

1959

Rosh Hashanah

Selflessness

The story is one of our people's most beloved. It tells of the Tzaddiq of Nemirov who disappeared every year during the Slichot season. The members of his family were wont to leave the house long before dawn. He would remain behind, presumably for a bit of extra preparation. However, he would never arrive at the synagogue, and no one would dare embarrass him by asking what happened. Who would be so bold as to ask the Rebbi where he went or what he did! Who knows? Perhaps he even ascended to heaven each day to plead with God, that God's people might have a good year, "Aye, it must be that," said Chasidim. "Who, but the Rebbi could wring good decrees from God for Israel!" Yet there was a Litvak among them. A Litvak is never gullible. A Litvak cannot tolerate myths. And he decided that he would discover what the Rebbi did during the Selichoth season.

Late one afternoon, when the Rebbi's house was empty, he entered and hid under the Rebbi's bed. All night he lay there - waiting, hoping that he would succeed in exposing the Rebbi. A few hours after midnight the family rose and went to the synagogue and the Litvak was alone in the house with the Rebbi - the Rebbi on the bed, and the Litvak under it. Then the Rebbi began to stir. He rose from his bed, washed his hands, and opened a clothes closet. From behind suits and coats, the Rebbi fetched a peasant's outfit, a peasant's cap, and peasant's boots. With these he dressed himself, hid his earlocks in the cap and fastened a hatchet to his belt. Then with cord, the Rebbi walked to the end of the town and into the woods adjoining it. The Litvak followed close behind. Is the Rebbi gone mad, said he. And why this attire? Can it be that the Rebbi is a saint by day and a thief at night? And he continued to watch. The Rebbi chopped down many small trees, cut them

into logs for firewood, then bound them with rope, and heaping them on his back, wended his way to town again. In a little alley on the outskirts of the town, there was a dilapidated hut in which there lived an old widow. The Rebbi knocked and the widow answered, "Who is it?" "It is I," said the Rebbi, "I Vassil the wood-cutter." "What do you want, Vassil?" said the widow, "I have wood for sale," said the Rebbi, "and it is cold and you need fire." "Ah," said the widow, "but how shall I pay for it." "Foolish woman," said the Rebbi, "don' t you trust your God?" "But even if I trust God, who will kindle the fire," said the widow. And with that, the Rebbi was in the house, while the Litvak peeped through the cracks in the door. The Rebbi unloaded the wood, and as he put the logs in the stove his lips moved as he recited the first paragraph of the Selichoth, and as he kindled the logs, he recited the second paragraph, and as he watched them burn, he recited the third. The Litvak was speechless. He returned to the synagogue.

"Litvak," they called to him, "did you find out where the Rebbi goes." The Litvak did not answer.

"Litvak, tell the truth, doesn' t he go to heaven?"

The Litvak mused. "Does he go to heaven? Who knows? Perhaps even higher than heaven!"

It is of heaven that I want to talk to you on this New Year festival, for in the story that I have told you we have the most perfect definition of heaven that I could possibly convey. I know that for many people heaven may be a life of luxury or sensuous pleasure. Many of us may even dream of a heavenly rest or a heavenly trip and some of us are even such gourmets that we speak of heavenly foods and drink. But in our serious moments we know that nothing physical can really be heaven - we are bored too rapidly by even the most lavish of physical indulgences. Instead we crave that sublime or ethereal experience of which it can be said that is the ultimate in life itself. Indeed, when we have such a sublime or ethereal experience we want it to last forever. In such moments we could even die with ease for they are moments when we feel as if we had caught a glimpse of eternal life itself.

Yet how can we describe these heavenly experiences that we may have them more often? How can we really experience heaven on earth?

Philosophers have asked the question and many answers have been given. I could, for example, describe for you at length what the great philosopher Maimonides visualized as the bliss of immortality. Maimonides was a great thinker, a great rationalist, and he imagined that there would be eternal bliss in the contemplation of God. For still other rationalists, to experience heaven was to be able to hearken to the music of the spheres and the divinely mathematical perfection of their relationships unto each other. This is perhaps the kind of bliss which appeals to great musicians when they either create or reproduce immortal music. Yet, in all fairness to the common man, can it be expected that every human being shall have the capacity for such intellectual enjoyment? We have not been endowed by our Creator with the genius of a Maimonides and it is not possible for us to enjoy the visions of pure reason and architectonic mathematics that could appeal to Maimonides. And if God loved the common man since He made so many of them, He must have realized that we too must have a way of catching the Infinite in much simpler ways, and in moods that while equally elevating are moods available to every human being, no matter how erudite or ingenuous.

It seems to me that God must have intended a much simpler answer to the basic quest that is ours. And He did. And that is taught to us by the Tzaddiq of Nemirov.

When you and I perform a good deed that is absolutely selfless - a good deed of which only God and we have knowledge, we are in heaven - we are at one with God. We are even as deathless as He is.

No one, but God, knew what the Tzaddiq was doing. The poor widow thought he was Vassil, the peasant. The Litvak was an intruder and the Rebbi did not know he was spying. But the Litvak knew heaven when he saw it. When I give of myself - without regard to self - when I give of myself without the chance of a "thank you," without the chance of recognition - when I give of myself with only God aware of it - I am with Him. I partake of His Infinite Self.

It is in a moment of selflessness that one has a foretaste of heaven. Furthermore, it is the principal aspiration of religious living to make us as selfless as possible. And on Rosh Hashanah

when we ponder the life and career of our great patriarch Abraham it is primarily to learn how to emulate him in his great capacity for selflessness. For Abraham was subjected to many trials and tribulations, as the Bible tells us. All in all, the Talmud records ten situations in which God tested Abraham's loyalty. (*Mishnah Avot* 5:3) Yet only the tenth - when he was asked to sacrifice his beloved son Isaac - is regarded as definitive. Why didn't the earlier trials satisfy God? Didn't God ask Abraham to leave his native land and go to strange parts? Was that easy to do? How many of us are ready even now - with Israel in Jewish hands - to leave our native lands and reside there? And didn't God try Abraham when He confided in Abraham that He was about to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah and Abraham had the courage to challenge God in the name of justice? Why was only the sacrifice of Isaac real proof of Abraham's loyalty to God? For one simple reason, Abraham was loyal - undoubtedly. But if Abraham was willing to go to Canaan, at least he hoped thereby to acquire a great land for his posterity. And if he argued to save the doomed cities, he wanted to save his nephew. Only once was he asked to perform the most selfless act imaginable - to give to God what he cherished more than his life - his own son - only then could God regard him as capable of selflessness. And that is why, in Rabbinic literature, Abraham is the only person of whom it is said that he served God "out of love." No other prophet or saint described in the Bible was that selfless.

But it is the function of religion to make us selfless - not that we can be selfless all the time but at least we must be helped to increase the frequency of occasions when we are selfless and thus have a foretaste of heaven.

This is not the hope and goal of religion alone. Psychiatrists, who up until recently were hostile to religion, have now emerged with a new approach and they tell us that the principal reason for all anxiety today is self-centeredness. Americans are spending between 100 and 150 million dollars a year on tranquilizers. Millions of us in youth, in middle age and in old age, are neurotic. And what is a neurotic: I read the definition of one of the world's greatest experts - "Any neurotic is living a life which in some respects is extreme in its self-centeredness. The region of his misery represents a complete preoccupation with himself."

There may be many reasons for our neurotic anxiety. "Sometimes when we are hypersensitive, resentful or captious, we are indicating a fear that we will not appear to advantage in competitive situations when we want to show our worth. Sometimes we are indecisive because we are afraid of choosing the wrong thing and being discredited. Sometimes we are even over scrupulous or self-critical because we want to show how praiseworthy we really are. The sin of pride is one of the most important causes of our neuroses. And as we shift to selfless goals, our lives become sounder even if we cannot completely rid ourselves of our neuroses.

Religion and psychiatry point in one direction. They aim to help individuals to become more selfless in order to enjoy better mental health and a foretaste of heaven.

The question is - can one really be selfless?

No. One cannot be altogether selfless. Even the parent who benefits his son does so because the son is part of himself, the substance of his selfish hope and ambition. But God does not ask that we ignore our egos altogether. He asks only that we balance selfishness with selflessness. He is a real man who knows how to prevent himself from becoming permanently enmeshed in his own lusts and desires and can transcend the self and say - No more.

This is the crying need of our day - in every area of life. This is the crying need - a greater capacity for selflessness and a curtailment of self centeredness.

Let us take the area of religion itself. Why can't religion do for you and for me what it did for our forebears? Why don't we derive from religion the spiritual security it once afforded our parents and grandparents? Simply because our religion is self-centered. We want religion to suit our tastes, our desires, our convenience. Religious practices and rituals are trimmed to suit the cravings of our own hearts. Instead of religion making demands upon us, we make demands upon religion. We want the rules of the *Shabbath*, *kashruth*, family purity, to conform to our self-interest.

Or take the area of education.

What are the goals of education in our day? Again self-centered ones. We stress self-advancement, self-development, self-expression. Every goal involves the self. However, where does selfless-

ness fit into the picture? What do we do with our educational facilities to convey a greater preoccupation with the needs of others rather than our own needs?

Or take the area of home. What are the values most emphasized in the home? Aren't they personal hygiene and personal appearance? Don't we stress the fact that we must help ourselves to feel well and look good? But ponder again, aren't these precisely the goals that make our children self-centered so that we subsequently have to complain that they are altogether incapable of selflessness and a readiness to sacrifice for others. It is always we who are trying to shield them from too much Hebrew, too much prayer, too much work, too much responsibility, and therefore, it is we who lay the groundwork for the neurotic personality which is the major problem of modern society.

Or take the area of our organizational activity. Here, too, the emphasis is always on what we ourselves can gain by joining. We ask, what are the privileges that membership affords? What are the satisfactions and the gratifications that are the reward for the payment of dues? Rarely do we invite one to become a member of an organization exclusively because he can thereby do something for others, rather than for himself. Even in our synagogues we think in terms of the privileges of membership and rarely do we say to people that they ought to join us precisely because we offer them as individuals nothing other than indoctrination in self-sacrifice. True; if they joined us for no selfish reason they would acquire the greatest gift of all, the experience of heaven which comes from selflessness, the glimpse of heaven which can be had when, like the Tzaddiq of Nemerov, one does the good with only God looking on.

This is the message of Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac. Abraham reached the peak of his spiritual development on Mount Moriah in a moment of selfless devotion to God. May more of us be helped to have glimpses of Heaven in our own movement away from self-centeredness to selfless devotion to God and His people.