

1952
*Slichot (midnight prayers on the Saturday
night at least one week before
Rosh Hashanah)*

The Great Challenge of Our Day

Y'ou undoubtedly noticed how softly our Reader chanted the latter half of this past week's Scriptural portion. Twice a year he does that, when he reads the two *Tochachot*, Moses' great warnings to the people of Israel. On two occasions Moses told the Jews how they would be punished if they violated God's law. The punishments he described I will not dare to summarize. If you are not already familiar with them, you should read them, for no summary can possibly do justice to their overpowering eloquence.

Yet, one has cause to wonder. Why did Moses utter the warnings twice? And why did he do it differently each time? Do the two *Tochachot* in Leviticus and Deuteronomy refer, perhaps, to two different situations in Jewish history? Or do they perhaps refer to two different kinds of crises?

The great Nachmanides tells us that the first *Tochacha* is prophetic of the destruction of the First Jewish Commonwealth in the year 586 B.C.E., when the Babylonians conquered Judea, reduced Jerusalem to ashes, and exiled the Jews to Babylon. The second, he says, is prophetic of the destruction of the Second Jewish Commonwealth in the year 70, when the Romans burned the second temple and precipitated our dispersion to all the corners of the earth.

While Nachmanides' suggestion is very intriguing, the question remains whether one can support his opinion from the texts. And to this question, the greatest preacher of the last generation, Rabbi Amiel, formerly Chief Rabbi of Tel-Aviv, gives a truly brilliant reply. The texts, he points out, bear out Nachmanides' sug-

gestion. For, explains Rabbi Amiel, there are two kinds of national disintegration. There are two ways in which a nation tends toward collapse. One way is for a nation to lose the earmarks of nationhood. It can lose its land, its statehood, its independence. There is another way, however, which is even more tragic. The individual constituents of the nation lose their pride in their heritage, their faith in their ability to create things worthwhile. The nation then disintegrates, because its constituents have individually given up the fight.

The first *Tochacha*, says Rabbi Amiel, deals with that type of national collapse which comes from the loss of land and statehood. And that can be seen from the verses of the text in Leviticus. The warnings are all given in the plural, because they refer to the collective collapse of the nation. The warnings also refer to the destruction of the soil and the devastation of the cities. The emphasis is on the devastation that will come to the national shrine and all the national institutions.

In Deuteronomy, however, the warnings are directed principally to the disintegration of individual Jews. That is why the verses are all in the singular, “thou” not “you”. And that is also why there is such a great emphasis on the collapse of individual faith. “Thou shalt have no faith in thine own existence.”

And historically, that is what happened. After the destruction of the First Temple, Jews lost their land and statehood, but with the guidance of the Prophets, Jews, even in their exile, turned closer to their God than ever before. Babylon became a tremendous center for the revival of Judaism. The Synagogue became the great creation of our people and the institution of the Synagogue became a model for all of the western world and one of our greatest contributions to civilization.

After the destruction of the Second Temple, however, our greatest loss was the spiritual disintegration of most individual Jews. They lost faith in themselves and their heritage. A few remained loyal, but the overwhelming majority were dispersed, embraced Christianity or assimilated altogether. True, there were times in the past 2000 years when Judaism thrived, in the Golden Age of Spain and in the ghettos of Eastern Europe. But generally speaking, in the year 70, there were at least five times as many Jews as there were in 1789 when the French Revolution began. This indi-

cates a sad breakdown of the morale of individual Jews following the destruction of the Second Commonwealth. And that is why Nachmanides regarded the two sets of warnings in the Bible as prophetic of the two great destructions. The first, in the plural, referred to loss of land and state, but the second, in the singular, referred to the disintegration and “failure of nerve” of individual Jews.

Believe me, friends, there is much that we can learn for our own day from this comment of our sages. We have been privileged in our own day to behold one recovery, the recovery by Jews of their land and statehood. We have been privileged to behold the redemption of the land - a miraculous and speedy rehabilitation of the soil of Israel, the reconstruction of its cities, the reforestation of its hills. But alas, we are very far from beholding *geulat ha am*, the recovery of the people, the restoration of universal Jewish morale, the restoration of the faith of Jews in themselves, their heritage, their future.

Of course, millions of people get along all their lives without a faith to live by, but when we discover Jews in our day craving such a faith - particularly among our college youth who are groping, and among disillusioned intellectuals - what are the faiths to which they turn? Alas, it is seldom to Judaism that they rediscover an allegiance. It is usually to either Catholicism or Communism that they become all-out converts!

But while converts to Catholicism are few, the Jewish converts to Communism are many. In this instance, the conversions are reaching almost epidemic proportions. And make no mistake about it. When I say conversions, I mean exactly that. No reasoning with these converts helps, for Communism is a real religion to them. What Moscow says is accepted on faith, no matter what the evidence. But these youths had been groping for a faith. They had no faith in their own heritage as Jews. They did not think that they could help the world by remaining Jews, as every mentally and emotionally healthy Jew should feel. And having lost faith in their Jewishness, they espoused a new religion.

American Jews are not the only Jews who must solve this problem. Israeli Jews must face it also. I have no fears that Mapam will ever control the Israeli government. But the present government is finding it difficult to cope with the tactics of these pro-

Russian elements who are embarrassing the government at every step. These Israelis have also lost faith in their own Judaism. They have a new faith, the faith of the U.S.S.R.

And that is why I say, we are witnessing the recovery of land and statehood, but the Jew's recovery of his own faith, the recovery of the faith of the Jew in the potential of his own heritage for good, this the future must yet bring.

How it will come, I cannot say. But one thing I know. If we recognize this second recovery to be an important one, then we will do things we have never yet tried. And I speak to you in practical terms. Compare the cost of curing a man who is physically ill with the cost of curing a man who is suffering from a mental disorder. You know that to cure a mental disorder costs much more and takes more time. The same applies to the rehabilitation of a people. We know the cost of the physical rehabilitation of Israelis. Hundreds of millions have already been spent and there are estimates that it will take at least another billion and a half of investment capital to solve all of Israel's economic problems. But while billions are, or will be, spent on the recovery of land and statehood, we are spending meager millions on the spiritual recovery. What are we spending on Jewish scholarship a year, here and in Israel? A mere pittance. Without enormous resources how can we create the books, endow the schools, support the scholars, that are necessary for the recovery of our faith in our heritage? Compare what we spend with the millions the Catholic Church spends a year on its universities, its radio broadcasts, its literature, movies and plays, its missionaries, and its public lectures? That is why I say, first, if we are to solve the problem we must think in terms of appropriating hundreds of millions for higher Jewish learning as we have spent hundreds of millions to recover land and statehood. But second, a spiritual recovery consumes time and we are giving it practically no time at all. We cannot hope to accomplish the recovery of our faith in our heritage, so long as Judaism is a three day a year religion to the majority of Jews.

It is interesting, for example, that our ancestors who kept the faith, and practiced Judaism every day of their lives, who prayed thrice daily, uttering at least 100 blessings every day, and who observed Sabbaths, holidays and fasts, felt the need before the High

Holy Days to add to their Jewish living by rising before dawn for special services - the Slichot - before the New Year and Day of Atonement. And most American Jews, to whom the three days is the sum total of all Jewish observance, have felt no need for the Slichos. How can we possibly behold our spiritual recovery with such a minimum application of time!

I pray fervently, that we will earnestly consider the problem that is ours. I pray fervently that the day is not distant, when we will give serious thought to the recovery of our faith in our own heritage, even as we have been privileged to behold the recovery of land and statehood. I pray fervently, that you and I, in particular, will resolve this coming year to give more of our resources, of money and time to *geulat ha' am* - the redemption of our people's faith even as we have helped to redeem our people's land, Amen!