from Creation to Sinai, the revelation of the Torah, as חֵדוּד, chaos. What they meant was that the world as created by God was only physically complete, but had not actualized its moral potential. It came of age morally only with the giving of Torah at Sinai. Now, what is the catalyst that helped in this transformation? What is it that helped the world overcome its amoral character and rise to the level of Sinai? The great Gerer Rabbi identifies this catalyst as the Ten Plagues of which we read today. In epigrammatic fashion, he tells us that the transition from אֵינֶנּוּ אֱלֹהִים to אֵלֹהֵינוּ אֱלֹהִים was effected by עֲשֵׂה נִפְלְאוֹת. The world, according to the Rabbis in Avot, was created through Ten "Words" of God, such as "Let there be light," etc. Creation is therefore symbolized by the Ten Words, and its moral maturity by the Ten Commandments. But it was the Ten Plagues, the עֲשֵׂה נִפְלְאוֹת, that made this possible. The confrontation of Moses with Egypt succeeded in uprooting the corruption of

Egypt, exposing the vacuousness of its nefarious paganism, and therefore allowing Israel to emerge from within it and receive the Torah. Without the Ten Plagues, the Ten Words would never have become the Ten Commandments . . .

However, while Confrontation certainly does have positive value, this should not be taken as carte blanche for Confrontation whenever the mood overcomes one. It is not legitimate under all circumstances and at all times, but only under set conditions.

The first condition is that the cause must be important enough and the grievance grievous enough to warrant controversy and disruptions. Never must a Confrontation be disproportionate to the cause, and never, never must it be frivolous. If Moses is a model, then certainly it must be important and serious. It is perhaps no accident that Providence chose for the leader of the Israelite revolution an old man of the age of 80. This was a kind of guarantee that he would be inspired by the importance of the mission itself, and not by youthful exhilaration, not by thrill and excitement for its own sake. In fact, Moses was reluctant to undertake his mission. He complained that he was an *שֵׁן בֶּן*, a stutterer -- and this was the Divine assurance against Israel's revolution being deflected by demagoguery. All too often, oral escalation and rhetorical extravagance precipitates Confrontation prematurely.

The second condition is that Confrontation may be used only if there is no alternative, if there is no other way out. Moses, indeed, took every precaution to give Pharaoh the way out. In the first two of every group of three plagues, he gave Pharaoh a *התראה*, a warning. He waited and pleaded, he argued and persuaded, and only after he failed did he sharpen the Confrontation. There must, therefore be a gradual buildup, not a sudden escalation and explosion. In fact, this is why there were Ten Plagues, when God could have accomplished the task with only one. But it was important to give Pharaoh a chance to re-think his position, to find room for compromise, to do teshuvah. Confrontation must, then, be the last resort, not the first method tried.

The third condition is that there should be no verbal onslaughts, no ego-involvement which can only complicate the situation and make it irreversible by hardening positions. In a sense, Moses erred here because of diplomatic inexperience. This is a point made by the late Professor Casuto, the Italian-Jewish scholar who taught Bible at the Hebrew University. He illuminates the negotiations between Moses and Pharaoh by making one significant point. When God first gives Moses his commission, he tells Moses exactly what to say: *וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה אֶל מֹשֶׁה וְאֶל אָהֳרֹן בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וְאָמַרְתֶּם אֶל פַּרְעֹה כֹּה אָמַר יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵי הָעִבְרִים יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵינוּ*, "the Lord God of the Hebrews appeared to us." Moses, however, changes that just a bit when he confronts Pharaoh: *כֹּה אָמַר יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל*, "Thus said the Lord God of Israel . . ." When Pharaoh heard this he was

adamant, outraged, and furious. Why? Not so much because of the request, as because of the way Moses expressed it. For Pharaoh and the Egyptians, the Jews were "Hebrews," a word which defines a rather vague ethnic group, and means essentially "aliens," "outsiders." These were people who had lived in Egypt for over two centuries, but essentially remained immigrants and never outgrew that status. Pharaoh could accept a delegation from the "Hebrews." However, Moses gave his credentials as speaking in the name of the God of "Israel" -- and this meant a nation, a full-fledged people, and therefore one counterposed to Egypt. This already implied disloyalty and betrayal and national arrogance. Pharaoh smelled revolution. The Confrontation was too sharp, too soon. Therefore, as soon as Moses noticed Pharaoh's reaction, he changed his message, and now it accorded with the original Divine instruction:

אלהינו, "the God of the Hebrews appeared to us . . . "

Then, though Pharaoh still refused to agree, the situation was defused and the temperature of debate lowered.

Finally, the confronters must have a plan or program or curriculum superior to the one they seek to replace, and for which they are ready to do battle. Merely to overthrow established order is at its best anarchy and nihilism, and at its worst criminal childishness and immaturity. In our Sidra, God promises the emancipation by using four synonyms, ארצה עמו, ארצה עמו, ארצה עמו, ארצה עמו. They are:

אני אקח אתכם, אני אציל אתכם, אני אגאול אתכם, אני אציל אתכם -- I will take you out, save you, redeem



you, take you . . . All of these speak of change without replacement, they speak of overthrowing the Egyptian order but make no mention of what will substitute for it. Hence, immediately thereafter, the Torah adds the words: *אני אביא אתכם*, "but I will bring you" to the Promised Land.

So too, on Passover, after we finish the last of the four cups, the *אכילת מצות*, which according to the Jerusalem Talmud symbolize the four synonyms of redemption, we reach the climax when all guests rise and together proclaim three times *שנה אכילת מצות*, "Next year in Jerusalem" -- when we will have overthrown the Pharaohs and Egypts of our times, we have something far superior in its place: Jerusalem, and all that it stands for.

In summary, therefore, Confrontation can be creative despite its destructive character, its unpleasantness, and its risks. The Ten Plagues can transform the unfinished world of Ten Words into the meaningful universe of Ten Commandments. But this acceptability and desirability of Confrontation depends on: when, where, and how?

When? -- When the cause is great enough, the complaint serious enough, and when there is no alternative to direct Confrontation.

Where? -- Where you have something to offer, a superior model, a nobler life or society, school, or world.

How? -- By gradual moves, by giving your opponent the way out and a chance to change and improve, by refraining from unnecessary insult and invective and from psychological and verbal aggression.



When these conditions are fulfilled, and then only, does Confrontation have the right to existence and use by right-minded people. Then it becomes not only morally defensible but obligatory in order to bring about a world and society that will actualize the Ten Commandments.

We live in a world "plagued" by Confrontation. We suffer from many more than *אשר לא יבא*. A good deal of it is unnecessary and inexcusable. For our own survival, we must disapprove and thwart such unwarranted invitations to violence.

But there are times that we too are called upon, as humans and Americans and Jews, to confront the status quo and the evil and the forces of darkness with a direct call for radical change. For a long time, until two decades ago, Jews have shied away from such confrontations. But when our consciences and our tradition -- and our reason and common sense and restrained judgment -- tell us that we must make our stand, then we shall do so, despite the withering criticism and moralistic reproach of our antagonists. And then, like Moses our teacher, we shall confront the Pharaohs of our times and help make this world of Ten Words over into one worthy of Ten Commandments.