

1)

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 יבכו את השרפה אשר שרף ה' ומפתח אהל מועד לא תצאו פן תמתו כי שמן משחת ה' עליכם.

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.

2)

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 שֶׁחַיֵּינוּ: '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."

47

1)

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.

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 tekva. With all his broken heart and unanswered questions, the mortal must yet exclaim "Who is like unto Thee, O Lord, among the mighty!"



2)

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.

3)

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.¹⁸ 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 המצוות אלא לצרף בהם את הבריות

פרק רביעי

3)

א בן זומא אומר: איזהו חכם, הלומד מפל אדם, שנאמר: מכל-מלמד תהלים קיט
 השכלתי, כי עדותיך שיחה לי: איזהו גבור, הכובש את יצרו, שנאמר: טוב משל טו
 ארך אפים מגבור ומשל ברוחו מלכד עיר: איזהו עשיר, השמת בחלקו,
 תהלים קכח
 שנאמר: יגיע כפיך כי תאכל אשריך וטוב לך: אשריך בעולם הזה וטוב