

"FATE OR DESTINY?"

Man's Role in Shaping his Life

a sermon by  
RABBI NORMAN LAMM

on Parshat Bo  
January 18, 1970

at  
The Jewish Center  
New York City

Two great ideas have been contending with each other in the religious consciousness of the Jew during most of the millennia of Jewish history. The first one maintains that geulah (redemption) is wholly the act of God, and man is nothing but a passive observer and the lucky beneficiary of His guidance of history. Man may hope for redemption, but not work for it; pray for it, but not precipitate it; await it, but not anticipate it. It is, as we would put it in today's vernacular, all God's show; He is the only actor, and man merely the appreciative audience.

The second idea denies that God ever becomes a substitute for human effort. It is true that without God, no work can prosper; but without man, there is no work available which can either succeed or fail. God neither expects nor wants man to abdicate his creative role in his own destiny. Man may not be the playwright, but neither is he a puppet; he is an actor in the drama of life.

The first theory may be characterized as that of quietism, the idea that only when man is silent and passive does he manifest his acceptance of divine sovereignty. Human initiative in redeeming himself is a gesture of defiance against God and faithlessness in Him. The second view is far more activist, and holds that man's freedom implies God's will that he assert himself in all spheres, including the achievement of his political dignity. It suspects quietism of wishing upon man not destiny, but fate.

These two views of our human role in our own affairs and future are the forerunners of what in our days have been formulated as, on one extreme, the approach of the Neturei Karta, and, opposed to it, that of Religious Zionism.

Actually, both have respectable precedent in Biblical history.

The quietist view, which sees Redemption as a completely divine act, has its source in the Exodus from Egypt. "Thus saith the Lord: about midnight I will go out into the midst of Egypt" (Ex. 6:4). It is God Himself Who redeems Israel. As the author of the Haggadah put it: "I and not an angel... I and not a seraph... I and not a messenger." Neither a general nor a diplomat, neither a politician nor a statesman will participate with Me; only I, God, am the Redeemer of Israel.

Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik often points to the painful paradox of the omission of the name of Moses from the Passover Haggadah. We mention Abraham and Isaac and Jacob, we mention Rabbi Akiba and Rabbi Tarfon, we even mention Laban and Esau -- but except for an insignificant, passing reference, there is no mention of the one man who gave all his life to realize the Exodus, the one man who suffered untold spiritual agony in order to mold this heterogeneous conglomeration of ex-slaves into a great people of mission and dignity -- Moses! Is it not an act of historic injustice that we perpetrate against him, that we

deny him any place at all on the Zone night dedicated to the liberation of Israel from Egypt? The question itself is one that Rabbi Soloveitchik relates to a Midrashic comment on the verse from the Song of Songs (3:1): "By night on my bed I sought him whom my soul loveth; I sought him but I found him not." The Midrash (Sh. R. 3:2) identifies this lost beloved as Moses. Rabbi Soloveitchik interprets the reference of the Midrash as a complaint over the absence of Moses from the Passover Haggadah.

Why, then, have we so mistreated Moses? What we are being taught is that no one, not even Moses, can share the glory of God as the Redeemer of Israel. Moses' greatness is not as a statesman or military hero. It is as Mosheh Rabbenu, as Moses the Teacher of Torah. There, in the realm of the spirit, man can excel and achieve his personal fame. But in the national political liberation from Egypt, only God is the Redeemer, not man, not even Moses.

The activist conception of the role of man finds its source in another national Redemption of which the Bible speaks -- the shivat Zion, the Return to Zion under Ezra and Nehemiah. This too was a geulah (Redemption). It was the fulfillment of a 70-year old prophecy. But it was engineered by Jews who, though they were possessed of great religious zeal and idealism, played the game of international politics quite skillfully. The Bible speaks of this national redemption in natural, almost

"secular" terms. It sees it, of course, as part of an overall Divine plan, but it allows events to speak for themselves, and the events are humanly initiated and executed. Man is active, and while God is never really passive, He awaits man's initiative and does not preempt the stage in the drama of redemption. The Return to Zion was destined, but not fated. Man had to risk his commitment to action before the prophecy could be fulfilled.

Hence, these two views as to our role in the future of Jewish history, the quietist and the activist, even while they contradict each other, are both legitimately Jewish, for they have adequate Biblical source.\* The Egyptian redemption emphasizes the Divine role, the Babylonian -- the human role.

Yet it would be a mistake to overdraw the lines and overstate the case. The Return to Zion must not be seen purely as a secular, political act. It would be an error of the first ~~pro-~~ <sup>magnitude</sup> ~~portion~~ to attribute to the Bible the philosophy of secular nationalism. Secular Zionism makes of religion the private matter of the individual Jew. By removing history and nation from the concern of religion, and vice versa, it trivializes Judaism, and reduces it into insignificance. It would be intellectually outrageous to identify the Bible as a source for such an ideology.

---

\* I am indebted to Dr. Joseph Goldschmidt of Jerusalem who proposed this analysis in a recent article.

It is true that shivat Zion is described by the Torah in human terms, but it is self-understood that the Divine component is ever-present.

More important, the Exodus from Egypt should not be seen as advocating a totally passive role for man. The Exodus was miraculous, but not magical. Even Moses cannot share in the glory, but the work and the suffering and the exertion cannot be taken off the shoulders of his people. The first makkah was not the plague of blood by God; the first blow against the Egyptians was (as Dr. Israel Eldad has pointed out) by Moses himself who, when he was scandalized by the injustice of the Egyptian striking the Hebrew, struck the Egyptian. Va-yakh et hamitzri is the first makkah, which evoked divine assistance and brought on the eser makkot (Ten Plagues) against the Egyptians. Tradition tells us that the sea did not split until the Prince of Judah jumped into the water and the water reached his nostrils -- for without the human willingness to risk martyrdom, God performs no miracles. Rabbi Judah the Prince reads the verse that is usually translated as: "The Lord will fight for you, and you will hold your peace" (Ex. 14:14) with a question mark: Do you really expect that the Lord will fight for you while you sit by with folded arms and do nothing? (Mechilta; see Torah Sheleimah to this verse, no. 86). "Wherefore criest thou unto Me? Speak unto the children of Israel and let them go forward," let them take upon themselves

the dangers of the great desert, while you "lift up thy rod" (ib. 15, 16) and exercise initiative in leading your people out of slavery.

Similarly, in the space of ten verses we find two similar descriptions of the actual Exodus, both of which indicate the opposite parts of this paradox. One verse reads: "It was on this very day that all the hosts of the Lord went out from the land of Egypt" (Ex. 12:41). The second verse reads: "It was on this very day that the Lord did bring the children of Israel out of the land of Egypt by their hosts" (Ex. 12:51). One verse has the Lord doing all, bringing the Israelites out, and the other has the Israelites going out by themselves. Both are true -- and even though the Israelites took the initiative, they remained "the hosts of the Lord."

The two Redemptions, the Babylonian and the Egyptian, both individually and especially taken together, represent, as does all of life, an interpenetration of the divine and the human, an intersection of destiny and choice.

Nevertheless, while there is never any purely divine or purely human activity, there is a strikingly different emphasis on each of these historic events: the Egyptian highlights the divine role, the Babylonian stresses the human role.

Which one ought we choose as the model for our own lives and activities? We can make this decision only if we determine

why each redemption was different, and why it was right that each one took place the way it did.

There was good reason why the Egyptian redemption reflected mostly Divine initiative, while the Babylonian redemption featured human exertion.

The Egyptian period characterized the childhood or even infancy of our people. Like a child who needs his father and mother to do things for him if he is to survive, Israel needed the "outstretched arm" and the "strong hand" of the Almighty. It could not survive without the Manna falling from Heaven. But maturity requires gradually increasing personal effort on the part of the child, and this independence implies investment and risk and exertion. That is why when Joshua entered the Promised Land, that very first Passover the Manna stopped falling. A mature people must work and sweat and labor -- and bless God -- for lechem min ha-aretz (bread from the earth), and not keep its palms upturned waiting for lechem min ha-shamayim (bread from heaven) to fall into them gratis. Furthermore, the immaturity of Israel in the Egyptian period was not only psychological but also spiritual. They had to be weaned from the pagan faiths to which they had assimilated, and taught a new vision, that of One God of all the world, above nature and controlling it. Hence God had to intervene directly and make His absolute independence from man and nature manifest to Israel.



However, the Babylonian redemption was one of human daring and initiative. Certainly it involved religious experience and religious direction and gratitude to God. But it was a more nationally and psychologically mature people which now returned, and also a people which understood, as our ancestors in Egypt did not, that the God of Israel is radically different from the gods of the nations. The Jews who returned with Ezra and Nehemiah were expected to be responsible, and they fulfilled that expectation.

The lesson of the Babylonian redemption is part and parcel of normative Jewish life. So it is with health, for instance. Of course our health is in the hands of God; but He desires that we spare no effort to preserve and improve our health. He may, if He so chooses, decide to withhold His blessing, and then we are in trouble. But unless we do something, unless we do enough, He will not help us. That is why the Talmud locates in the verse "and he shall cause him to be healed" (Ex. 21:19) permission for the physician to practice the art of healing. One might think that it is forbidden to interfere in the divine governance of the universe by healing the sick man. The Torah, however, permits it. And once it is permitted, it becomes mandatory to enhance health in order to preserve life.

The same principle applies to sustenance. We must have faith that God will provide for us, but that does not excuse us

from working for a living. True, strong faith would at least keep us away from over-exerting ourselves and amassing far more than we need at the expense of other goods. But at the same time, "and thou shalt gather in thy corn" (Dt. 11:14), we must make every effort to keep ourselves and our family provided for. This holds true in even greater measure for the poor; we recognize it as cynicism rather than piety when a rich man refuses food to the hungry because of faith that God will no doubt take care of the downtrodden.

Without God, there is neither health nor wealth. That is why we pray in the Amidah both Refa'enu and Barekh alenu, both for health and prosperity. But without man, there is no use praying. God does nothing for us if we do not have sufficient interest to begin on our own. And the prayers for geulah and kibbutz galuyot (redemption and the ingathering of the exiles) are surrounded by the blessings for health and sustenance. They are all of one piece. The divine and the human do not contradict each other. On the contrary, they need each other.

These thoughts and this conclusion about the vital and indispensable role of man in his own destiny are occasioned not only by thoughts of the eventual geulah or reference to the State of Israel.

I have in mind as well our own Jewish community. An appreciation of the human role in human destiny means that if

we are not going to exert our own leadership and offer our sacrificial participation, our community cannot prosper. We cannot, we may not, we dare not leave it to God. God must not be used as simply a <sup>psychological</sup> ~~semantic~~ device to excuse our own indolence.

In recent years there has been a perceptible decrease in lay leadership and participation in many of the most important Jewish organizations. If a lapse from gallantry be permitted, it is especially noticeable in the case of the ladies. Women's organizations play an extremely important role in the Jewish community, from Sisterhood to Day School, from Mizrachi to Yeshiva University to the Mikvah. And if this lack of leadership initiative and this reluctance to participate in communal work will continue, we ~~are~~ <sup>will</sup> all <sup>be</sup> in trouble.

We live in strange times. Our history is a stormy one. When we consider the fate of our Jewish community, we must remember that we can no longer count on that great and once seemingly unlimited reservoir of Jewish talent and leadership, the Jewry of Europe. Six million of them have been done to death. We cannot rely on Russian Jewry, for three million of them are behind the Iron Curtain and it is they who look to us for leadership. We cannot even count on the millions of our fellow American Jews to do our communal tasks for us, for unfortunately so many of them have dropped out of the Jewish community through

the attrition of assimilation and intermarriage. At a time of this sort there is no one to rely upon but ourselves. God will not help us unless we are first willing to help ourselves. Our historical situation challenges us to redouble and intensify our efforts as never before.

An appropriate illustration of the nature of this challenge was offered by Prof. Dov Sadan of the Hebrew University in his Erna Michael Memorial Lecture at Yeshiva University several weeks ago. In responding to the introduction, in which mention was made of his prolific writing -- Prof. Sadan is the author of over 40 volumes and hundreds of articles -- the speaker told the following story which explained his unusual creativity. He was born in a tiny shtetl in Eastern Europe. Throughout his youth, his father impressed upon him the story of his birth. When his mother was about to deliver, the doctor presented her with a cruel choice: either she could live, but the baby must die; or, if she chose life for the baby, then she would have to die. She chose the latter alternative, and she perished. He was that baby. And his father always told him: Dov, you must work hard, not only for yourself, for you are responsible as well for the life of your young mother, and for the children she might have had after you, had she chosen her own life over yours. You must live not only for yourself, but also for her and for all those others.

¶ It is this thought that always remained etched in his mind, which gave him no rest, and which motivated him to produce this enormous amount of scholarly material.

The same thought must inspire us, even obsess us, in determining our contribution to the community effort. We must work not only for ourselves, but also for what could have been accomplished by European Jewry had it survived, what might be accomplished by Russian Jewry were it not for its imprisonment behind the Iron Curtain, what ought to be accomplished by other American Jews were it not for their dreadful assimilation. We must act not only for ourselves, but for others as well.

Not only may we not fatalistically leave everything to God and, instead, forcefully play our own role, but we must also embrace the additional burden - and glory! - of the roles of others in achieving our own destiny.

Let us do so with pride and with dignity, and in response God will give us all three: geulah, refuah, and berakhah -- redemption and health and the blessing of prosperity.