YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

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**SICHOT OF THE ROSHEI YESHIVA**

**SICHA OF HARAV YEHUDA AMITAL**

**Selective Confrontation:**

**The Role of the Modern Jewish Leader**

Part 2 of 2

Still, there is a more significant and fundamental reason to suggest "selective confrontation" as a course for action. Today Judaism faces a double-edged sword. Not only must it do battle with various alien influences that are brought to bear upon it, but it faces a for more serious threat originating in Judaism itself. Many of the values and ideals of the gentile world have already become firmly entrenched in much of Jewish culture and these have, in turn, affected the very essence of the Jewish mode of life. It has caused thousands upon thousands of Jews to run contrary to the "Derekh Hashem." The only way to combat this influence is through selective confrontation. We must redefine, re-evaluate, judge and search honestly for a Judaism that is untainted by foreign values that have no worth. At the same time we must remain able to accept the outside world's good and virtuous qualities, constantly refining them, and if need be, adding to them so that they can be incorporated into our lives.

I will not deny that there will always remain certain unique individuals whose only possible way of return to the religion of their forefathers is by totally severing all ties to the world around them. Yet we retain the hope and belief that the masses of Jews will at some time express a sincere desire to embark upon the road of return as well. If this goal is ever to be realized, a way must be found and offered to these Jews, which will allow them to cope with the stress and influence brought to bear upon them during their daily lives. This can only be accomplished through selective confrontation.

The Zohar interprets the story of Noach as perhaps one of the most telling lessons in regard to the dangers inherent in secluding oneself and severing ties with the world.

When Noach came out of the ark and saw the whole world destroyed, he began to cry to the Holy One, blessed be He, and said: "Ruler of the World! You are called merciful. Why did You not show mercy upon Your creations?"

The Holy One replied: "Foolish shepherd! Now you tell me this and not when I kept on whispering to you softly, 'Make thee an ark of gofer wood' (Bereishit 6:14), [and when I told you,] 'Behold I will bring a flood of waters upon the earth to destroy all flesh' (6:17), [and furthermore when I said,] 'But for thee have I seen righteousness before Me in this generation' (7:1). All the time that I delayed you and talked to you [was only] so you would plead for mercy for the world. And from the moment that you heard that you would be saved in the ark, it never occurred to you [to consider] the sorrow of the world. You made the ark and were saved. And now that the world is destroyed you come before me in a quest for mercy!"

Rabbi Eliezer and Rabbi Yehoshua were sitting in one of the cities close to Tiberias [when] Rabbi Yehoshua asked: "Rebbe, why did Noach not request mercy for his generation?" Rabbi Eliezer answered, "For Noach thought that he would not escape [the same punishment received by his generation]." (Zohar Ha-chadash, Noach)

The reason that Noach found it impossible to plead for his generation is because be could not identify with it and therefore he felt no connection to the people surrounding him. He could not understand any of their goals and aspirations. Most important, Noach feared that if he did try to identify with his generation, he would become influenced by the evil and deprivation taking place around him. It was because of this real fear for himself and for his family that he chose to remain silent, and through his silence he sealed the fate of the generation and guaranteed their destruction.

Of course, there is always the danger that one will be influenced by that which one is attempting to change. By identifying with the problems, faults and needs of the people, one becomes sympathetic and even empathetic to their plight. However, the best defense against such a reaction is not to sever ties but always to strive to maintain perspective. If one understands that identification does not mean mimicry; that understanding does not necessitate confirming; that empathy does not entail total acceptance*-* then offering help will not lead to needing it, and one can become and remain the source of influence and not its object. The process of selective confrontation will allow through its sieve only that which has been refined and made palatable to Judaism. The danger, though still present, remains minimal, while the achievement, of returning many of our people to a life guided by the Torah, through a process of sanctification and holiness, is a great one indeed.

A total denial and ignorance of the capacity of the gentile world to wield its influence upon Judaism can only yield disastrous results. It will serve to alienate permanently those who might want to try to return to the religion of their forefathers. Separation and severance of all ties to the gentile world, where it must be remembered that a majority of our people identify with and function within, can only serve to divide and cut one off from most of the Nation of Israel. As was the case with Noach, cutting onself off from one's contemporaries causes an inability to help them and instill hope in them. We must always retain a certain degree of sympathy, understanding and identification for our generation, no matter how detestable their life-style might be to us, for this is the only way to face and to help them overcome these problems.

The focal point of selective confrontation is to generate a positive, creative and responsive program to answer the needs of the people. Such a program is desperately needed to supply the Jewish people with the strength to continue untouched and untainted by those negative influences that they face day after day. Amidst a world of ever-changing values, moral systems and ideals, it remains the only way to retain the pristine purity in Judaism and Jewish culture - regardless of time or place.

The young men and women who see themselves as the future leaders and teachers of our people must be imbued with a sense of the importance and necessity of adopting the approach of selective confrontation. However, they must also appreciate that such a path cannot be embarked upon unless they have spent time and effort studying the Torah. It is not enough to expand one's horizons in grasping at the world as it exists outside of Jewish culture. The first concern of these youth must entail gaining as much specific and general knowledge of the Torah as possible. With this purpose in mind, one may gain an intimate awareness of the breadth, depth and essence of the Torah and its laws, while seeking to create and live in a Torah imbued society. Then, and only then, will they possess the essential qualities of leadership and an ability to steer our people away from a complacent Judaism to a religion that retains the totality of Torah. They must themselves be able to meet any challenges that society forces upon them. Once such a goal is realized, we will find that Judaism can be transferred from place to place, from generation to generation, from era to era, as has been done until this point in time. We must promote an atmosphere of understanding and we must comprehend the specific needs of all our people, while at the same time we must consistently emphasize the demands of the Torah and its commandments.

The natural place for producing such an aware and knowledgeable leadership is in the Land of Israel. This is the result of two major factors. First, Israel is the center of the political and spiritual life of the People of Israel. The day by day problems of simple existence that one must cope with sharpen the individual's perception in regard to his own place within, and responsibility for, the entire people. Personal problems, while important, are sublimated to the needs of the nation. When living in any of the various Jewish communities all over the world, it is easy to forget and certainly it is more difficult to understand the basic problems that the Jewish people as a whole must face. In the Land of Israel one cannot ignore the cardinal problems facing the State and People of Israel. The individual Jew can grasp the true essence of "Klal Yisrael" only in the Land of Israel. I by no means wish to imply that it is impossible to gain such a scope of knowledge and understanding outside of Israel. Yet it remains true that the natural place for raising and training such a leadership is in the Land of Israel and nowhere else.

The second reason for choosing the Land of Israel as the place most apt to produce such a leadership is quite different. The danger that confrontation poses both to teacher and student, to the leader and his public, are not likely to be as pronounced nor as successful in Israel. The gentile world is less able to influence a culture and moral system which is run by free Jews inhabiting their own land. The success of training and learning, the ability to face and stand up to the challenges of the gentile world, the producing of a strong, viable and empathetic leadership, can be guaranteed to a much greater extent in Israel. It is for these reasons that I believe that the future of our people lies within the borders of our land.

Certainly the Torah stresses that the Jewish people do, indeed, retain a religious uniqueness and that they do have the ability to transfer their beloved Torah from one place to another and from one generation to the other. When the children of Israel left Egypt they were commanded to build a Mishkan (the Tabernacle), which was, in effect, a portable Temple (Bemidbar 1:48-54). The Mishkan existed until the building of the Temple by Solomon in Jerusalem. It served as the center for Judaism throughout the years in the desert and in Israel, just as the permanent Temple would eventually do. The Levites were relegated the responsibility for caring for the Mishkan, and for taking it apart and setting it up. However, the leaders of the Twelve Tribes were assigned a special function. They had to personally donate the wagons used to carry the Mishkan from place to place. Without these wagons, the tool that served to move the Mishkan, which was the prime religious symbol of the people, the Nation of Israel would have never moved nor progressed towards the Land of Israel. The leaders responsible for donating these wagons were, in essence, responsible for the transfer of the children of Israel from place to place.

The significance of these wagons is clear. The leaders had to guarantee the smooth transfer not only of the people, but of their laws, culture, ethics and morals. While they moved from place to place and finally into the Land of Israel, they were able to continue the observance of these laws. Neither time nor place affected the eternal aspects of the Torah - the wagons guaranteed that the very same Torah that had been given at Sinai would remain intact and in force when a new generation of Israelites entered their promised land. Without these wagons, without these tools of transfer, it would have been extremely difficult, if not impossible, to accomplish this.

This understanding of the nature and use of the wagons helps us understand another puzzling statement made in the Torah. When the children of Jacob came to their father and informed him that Joseph was not only still alive but a ruler in Egypt, the Torah describes Jacob's reaction as follows:

And they went up out of Egypt, and came to the land of Canaan to Jacob their father, and told him, saying, "Joseph is still alive, and he is governor over all the land of Egypt." And his heart fainted for he believed them not. And they told him all the words of Joseph, which he had said to them; and when he saw the wagons which Joseph had sent to carry him, the spirit of Jacob their father revived. (Bereishit 45:25-27)

Many commentaries were bothered by this passage. What was so unique about the wagons that Joseph had sent to his father? What caused these wagons, and only them, to revive the spirit of Jacob? After refusing to believe the account given by all his sons, after almost dying from fear, these wagons seemed to contain some hidden meaning, some message to Jacob. What were these wagons sent to convey?

We must understand that Jacobdid not doubt his sons' tale that Joseph was alive and ruler of Egypt. Yet he was terrified of the possibility that Joseph, ruler of Egypt, was no longer Joseph, son of Jacob. He was afraid that Joseph had severed all ties with the house of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. He was scared that he would find that Joseph, his beloved son, had not succeeded in transferring the values of kindness, humility, justice and courage, learned in his father's house, to the foreign land of Egypt. He was anxious to know whether Joseph had remained subservient to the one and true God, and whether his son still stood before God in fear and awe. Egypt was an antithesis of all Joseph had known. It stood diametrically opposed with the world Joseph had experienced since childhood. Could Jacob then dare to hope that Joseph, now a powerful ruler of Egypt, remained Joseph, son of Jacob?

Joseph knew intuitively that his father would be assaulted by such terrible doubt. He knew that his father would fear whether he was still Joseph, one of the twelve brothers, or whether he had become Joseph, ruler of Egypt, serving gods his father knew not, devoted to a land that was not his own, rulng a people that had no connection to him. Thus Joseph sent his father the wagons. When Jacob saw these wagons he felt relief and his spirit returned. It was not the materials and food which was in these wagons, but the wagons themselves, that left no room for doubt in Jacob's heart. With these wagons Joseph told his father:

"Do not fear, father. I am still Joseph your son. I have lived within and withstood the influence of Egypt. I rule the people and their culture - it does not rule me. The world I once knew, that world of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, is still alive and exists within my household. I have confronted the problems and challenges of Egypt, yet I was able to transfer my world, the world of my youth, even into Egypt. This land which is opposed to all that which I have been taught in my youth, to all the morals, beliefs and ideals that you, father, instilled in me, has not affected me. Father, do not fear! I am still Joseph your son."

The wagons had symbolized all that the house of Jacob held sacred, all the beliefs they upheld as true. "And Israel said: It is enough; Joseph my son is still alive; I will go see him before I die" (Bereishit 45:28).

(This speech was delivered at the Dinner for Yeshivat Har Etzion in New York, in Kislev 5741 [1980].)

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