


## *Tzav*

### *Reclaiming Beliefs, Observances, and a Personal God*

 One of the major problems facing the Jewish people in America today is whether or not the practices of Judaism can once more be revived or reclaimed. Can the Jewish people in America once again make the practice of Judaism the central focus of their loves? During the past few generations, Jews in America have, by and large, taken their Judaism for granted and have spent all their energy trying to integrate into America. They have felt that being a Jew was just something they were and that they did not have to cultivate it. It was an ethnic identity with certain vague theological ideas tied to it. It is, of course, true that Judaism is both an ethnic and a religious identity. The Jewish people and Judaism are not always identical. We do not believe that Judaism is what the Jewish people do. We believe that Judaism is what the Jewish people should do. According to our faith, you are a Jew if you are born to a Jewish mother. You may not be a believing Jew or an observant Jew, but you are still a Jew unless, of course, you openly, through some official act, take upon yourself another religion. Even then you can return to be a Jew in good standing any time you want to. Judaism teaches that a Jew, even if he sins, is still a Jew.

In the days of Eliahu almost every Jew had bowed down to Baal at one time or another. Eliahu was very despondent. He told G-d, "The Jewish people are finished. They are not even giving their children a bris anymore. They are going to become pagans completely." G-d told Eliahu not to be despondent, that even though only 3,000 Jews had not bowed down to Baal, the Jewish people would survive and return to the Judaism, "and you," G-d told Eliahu, "will attend every *bris* from now on just to prove to you and to all Jews in the future that the Jewish people can and will return to their religion, even though sometimes they may, because of different historical and ideological circumstances, deviate in great numbers from it." That's the reason why we have a chair for Eliahu (Elijah's chair) at every bris. In order for Judaism to survive, of course, there have to be Jews. There has to be a group of people who know they come from Jewish

roots and who want to retain their Jewish identity, even though they may not do everything that Judaism demands.

One of the reasons why *Purim* is always celebrated in close proximity, 30 days before *Pesach*, is to teach us this lesson. After all, in a Jewish leap year there are two months of *Adars*. We add a whole extra month. The question is often asked, why does *Purim* occur in the second *Adar*? Why doesn't it occur in the first *Adar*? The answer given is because the events of *Purim* actually happened on *Pesach*. Queen Esther went to King Achaverosh on *Pesach*. The two parties she held were on *Pesach*, and Haman was hung on *Pesach*. *Purim* and *Pesach* have a lot in common because in both instances the Jewish people were far from practicing Judaism the way that it should be practiced. The rabbis say that the Jews in Shushan lacked self-pride and even participated in their own abasement at Achaverosh's banquet when he mocked them by using the utensils that were used in the Temple. The Jews in Egypt had already sunk to idol worship and were at the 49th level of *Tumah*, the rabbis say. If they would have progressed any lower, they would not have been worthy of being redeemed. *Purim* and *Pesach* both teach us that as long as Jews identify themselves as Jews, even though they are far from following Judaism the way it should be, there is still hope. Our first obligation is to make sure Jews survive physically. We can then worry about their spiritual development later.

The great challenge of our era has been to ensure that Jews survive physically. The Holocaust, the terrible anti-Semitism of Stalin, the relentless Arab and now Iranian attacks against Israel, and the resurgence of anti-Semitism throughout the western world has made the battle for Jewish physical survival a difficult job in this century. Judaism, itself, has always been built on two pillars: Jewish observance and Jewish beliefs. It is true that we do not have a creed, but this does not mean that there are not basic Jewish beliefs that a Jew must adhere to if he is to find his Judaism meaningful. If a Jew does not have these basic beliefs, then he will not practice Judaism. He may not accept another religion and he may still have the name Jew on him, but he will not practice Judaism. It is also true that in Juda-

ism we stress deed over creed. Judaism agrees with what we say in America. "We do not care what you believe as long as you obey the law," but the truth of the matter is that you will not obey the law in America unless you believe in America's beliefs. Unless you believe in democracy and the equality of every human being, you will not feel compelled to follow the law just because the majority voted for it and it does not conflict with the Bill of Rights.

Approximately 100 years ago some basic Jewish beliefs died for many Jews. The basic Jewish beliefs which we must subscribe to are: (1) that there is a powerful personal G-d Who cares about us and the world; (2) that He wants us to be His partner in creation; (3) that He has revealed His will to us; and (4) that He wants us to help Him redeem the world. We also believe that He can help us, and that it is not childish or silly to pray to Him. Most Jews in the past 100 years have at least believed in part of these beliefs. What died 100 years ago to many Jews was the belief that G-d was powerful and that He cared for us individually. Because these Jews swallowed hook, line, and sinker the Newtonian concepts of cause and effect, they felt that G-d was powerless to help us, that everything in life was cause and effect. G-d may have started the universe but He really has nothing to do with it any more. He is just like a watchmaker who, after he makes a watch, has no connection with it at all. It does no good to pray to Him because He cannot help anyway. The idea of a personal caring G-d Who could answer our prayers died for many Jews. They still believed that there was a force in the world which was driving man toward redemption and, therefore, man still had to be concerned with redeeming the world and perfecting it, but this force of history took no personal cognizance of individual man. That's why so many Jews became socialists, etc. Jewish education in eastern Europe, though, was very strong and those Jews who lost their belief in a personal G-d were still tied emotionally to Jewish observances. It would take two or three generations for most Jewish observances to end in these families. The reason why Israel came into being and the Hebrew language came to be the spoken language of Israel was because the Jews of eastern Europe, especially the ones who attended

*yeshivas*, knew Hebrew well. It was not something strange to them. The story is even told of one of Lenin's ministers who was supposed to have been a communist who got up in the middle of a cabinet meeting and started to shake against the wall. Lenin asked him what he was doing. He told Lenin that he was praying the afternoon prayer. Lenin said, "I thought you were a communist." He said, "I am, but I still have to *daven Mincha*." He was later kicked out of Lenin's cabinet and went to Australia and became a millionaire.

Paradoxically in our day Jewish belief has come back. At a time when almost all Jewish observances among large parts of the Jewish people have ceased, Jewish belief has come back. We now have no difficulty at all believing in a personal G-d. We all know how, based on the Van Hisenberg Principle, that the very act of observing something changes it. Science no longer talks about reality. It only talks about models. The very existence of black holes means that man cannot know everything. Man is limited. We now, in addition to our own efforts, need G-d's help. We also now know that scientific laws are not cut and dried but probabilities, that within scientific laws, there is much room for G-d to act. He can act within nature without changing it.

That, too, of course, is what is stressed in the holiday of *Purim*. G-d's name is not even mentioned once in the *Megillah*. G-d can influence events without ever having to change nature. So many coincidences happened in the *Megillah*: Mordechai saved the king's life; the king got mad at Vashti and chose Esther to be his queen; he could not sleep; Haman happened to be just waiting outside, etc.

In our own day, too we can see the finger of G-d in many events if we want to. Israel could never have come into being without the destruction of seven empires, an event which in the early 1900's was thought to be impossible. Israel could never have come into being until the Turkish, Russian, German, Italian, Austrian, French, and British empires were dismembered. Today a Jew has no problem at all believing in a personal G-d. Quantum mechanics, sub atomic physics have forever destroyed the Newtonian concept of absolute cause and effect. G-d can act. G-d can help. Praying to G-d is not a silly

act. Judaism can be revived in America as it has been revived in the past.

After *Purim* the rabbis teach us there was a great religious revival. The Jewish people accepted the *Torah* willingly and with a full heart. The *Medrash* tells us that at Mount Sinai the Jewish people had not accepted the *Torah* willingly and with a full heart. G-d had raised the mountain over them like a barrel and He said, "If you will accept the *Torah*, it will be all right. If not, I will let the mountain fall on you." The Jewish people had just come out of slavery and their acceptance, as this *Medrash* illustrates, was not wholehearted. At the time of *Purim*, however, they accepted the *Torah* wholeheartedly. The community recognized that they needed it. The *Torah* was not just for the sick or the old or the emotionally maimed people.

Today, too, Jews recognize that they need spirituality in their lives. Religion is not something secondary to their personal lives; it is a necessity. That's why it was so important that the community as a whole launched the "Reclaim the *Shabbat*" project. This proclaimed to every Jew that they were not being silly or medieval or foolish because they want to believe in a personal G-d and have spirituality in their lives. This is an adult intellectual position.

In the *Torah* portion *Tzav* we learn how one of the main jobs of the high priest was to take the embers off the altar. He was to take these embers and give them new life. The simmering fires of spirituality which have always burned in the Jewish people's hearts, even in those periods when total Jewish belief seemed dimmed could be reignited. The *Kohen Godol*, the high priest, was, first, of all, to keep the fire burning. We have been fortunate that throughout this modern period, there have always been some Jews and some communities who have kept Jewish belief and observance alive. What is necessary today is to fan these beliefs and observances into a mighty flame. The high priest was to serve in the Temple with his fancy vestments, but he was also supposed to remove them and take the embers from the altar outside in the camp among the people. In order for Judaism to be revived fully in America, two things are necessary. One is an increase in Jewish learning. Another of Aaron's duties was to take

pure olive oil and prepare the *menorah* to be lit in the Tabernacle every day. The teachings of the *Torah* have to be spread far and wide. The *menorah*'s light was to radiate out from the Temple. Aaron was also supposed to create warm elevating experiences for the people. That's what the Temple service was supposed to be about. Judaism has to be taught by appealing both to the head and the heart. People should be impressed by its truth and by its understanding. Its message also has to be taken outside the Temple. The warm embers of simmering Jewish belief and observance can be fanned into a mighty flame and demonstrated to everyone. All Jews can be made to feel that Judaism can uplift their lives, enrich the lives, and fulfill their deep personal need for spirituality.

Elijah was wrong when he complained to G-d that Judaism had reached the end of its line. So today are those who claim that Judaism has reached the end of its line in America. All we need for the beliefs and wonderful life enhancing observances of Judaism to be felt and appreciated by all Jews is for our community as a whole to promote and support Jewish learning and positive Jewish experiences such as *Shabbatonim* as much as it can. The ember that is simmering in the heart of every Jew can be ignited. We just have to assure all Jews that their need for spirituality is real and valid and that it can be supplied to them by Judaism. Let us hope that this will happen soon in our day.

### ***Commitment, Communication, and Happiness***

**T**oday is *Shabbat Hagodol*. We read a special *Haftorah* from the Prophet Malachi. In it we read about how the people were losing faith, how they were even cheating on their charity obligations, how they were doubting if it pays to be honest.

The time of Malachi was a time of great change. Always in periods of great change there are feelings of turmoil, of alienation. We today are also living in a period of great change. In our day, too, there does not seem to be any stability. People enter a profession and then find that it is obso-

lete. Nothing is stable. Families are crumbling. People do not know who or what to trust and, therefore, they do not trust anyone or anything.

People are concerned only about themselves. They, in many instances, are out just to look after number one, themselves. This leads to breakdown of families, conflict between generations. That's why one of the main themes of the *Haftorah* is the turning of the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the turning of the hearts of the children to the fathers.

Today people have difficulty putting their trust in anyone or any institutions; therefore, they are searching for happiness. In America today we all subscribe to the notion of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. We, in Judaism subscribe fully to the idea of life and liberty, but the pursuit of happiness is an idea we cannot subscribe to. You cannot pursue happiness. Happiness is a by-product of something else.

There are, to my mind, only three ways to achieve happiness. One is through accomplishment. That's the only way that people feel they can achieve happiness in America today; by setting up some sort of goal and reaching it, climbing a mountain, getting a degree, etc. In fact, today if a mother tells you how she takes care of her children, takes them to the doctor, car pools, and solves their problems, people just shrug. If that same woman said she just got a degree in child development, everyone would applaud. The woman who is raising her children probably knows more than the one with a degree in child development because she has actual clinical experience.

The second way to achieve happiness is to know that you are accepted just for yourself, and the third way is to be able to bring joy to others. These last two ways to achieve happiness require commitment, commitment to other people, and today many people are not willing to make a commitment.

The *Torah* portion *Tzav* speaks about commitment, what it entails. It is not just for the good times. It is also for the bad times, too. We learn that the *Kohen Godol* had two main jobs: one was to officiate at the *Yom Kippur* services; the second was to change his clothes and to remove the ashes from the altar. These ashes were really embers. The rabbis tell us that the fire that burned on the altar was also used to light the *menorah*. The fire, which represents passion, first was used for sacrifice and then to light the

*menorah*, which was a symbol of perpetual light. Commitment requires not just a passion. The rabbis tell us that the fire burned all night. The *Kohen* was concerned with those embers, with fanning the embers and causing them once more to burn. His job was to take wild passions and transmute them into the steady light of the *menorah*, devotion.

When things were going real good, the *Kohen Godol* was not needed. He was needed when the embers were almost burned out. In order to have commitment, in order to maintain a relationship, a person always has to be there when the embers are low, when things are bad. A person should be there in order to nurse the fires and bring it back to life. The trick in any relationship is to transmute the initial passion, or fire into the steady light of the *menorah*. This requires a commitment to be there during the night as well as during the day. It requires commitment. It requires caring for the embers and causing them to glow again.

In the *Haftorah* we learned that the people did resuscitate their relationships. They did learn to trust each other. They did this by learning to communicate. Then they spoke each man to his neighbor. The hearts of the father were turned to the sons, and the sons to the fathers. Let us hope and pray that in our day this will come true, that people will learn that happiness comes from commitment. I am reminded of the story they tell about a man who wrote a letter to the IRS saying, "Ten years ago I cheated the government. Lately I have not been able to sleep because of it. Enclosed, you will find a thousand dollar bill. If I find I still can't sleep, I'll send you the rest I owe." This type of commitment is no commitment. It is self-centered and does not reach out to others. We need commitment which will allow us to be happy because we know we are accepted and we can bring joy to others.