YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**SICHOT OF THE ROSHEI YESHIVA**

**SICHA OF HARAV YEHUDA AMITAL**

**Selective Confrontation:**

**The Role of the Modern Jewish Leader**

Part 1 of 2

With the destruction of the Second Temple, the Nation of Israel began what was to become a long and cruel exile. Our ancestors were forced to move constantly, traversing endless miles in search of some friendly country which would allow them to remain within its borders. Wherever they went, the Jews were never permitted to remain for long, and they were constantly emigrating from city to city, and from country to country in the attempt to find one place which they might call their own. One generation established roots while the next was forced to sever them and continue the relentless search for yet another temporary refuge. Each new city, every new country that the Jews entered forced them to weigh new values, ethics, culture and customs against their own.

One of the greatest challenges that these Jews faced was how to sustain the values of their own religion during their constant displacement. How could they preserve the Torah in its totality, constantly maintaining the ethical and moral standards that the Torah demanded, while living among a foreign people and within an alien culture which was often diametrically opposed to the Torah's values?

This problem has taken on special significance in the last century, in light of the Holocaust and the subsequent founding of the State of Israel.

Although our nation is at present experiencing the long awaited "kibbutz galuyot" - the ingathering of the exiles - many Jewish communities still function and thrive in a foreign atmosphere, often finding themselves bereft of traditional Jewish values. Another, more serious, factor has served to complicate the problems that these communities face in their battle to live at one with the modern world while striving to maintain a Jewish identity. I am referring to the swift changes that take place in our world, changes that often leave us feeling somewhat superfluous in our relations with the world at large. A sense of alienation sets in, where the individual is no longer sure of those values, morals and ideals that he once took for granted. In our modern world culture, ideas, ideals, the worth and importance of values, all change at a pace that is simply too overwhelming for the individual to comprehend.

If such changes remained in the realm of physical and material values; if the demand of material success was the only one that modern man had to live up to; if the competition along life's long and often arduous journey were limited to mere accumulation of wealth and comfort, then perhaps we would be able to face the modern world with a great deal more confidence and ability. However, our world demands not only a change in the realm of the material, but taxes the spiritual world as well. The spiritual well-being of each individual is no longer a hidden aspect of his being; rather, it is being constantly challenged, and the values he once upheld as true and eternal become enveloped in doubt. Suddenly, the individual finds that his once secure metaphysical world has been breached and he watches helplessly as it slowly dissolves in a mass of unrequited dreams. With no objective, spiritual standard by which to judge himself and his surroundings, the individual is lost, and consequently the meaning in one's life becomes a mass of uncertainty and riddles.

We as Jews are facing a twofold problem. First, it is incumbent upon us to transplant the values inherent in the Torah into our mundane, everyday existence despite the constant change taking place around us. Second, we must be secure in our dedication to the values of the Torah, so that we can be assured that these values will maintain their fundamental meaning even when facing the challenge of foreign lifestyles and cultures.

The Zohar calls the "taryag mitzvot" (613 commandments of the Torah) the "taryag eitim," which means "commandments of counsel and advice." According to this perspective, one must view the entire gamut of mitzvot as a continuous process of counsellng one on how to contend with a world that often places itself in direct opposition to the values of Judaism. As the Zohar subtly tells us, the commandments are there to help man confront a world that is antagonistic to the ideals of righteousness, charity, justice, mercy, humility and fear of God. The qualities we call "derekh Hashem" - "the path of God" - seem to change in meaning from era to era, place to place, day to day, hour to hour, in a world ignorant of Torah. Different situations and changing times give these values new forms and meaning. The problem is not insuring that these mitzvot, these commandments of counsel and advice, remain effective in all times and places. The Torah has proven again and again its own worth and eternal wisdom. Rather, the problem is our ability to safeguard our people, and protect them from all the pitfalls that confront them in their dealings with the modern world and its confusing range of ideals and values.

Perhaps we can single out two specific commandments to illustrate the problems that face us in the modern world. The first is the mitzva of "machatzit ha-shekel" - the donation of half a shekel to the Temple every year, and the second is "Tu Bi-Shevat," the New Year for plants.

The half shekel donated to the Temple pays for the upkeep and running of the Temple; the Halakha tells us that a korban tzibbur (congregational sacrifice) offered at the Temple must be brought in the name of the entire people of Israel. Each individual has a part in the congregational sacrifice, because these sacrifices are paid for with the funds collected in the donation of the half shekel. On the other hand, another halakha tells us that if there is any money left over from the previous year, these funds are not allowed to be used for the purchase of sacrifices during the current year. Sacrifices must be purchased and offered only during their allotted time (see Rambam, Hilkhot Shekalim 4:10-12).

A similar idea is expressed within the laws that pertain to Tu Bi-Shevat. The central theme of this holiday is the separation of the terumaand ma'aser (the portions set aside for the Priest and Levite) from the current crop. Here again the halakha informs us that we cannot use fruit from the previous year in the determination of what must be set aside for teruma and ma'aser. Tu Bi-Shevat, the New Year for Trees, marks the cutting-off point, and from that point the farmer may determine his yearly crop yield (see Rambam, Hilkhot Teruma 5:11; Hilkhot Ma'aser 1:70; Mishna Rosh HaShana 1:1).

Both commandments revolve around the central thesis that one can offer or count only those objects that belong to the present - the here and now - as part of the mitzva. Use of old funds or fruits from a previous year is not considered to be a fulfillment of the mitzva. These commandments teach us the necessity of constant awareness of the time and place in which we function. Yet we are also commanded to serve God without deviating in any way from the Torah which He has given us.

How can we achieve such an ideal state? How can one remain aware of what goes on around him, living in the present, without becoming receptive to negative influences exerted upon him daily? Is it at all possible for the individual to remain within the four walls of the Torah, while functioning in a world alien to those very precepts that the Torah espouses?

Throughout the exile people have grappled with this very problem. It would seem that we have found three methods which we may apply in order to preserve our identities as Jews. Each method met with a varying degree of success and failure, yet the first two seem to have only succeeded for the unique individuals within our midst.

The first method is for one to sever himself completely and totally from the world around him, rejecting out hand anything that the outside world might offer - be it a positive or negative influence. This method considers any idea or value that has emerged in an alien atmosphere to present a direct challenge to the Torah, and is thus invalid. There is no doubt that many of those who adopt such a method in dealing with the outside world can point to some success within a short period of time. Yet in the long run this method can prove very detrimental to those who live by such rules. For it tends not only to cut people off from the outside world, but from the rest of the Jewish people as well. By its nature, it causes friction and leaves those who live by such a method to detest anyone who does not come into their fold.

The second method is more radical and enjoys less success than the first. While acknowledging the existence of the world around him, and at times even displaying understanding for it, the individual chooses to wage an all-out war on those ideals and values that are not in congruence with the Torah. This route envelops the individual in total seclusion, yet also leaves him no rest and pits him against impossible odds. It forces him to live with constant friction and enmity, conducting what he believes to be a holy war to protect the Torah. It is a route that is doomed to failure, if only because a human being cannot function within a constant environment of hostility and antagonism.

The third course upon which one might embark is neither an effort at total seclusion nor an insistence upon waging war on society. It is one that might be summed up in the term "selective confrontation." There are many reasons for choosing such a course of action. It will help to avoid (to some extent) those great problems of faith that have plagued our people throughout the last century. It will, as well, offer a practicable alternative in which the masses of Jews will feel a desire and need to return to a Jewish way of life, abandoning the foreign ideas and values which have been inplanted in its stead.

Selective confrontation allows one to remain aware of the world that functions outside of Judaism, and then to weigh those values againstthose which Judaism has to offer. In the Kabbalistic phrase, it is the process of "ha'alat ha-nitzozot," the raising of the sparks of holiness inherent in all people. The process itself is one that serves to differentiate between those values which can add to the richness of a Jewish life, and those values which remain diametrically opposed to Judaism. It is a sifting of ideas, while synthesizing and accepting only those virtues and ideals which remain in congruence with what the Torah and Halakha demand of the Jew. This refining process guarantees that the negative aspects cannot and will not enter and possibly tarnish or defile the Law. One can then clothe and incorporate the good within an amicable atmosphere willing to accept it.

Maimonides, in his "Epsitle to Yemen," expressed his opinion regarding the imbuing of foreign ideas and values into Judaism. He explains that the verse, "No weapon that is formed against thee shall prosper; and every tongue that shall rise against thee in judgment thou shalt condemn" (Yishayahu 54:17), is referring to the methods which the gentile world applies in its battle with Judaism. The first method is the use of physical force, in oppression and war. The second method is more metaphysical, where the art of dialectical argument, propaganda and debate is used to wield influence upon the Jewish people. The prophet informs us that God has promised that neither of these methods will succeed. As Isaiah continues in the same verse, "This is the heritage of the servants of the Lord and the recompense of their righteousness appointed by Me, says the Lord."

I am well aware of the dangers of embarking upon such a path - specifically because it forces upon the individual a terrible obligation, one which causes constant confrontation and selection between cultures and values. Yet it will surely help alleviate many of the dangerous problems and enigmas of faith with which our people have found themselves challenged, especially during the last century.

[To be continued next week.]

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

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