

Purim

Purim and the Mishebairach Prayer

As we all know, it is customary when a person is sick to have a special prayer, known as a *Mishebairach*, said for that person when the *Torah* is being read. The *Mishebairach Prayer* is a short beautiful prayer in which we say, "May He Who has blessed our forbearers, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, Moshe and Aaron, David and Solomon, may He bless and heal so and so who is ill and for whom charity is being offered. As a reward for this, may the Holy One, Blessed be He, have mercy upon him/her. Grant him/her health and vigor in life. May He speedily restore him/her to perfect health, both spiritually and physically, and to this let us say amen."

Judaism is not magic. We do not believe that we can coerce G-d to do anything. The difference between magic and Judaism is that people who believe in magic believe that if they say a certain formula or do a certain act, they can compel the gods to do what they want them to do. They have control over them, just like in the genie legend. If you rub the bottle and let the genie escape, he must grant you three wishes. The *Mishebairach Prayer* in Judaism is not a guarantee that the person will be cured. It is a hope, a petition, so to speak, to G-d to grant our request. We believe that G-d listens to all prayers, but sometimes He says no. G-d rules the world and He knows what came before life and what comes after life. Therefore, His decisions necessarily are based upon things which we do not understand. We do know, though, that we are partners with G-d in this world and that G-d does take into consideration our requests and our deeds.

That's why the giving of charity is mentioned in this prayer. We, in effect, tell G-d that this person is so dear to us that he/she helps us to do His work by having us give charity. We also know that man is fallible and that G-d can interfere in the laws of nature without seeming to do so. That, by the way, is the whole basis of the *Purim* story, which we will read this week in synagogue. Although G-d's name is not mentioned once in the entire *Megillah*, His presence is felt in the miraculous salvation of the Jews. Queen Esther fasts on behalf of the welfare of all the Jews in Persia and G-d responds without revealing Himself directly.


Most of the time when we come to make decisions, we usually have

fifty good reasons to do a particular thing and fifty good reasons not to do a particular thing. We need G-d's help to make the right decision.

Doctors, too, many times are puzzled at what course of treatment to give their patients. This prayer, in effect, asks G-d to permit the physicians to make the right decisions. We also do not know where new ideas and new inspiration come from. Two equally trained doctors can look at a patient. One comes up with a brilliant idea to help him and the other does not. We believe that G-d is constantly sending down His inspiration, and we hope and pray that our doctors, too, will be the recipients of some of this inspiration.

The *Mishebirach Prayer* also offers hope, hope that beyond and behind the physician stands G-d, Who can, if He wants, create remissions. A spontaneous remission is by its very nature unexplainable. True a *Mishebirach* is not guarantee that a person will get cured, but it gives hope to those who make it and it does state clearly our belief that G-d can help and does help many times when it suits His purposes. G-d helps, according to our tradition, usually through the intuition, inspiration, and decision-making of our doctors. May they, with G-d's help, bring cures to all sick people.

Modernity, Jewishness, and Choice

 One of the terrible dilemmas that modern Jewry has been forced to contend with is, how can we practice Judaism and still be part of the modern world? Since the French Revolution we have been confronted with a cruel choice. This choice was enunciated first by Clermont Tonnerre at the French National Assembly in 1789: "to the Jew as an individual, everything; to the Jew as a nation, nothing." Since then we have been told that we have to choose between Jewish ways and western ways if we want to be part of the western world. We have to conform to western ways in every way, to all its mores, customs, obligations, and duties. We cannot ask for any type of exemptions in order to practice our religion. The only thing that was not asked from us openly was to be baptized, but even that many times was strongly implied. Since the time of the French Revolution, we Jews have so internalized this feeling that

we must choose, that even today in the State of Israel there are many who feel that in order for Jews to live in the modern world, even in Israel, we have to surrender all vestiges of our Judaism.

The truth of the matter is that we do not have to choose between being a modern person and being a practicing Jew. We can be both. Unfortunately, not all Jews believe this today. Even the ultra orthodox, especially in Israel, have so internalized this view that they have chosen to completely reject the modern world. It goes without saying that the rabidly secular Israeli intellectual elite believe that we have to choose between Judaism and the modern world, and they categorically have chosen to be part of the modern world. It is this secular elite which always holds up as the true practitioners of authentic Judaism the ultra ultra orthodox. They do this because they then can justify their claim that not only is Judaism completely irrelevant to the modern world, but it is antithetical to the modern world. Authentic Judaism, they claim, can never be reconciled with the modern world and, therefore, should be dismissed. Unfortunately, in the minds of many Jews today this same feeling lurks, that the only true Judaism is the Judaism of the ultra orthodox. Everybody else has either compromised Judaism's basic tenets or completely twisted them or dismissed them. That's one of the reasons why Bar Ilan University in Israel has been under such severe attack, especially by the rabidly secular intellectual elite in Israel. They cannot abide the thought that Judaism and modernity can be wedded together. They are trying their best to break the modern orthodox Jew.

They also are attacking the American *Oleem* to Israel because for the last 30 years they have been primarily modern orthodox Jews. These Jews, by their very life-style, contradict the basic world view of these secular intellectuals, that you cannot be Jewish and modern at the same time. It is true that a believing Jew cannot accept everything that the modern world professes, *i.e.*, pornography, alternative life-styles, etc. However, it is not necessary to accept everything in the modern world to be modern. Part of the credo of the modern world is that I get to pick and choose what aspects of the modern world I want to incorporate into my life. On no fundamental matters does being a modern person and being a practicing religious Jew conflict. The choice that many people thrust upon us is in reality a choice

that does not have to be made.

This false necessity of making a choice reminds me of the story we used to be told in school. The teacher would ask us, "If you were asleep and you had a dream that you were in a lifeboat with your father and mother and wife and child and the lifeboat overturned and you could only save one person, what would you do?" The correct answer, of course, is that you should wake up. Most times in life we are not called upon to make such choices, and the very act of theoretically posing such choices can only lead to great divisions and harm. Life is not logical, and there are so many variables in it. Maybe your father and mother and wife and child could swim better than you. Maybe they would have to save you. Maybe they had lifejackets on. Maybe there was another ship approaching. There are too many variables to make such choices unless they are actually thrust upon you. Most of the time the very act of formulating such choices means that we have already made up our minds to reject certain people or aspects of our life. When people say that I have to choose between Judaism and being a modern person, it usually means that they have already made up their minds to reject Judaism and are only using this supposed choice to justify their already predetermined position.

Modern science teaches us that things are not always logical, that we have to hold contradictory positions about even physical phenomena which seem impossible. According to Quantum Theory, light is both a particle and a wave. How can that be possible? It is logically impossible but yet it is true. Science teaches us that time is not constant. One day in G-d's eyes can be 15 billion years to us. How fast you are going, and what your mass is determines time. This seems a very absurd concept, yet we know based on many experiments that Einstein's *Theory of Relativity* is 100% true. We also know based on the *Theory of Chaos* that there are many paths to reach the same destination and that it is almost impossible for us to predict which path an atom will take since there are so many variables. We also cannot know everything. When modern science speaks about black holes, it means that there is a limit to our knowledge. We can never know anything about that black hole directly because that black hole emits no light. By definition, then, our knowledge is limited. What's more, since the Van Heisenberg Principle was formulated, we know that the very act of observing some-

thing changes it. Therefore, we cannot even know reality. Physics tells us that there can be many possible outcomes to any given reaction and that an outcome is not actualized until we choose it but the others are still theoretically possible. Choices in life are never clear-cut.

In life we are not called upon to make clear-cut choices. We all know that in Judaism we never say either/or; we say both. We have to do things that are pleasing to ourselves and pleasing to others. We have to make decisions based on law and mercy, on love and discipline. We cannot just use one principle. We have to make decisions which balance our physical and spiritual natures. We have to make decisions which take into account our economic and spiritual well being. There is no necessity to thrust ourselves into an either/or position. We can be strong and accommodating at the same time. We can be firm in our beliefs and also be flexible. We all know that in Judaism every rule has an exception. There are only three things we can never do to save our lives: murder, incest, and idol worship.

The holiday of *Purim* teaches us all these things. It teaches us that G-d acts in mysterious ways. In the whole *Book of Esther* G-d's name is not mentioned even once. In fact, the name "Esther" means "hidden." Esther, who hid her identity as a Jew, did not have to choose between being a Jew and a queen. She ended up by being both. The rabbis say that the terrible threat of extermination by Haman hovered over the Jewish people because the Jewish people showed no self respect. They attended Achaverosh's banquet at which time he mocked them by using the holy utensils of the Temple. The Jews participated in this mocking of themselves. They felt, as many Jews do today, that Judaism is inimitable to the modern world. They felt that if they wanted to be modern, they had to reject Judaism and not just reject it but ridicule it, show how decadent and corrupt and immoral it was.

In our day we see how this same process has occurred. *Yiddish* and Hebrew literature until the second world war were based on the premise that Jews had to modernize. Judaism was looked at as a medieval, old thing and hatred of rabbis, who are the bearers of the tradition, was rampant. A good portion of this literature vacillated between nostalgia for the past and bitter satire of the then Jewish religious masses and their leaders, the rabbis. The Jews at the time of Haman acted like these writers. They

not only participated in events which ridiculed them, they even ridiculed themselves and their traditions. Haman was quick to point out to the king that the Jews were a scattered people whose laws were different from all other peoples and that the king should not tolerate them. Haman was even willing to pay 10,000 silver talents, an enormous sum (30 million *shekels*) for the privilege of killing the Jews. Haman said, as Hitler did in our day, that the Jews were a virus affecting the world and the only way the world could be saved was by eradicating the Jews. The Jewish fate seemed sealed but then G-d intervened without seeming to intervene.

Strange coincidences took place. It turns out that Mordechai had saved the king's life. He had had Esther report the conspiracy that he had overheard in his name. Then the king could not sleep. Haman overreached himself, and Esther revealed who she was to the king, and the Jewish people were saved almost. The king could not revoke Haman's decree but he could allow the Jews to defend themselves. A bloody war ensued on the day that Haman had set aside to kill all the Jews, and we were victorious. Mordechai the Jew became viceroy. The fact that Mordechai was a Jew is stressed in the *Megillah* because Mordechai did not have to sacrifice his Jewishness in order to rise to the highest level of power in Persia. Mordechai proved that you can be Jewish and a Modern man at the same time. It is interesting to note that at the end of the *Megillah* it says, "for Mordechai the Jew who was viceroy to King Achaverosh. He was a great man among the Jews and accepted by the majority of his people." Notice it says that he was only accepted by the majority of his people. There were still those in Mordechai's time who felt that in spite of Mordechai, you could not be a modern man and Jewish at the same time. Mordechai proved them wrong, but they did not want to accept the fact because they really did not want to be practicing Jews anymore. They wanted to throw off Judaism by claiming that you could not be modern and Jewish at the same time.

In our day, too, there are many who are trying to claim that you cannot be modern and Jewish at the same time. This is false. There is nothing in Judaism which contradicts democracy or human rights or our participation in all social worthwhile causes. In fact, a belief in Judaism enhances our appreciation for these concepts. Just as Mordechai could be modern and Jewish in his time, we can be modern and Jewish in our time. That is

one of the lessons of *Purim*. Let us all hope and pray that we will learn it well so the *Mashiach* will come quickly in our day. Amen.