R'Sdarath/ Lyrs

.. Biblical heroism is not ecstat-

ic but rather contemplative; not loud but hushed; not dramatic or spectacular but mute. The individual, instead of undertaking heroic action sporadically, lives constantly as a hero. Jacob did not just act heroically upon the spur of the moment. His action was indicative of a resolute way of life; he was not out to impress anybody. This type of heroics lasts as long as man is aware of himself as a singular being.

בָּרוּךְ אַתָּה יהוה אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֵלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם אוֹוַר יִשְּרָאֵל בִּגִבוּרָה.

בָּרוּךְ אַתָּה יהוה אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלֶם עוֹטר ישראל בֿתפאַרה.

בָּרוּךְ אַתָּה יהוה אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֵלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם הַנוֹתֵן לַיָּעֵף בְּחַ.

[4

בראשית, וישלח

לב, 27-29

and the hollow of Jacob's thigh was strained,

הַלֻּלֶּכ הַנְּבְינֶנֶ הַ

as he wrestled with him.

בְּהַאָּבְקוֹ עִמְּוֹ:

27. And he said: Let me go, 27 וַיָּאמֶר שֵׁלְחֵׁנִי

for the dawn breaketh. ָּבִי עָּלֶה הַשְּׁחַר בִּי עָּלֶה הַשְּׁחַר

And he said:

רַיּאמֶר

I will not let thee go,

לָא אַשַּׁלְחַדּ

except thou bless

בָּר אִם־בַּרַכְּחָנִי:

, אם_בברטוני גי ניהייוון במנך ערמת חמים סונה בשושנים — אדם נושא אשה בין ל' שנה בין מ' שנה משמוצא יציאותיו הוא בא לוקק לה והיא אומרת לו כשושנה אדומה ראיתי יפורש ממנה מיד. מי גרם לו שלא יקרב לה איזה כתל ברזל ביניהם איזה עמוד ברזל ביניהם איזה נחש נשכו איזה עקרב עקצו שלא יקרב לה, דברי תורה שרכין כשושנה שנא' בה ואל אשה בנדת ממאתה לא תקרב. וכן מי שהביאו לו תמחוי של חתיכות אמרו לו חלב נפל שם ומשך ידו ולא מעמו מי גרם לו שלא למעום איזה נחש נשכו שלא ימעם ואיזה עקרב עקצו שלא יקרב וימעם אותם. דברי תורה שרכין כשושנה שכתיב בה כל חלב וכל דם לא תאכלו.

Thy belly is like a heap of wheat set about with lilies. It often happens that a man takes a wife when he is forty years of age. When, after going to great expense, he wishes to associate with her, she says to him, 'I have seen a rose-red speck,' he immediately recoils. What made him retreat and keep away from her? Was there an iron fence, did a serpent bite him, did a scorpion sting him? A dish of meat is placed before a man and he is told some forbidden fat has fallen into it. He withdraws his hand from the food. What stopped him from tasting it? Did a serpent bite him; did a scorpion sting him? Only the words of the Torah which are as soft as a bed of lilies, 12

IRADITION

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CATHARSIS Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik

12. Shir ha Shirim R. to Song 7:3.

5)

Bride and bridegroom are young, physically strong and passionately in love with each other. Both have patiently waited for this rendezvous to take place. Just one more step and their love would have been fulfilled, a vision realized. Suddenly the bride and groom make a movement of recoil. He, gallantly, like a chivalrous knight, exhibits paradoxical heroism. He takes his own defeat. There is no glamor attached to his withdrawal. The latter

is not a spectacular gesture, since there are no witnesses to admire and to laud him. The heroic act did not take place in the presence of jubilating crowds; no bards will sing of these two modest, humble young people. It happened in the sheltered privacy of their home, in the stillness of the night. The young man, like Jacob of old, makes an about-face; he retreats at the moment when fulfillment seems assured.

Gulakider

Let me illustrate the Halachic idea of inner withdrawal or emotional catharsis. Aaron the high priest met with disaster. On the most joyous day of his life, when the Tabernacle was dedicated and he was inaugurated into his office, two of his sons died. Death is always the great evil which man cannot accept. It is certainly unacceptable to a father whose grief over the loss of a son is limitless. How much more so the unreasonable death of two sons, who had entered the sanctuary to worship and to serve the Lord and were devoured by a fire from the Lord. Moses addressed the following words to Aaron immediately after the disaster struck:

ויאמר משה וכו' ראשיכם אל תפרעו וכגדיכם לא תפרמו ולא תמתו ועל כל העדה יקצף ואחיכם כל בית ישראל יככו את השרפה אשר שרף ה' ומפתח אהל מועד לא תצאו פן תמתו כי שמן משחת ה' טליכם.

Let not the hair on your head go loose, neither rend your garments; lest ye die, lest wrath come upon all the people. But let your brethren, the whole house of Israel, bewail the burning which the Lord hath kindled. Ye shall not go out from the door of the Tabernacle, lest ye die; for the anointing oil of the Lord is upon you.¹⁴

Moses enjoined Aaron and his children from mourning for Nadav and Avihu. Aaron and his two surviving sons were enjoined from shedding a tear for them. Why? Because the priests constituted a community of the anointed who were consecrated exclusively to the service of the Lord. The inalienable right, to which every parent is entitled, of mourning the death of a child, was denied to Aaron and his sons. The commitment or consecration of a priest to God is ultimate, all-demanding, and all-inclu-

14. Leviticus 10:6-7.

Now let us visualize the following concrete situation. The mourner, who has buried a beloved wife or mother, returns home from the graveyard where he has left part of himself, where he has witnessed the mockery of human existence. He is in a mood to question the validity of our entire axiological universe. The house is empty, dreary, every piece of furniture reminds the mourner of the beloved person he has buried. Every corner is full of memories. Yet the Halacha addresses itself to the lonely mourner, whispering to him: "Rise from your mourning; cast the ashes from your head; change your clothes; light the festive candles; recite over a cup of wine the Kiddush extolling the Lord for giving us festivals of gladness and sacred seasons of joy; pronounce the blessing of שהחיינו: 'Blessed art Thou . . . who has kept us in life and has preserved us and has enabled us to reach this season'; join the jubilating community and celebrate the holiday as if nothing had transpired, as if the beloved person over whose death you grieve were with you."

A

Once, on the first night of Shavuot, the students of the Volozhin Yeshiva had returned from the festive repast to the bet medrash [study hall]. The building was aglow with illumination and spiritual fervor. Some four hundred students were engrossed in talmudic study. Suddenly, the fatherly figure of the Neziv [Rabbi Naftali Zevi Yehudah Berlin, 1817–1893; the rosh ha-yeshiva of Volozhin] appeared in the the bet medrash. In a loud voice he declared: "Let us join together in a dance in honor of the Almighty's giving us the Torah." Soon the entire student body was caught up in an ecstatic dance with the Neziv.

2)

In the midst of this dancing, a gentile entered with a telegram for the Neziv. The telegram had already been opened, for the messenger knew that the recipient could not open it on the holy day. The Neziv read the telegram, placed it in his pocket, and continued dancing.

Both days of the holiday continued in this joyful fashion. Finally it ended as the concluding evening prayers were chanted and the Havdalah was recited. The moment after it ended, the Neziv broke down and began to sob without restraint. The telegram had informed him that his only sister had passed away on the

day before Shavuot. Nevertheless, mourning can only begin after the festival and not on it. This is the demand of the halakhah to which we must surrender.

Only at the conclusion of the festival did the Neziv remove his shoes and break into uncontrollable tears. This is the demand of the teku. With all his broken heart and unanswered questions, the mortal must yet exclaim "Who is like unto Thee, O Lord, among the mighty!"



Judaism insisted upon catharsis in another area, namely, the intellectual. Judaism insisted upon the redeeming of the logos and maintained that there is an unredeemed cognitive gesture, just as there is an unredeemed carnal drive.

Cognitive catharsis consists in discovering the unknowability of being. Commitment to knowledge, to scientific inquiry, implies, ipso facto, the recognition of the eternal mystery, which grows with the advance of knowledge, which deepens with the triumphant march of the human mind, and which becomes, with every cognitive breakthrough, more baffling, perplexing and challenging. Often we raise a Kohelet-type question: is man indeed a knower? For man always faces the paradoxical situation of solving one problem, only to discover another problem, more complex and inclusive than the first, and which has been precipitated by the very solution to the old problem.

1)

Catharsis of religious life consists exactly in the awareness of the long interludes during which man finds himself at an infinite distance from God: the periodic states of ecstasy engendered by the feeling of closeness to God alternate with the states of black despair, which even the prophet encounters during moments of exile from the presence of the Almighty. Those long periods of black despair (הסתר פנים) contain the cathartic element which cleanses and redeems religious life. The breaking of the covenantal tablets is an experience every committed individual must endure. Only after Moses had lost everything he was questing for, did he ascend Mount Sinai to receive, not only two new tablets of stone but also the radiant countenance and the great mission of transmitting and teaching Torah to the covenantal community. On the long life journey, at one point or another, one must reach the absurd stage at which one finds oneself bankrupt and forlorn. The Bible, with ruthless honesty, recorded such experiences of failure in the lives of our greatest. Man must be cognizant of this tragic fact, which sooner or later he must encounter, if his metaphysical destiny is to be realized. Great is not the man who has never faltered but the man who tripped,

fell and rose again to greater heights. Sin is a reality, not just a potential threat. Perfect man has never been created. 19

2)

Bereishit Rabbah 44:1 - The mitzvot were given to refine humanity.

What does it matter to God if an animal is slaughtered by cutting its neck through the spine or the throat?

וכי מה איכפת ליה להקב"ה למי ששוחט מן הצואר או מי ששוחט מן העורף הוי

[The answer is:] "The commandments were given only in order to refine humanity."

לא נתנו המצות אלא לצרף בהם את הבריות

פרק רביעי

3)

א בֶּן זוֹמָא אוֹמֵר: אֵיזֶהוּ חָכָם, הַלּוֹמֵד מִבֶּל אָדָם, שֶׁנָאֲמֵר: מִבְּל-מְּלַפְּּדֵי תּהֹם פּטּ הִשְּׁבֵּלְתִּי, כִּי עַדְּוֹתֵיךְ שְּיחָה לִי: אֵיזֶהוּ גִּבּוֹר, הַבּוֹבֵש אֶת יִצְרוֹ, שָּנָאֲמֵר: טוֹב משליטוּ אֶרֶךְ אַפָּיִם מִנִּבּוֹר וּמֹשֵׁל בְּרִּוּחוֹ מִלֹּכֵד עִיר: אֵיזֶהוּ עֲשִיר, הַשְּּמֵח בְּחֶלְקוֹ, שַּנָאֲמֵר: זְּגִיעַ בַּפֵּּיךְ בִּי תֹאכֵל אֲשְׁדֵיךְ וְטוֹב לָךְ: אֲשְׁרֵיךְ בְּעוֹלְם הַזֶּה וְטוֹב תּהֹים פּס