

The Love of Jews

Ours is an age of specialists. As a wit once described it, it is a period when in every field of learning, the experts know more and more about less and less. However, long before we advanced to our present state of learning, we Jews also had specialists - but of a different kind. Many of our saints and sages decided that they would become specialists in a particular Mitzvah. *{See Talmud Shabbat 118b}* I need not tell you that they observed everything that the written and oral law required. But from the thousands of ethical, moral and ritualistic precepts that we have, they would select one with regard to which they sought to achieve perfection. One saint might choose tongue control, and he would become an expert in moral speech. He would never utter a word that might even remotely be regarded as slanderous. Another saint might choose benevolence and he would spend days and nights assisting the poor.

However, the history of Jewish morality indicates that not only individual Jews would try to become specialists with regard to a particular Mitzvah, but Jews as a whole would find that at different periods of their history, all of them would become perfect, or efficient to the maximum, with regard to a particular Mitzvah. For example, at one period of Jewish history, the entire world was depraved with idolatry. As a result, Jews felt impelled to become especially militant in their fulfillment of the Biblical commands to destroy idols and the last vestiges of pagan worship. At another period Jews found that the world at large was suffering from clerical domination and the universal ignorance that the clergy hoped to perpetuate. Jews therefore became all the more enamored of Talmud Torah - of study, and the propagation of learning among all classes of Jews. At still another period Jews found that the world was suffering from a resurgence of nationalism which be-

came the greatest cause for bloodshed, conquest and exploitation. Jews therefore became experts in the type of nationalism the Prophets described - a nationalism which sought universal social justice as its goal. And if you should ask me what is the Mitzvah with regard to which Jews in the present period of history should become especially expert, I will give you the reply of the Gerer Rebbe - of blessed memory. This age, he said, is the age when the world has sunk to the lowest level in the history of anti-Semitism. In our day - more than in any other - Jews have been tortured and exterminated. In our day - more than in any other - the Anti-Semitism of the subtle variety, which is definitely the most venomous, dominates the hearts of almost all men in power. Therefore, if the world is sick with the hatred of Jews, then it becomes the moral responsibility of Jews everywhere to become especially expert in the Mitzvah of *ahavat Yisrael*, especially expert in the Mitzvah of loving Jews. Everyone of us must so discipline himself that our every thought, our every utterance, our every deed, must be one that will reflect our love of Jews. Such experts were the heroes of our Passover festival - Moses, Aaron, and the elders. Who were the elders whom God asked Moses to consult with regard to every move he made? How were they chosen? Why were they later honored to constitute the membership of the Sanhedrin? Says Midrash Rabba (*Bamidbar Rabba* 15:20) that they were the Jews whom the Egyptians made responsible for the quotas of bricks which our ancestors were to make each day. These foremen were punished for the failure of their co-religionists to meet the quotas but they reported no one and punished no one. They bore in silence the brunt of all the punishment themselves.

Aye, they loved their fellow-Jews and therefore earned their immortality. Aaron was the great peace-maker among his people. And Moses - Moses was the man who was chosen to liberate his people because he risked his life to prevent an Egyptian from killing a Jew. And this Mitzvah of loving Jews - even Jews with whom we disagree, even Jews who do stupid or sinful things - is one of which our Passover festival must make us mindful.

Moses was the man who exemplified the love of his people to a maximum degree. After their liberation, for example, he faced a situation which made him sick at heart. He had brought his peo-

pie out of Egypt, into the desert, and had there furnished them with food and drink. But alas, the diet that he provided was terribly monotonous. It included no fish or meat and the Jews griped loudly. But as if that were not sufficient, they began to complain that life in Egypt was better than life in the desert. (*Numbers* 11:5-6) Mind you, they preferred the chains of slavery with its fish and watermelon chow, to freedom with only manna. God was angered and poor Moses did not know what to do. The Bible says, "In Moses' eyes it was bad" (*Ibid.* v. 10) and the commentators tell us that Moses felt more depressed about this situation than about any other problem that ever faced him because he could find no *Zichus*, merit for his people. He could find no justification for the way his people acted. And how would he defend them before God?

Can you visualize any Yemenite or Iraqi Jew trying to leave Israel now to return to Yemen or Iraq because Israel's food is poor? How then could Moses defend his people who had plenty to eat but only because the diet was monotonous preferred to return to slavery?

But Moses, in his love for Israel, found a way, and you must reread the text of his plea before God. "God," he said, "You picked the wrong leader for them. It is all Your fault. Had You picked someone who was closer to them - like a parent - or someone who was more patient - or someone who was more ingenuous in satisfying them - they would not now complain. And if, God, You did make me their leader, and I failed, kill me now and let me not behold my failure."

My interpretation of this plea, friends, is the one suggested by the weight of Midrashim and medieval commentators and it is a beautiful one. Since Moses found no way to explain his people's ridiculous complaint, he blamed it all on his own failure as a leader. That is how deeply he loved his people! The blame for any wrong they committed was his! And that is an illustration of what it means to become expert in one's love for Jews!

Alas, however, that we in our day - despite the plea of the Gerer Rebbe and the example of Moses - are not becoming as perfect in our love for Jews, as the non-Jew has become maximally effective in his hatred of us! Why do I say this?

I say this because you must be as disturbed as I am when you read in the newspapers how bitterly the Zionist Organization and

the Government of Israel attack each other, or how at their Rabbinical Conventions, even Orthodox, Conservative and Reform Rabbis hurl uncomplimentary epithets at their adversaries. Now believe me friends, I am not naive enough to suggest to intelligent people that we can ever unite all Jews so that they will think and act alike. As a matter of fact, it would be most unhealthy for Judaism if there were not healthy differences of opinion. We Jews have always had sects and parties. We have always had groups who advocated new ideas, new proposals, and it was this healthy difference of opinion that vitalized Judaism and made it possible for a small group of people to make such enormous contributions to the progress of human culture. But what we must learn particularly in this day and age, when we are morally obligated to specialize in the Mitzvah of loving Jews, is that even as we differ with each other, we should do so with mutual respect and with love and understanding. When Moses could not find any justification for his people's fault, he blamed his own leadership. Perhaps we have no right to expect the Rabbis of today to be as great as Moses and take the position that if they have failed perhaps they are at fault. But the least that we can expect of every Jew, Rabbi and layman alike, is that our differences shall be expressed with mutual respect even for those with whom we differ.

Let us take the problem within the World Zionist movement as a whole. It is not so tragic that there are parties, because there do exist healthy differences of opinion between the different groups. The General Zionists may have reason to believe that Mapai has failed, at least with regard to its encouragement of private enterprise, and Mapai may have reason to believe that the reactionary General Zionists throughout the world and particularly in Israel cannot reconcile themselves to the fact that the State of Israel must be overwhelmingly socialistic in its enterprise. But the difference between the two is not so great that there ought be incriminations and recriminations in the press to embarrass us and create the impression that Jews fight their political battles on the same level of vulgarity which we are wont to see between Democrats and Republicans in the United States. The tenor of all the releases in the press is that the battle between the parties is only one for party advantage. It was made to appear as if Ben Gurion was involved in the controversy only because he wanted more jobs

for Mapai members and as if the General Zionists wanted a chance to get their own party into power, and as a result each side tried to make the other side appear black and villainous. Wouldn't it add to the stature of the Zionist movement if we established a policy of speaking even of our adversaries with profound respect and admiration, without maligning their motives, and in that way help all Jews without party affiliations to understand that in the final analysis while there may be differences of opinion, the real motivation is a profound love of Israel and a desire to do what is best for the Jewish people.

An even better illustration of this controversy is the manner in which this fight is going on in Israel and in America between the parties on the extreme right and the extreme left. I am one of the Rabbis who does want Israel to be a land in which Torah will thrive, but I cannot reconcile myself to insulting and abusing the members of Mapam. As much as I might differ with them, I cannot march in parades and attend protest meetings to vilify them. And I cannot understand how any of my colleagues are writing tirades in the press and conducting protest meetings against the Government of Israel. But the left is also guilty of the same crime. In their hatred of the religionists, Mapam has gone to the extreme of denouncing Torah altogether and completely overlooking the fact that the great ideals which they themselves profess did not start with Karl Marx but rather with the Torah itself. When one reads their party newspapers one can see the extent to which they are blinded by their hatred of the Rabbis in Israel, that they cannot see anything in the Torah that might be the basis for their own idealism.

But it isn't only within the Zionist movement in America and in Israel that we detect this failure of Jews to recognize that our principle obligation today is to look upon our co-religionists with respect and admiration, and love them even when we disagree with them. It is also true of the religious sects in America.

The Torah Tour Committee of the Rabbinical Council of America urged all of its speakers, who traveled throughout the United States to present the position of Orthodoxy, never to attack Conservative or Reform Jews. These speakers were to state positively what they stand for and not to deliver tirades against those who

disagree with them. Yet how distressed I was to read recently of the attacks made on the Orthodoxy of American Jews and all Orthodoxy in Israel by Conservative and Reform colleagues whose diatribes made the columns of the New York Times and the Herald Tribune. I cannot understand how a Reform Rabbi would make the statement that Reform Rabbis in Israel have no status when they heard here in New York from the mouth of the Minister of Religion that he had pleaded with several of the irreligious colonists in Israel to take a Conservative or Reform Rabbi and they refused. Particularly because the papers distort any statement we make about ourselves, we should be doubly cautious always to talk of our fellow Jews with respect and understanding. Nor can I understand how a Conservative Rabbi would say that Orthodox Judaism holds the law to be unchangeable when that very colleague sat with the greatest Orthodox Rabbi of America and heard from his mouth what is the philosophy of change and what should be the principle of change within traditional Jewish law according to Orthodoxy. But again, the effect of loose statements taken out of context and published in the press is just to create the impression that Orthodox Jews are just as benighted, as medieval as the Catholic Church and only the other groups represent progressive thinking. The net effect of this type of attack is to estrange our young people altogether and make them lose their love for Jews and Judaism as a whole. Why should they have any special love of their people when Jews fight with each other with the same venom and the same intolerance that characterize the most ugly political debates between Democrats and Republicans and between Catholics and Protestants. We cannot hope to win our youth back to a love of Israel unless we can impress them with the fact that by staying with us they are at least staying with a people who, if they accomplish nothing else, at least exemplify mutual respect and confidence.

Perhaps I am asking for a situation which is too ideal, but, friends, it troubles me no end. And I can at least talk to you Jews and say to you "if you agree with me that this is an age where we must combat the almost psychopathic hatred of Jews that prevails among the non-Jews, then we must cultivate in ourselves a profound love of Jews; then each of us must begin to learn how to dis-

cipline our tongues. When we talk of Jews and Jewish movements we must so talk that even when we differ it will not be in an ugly way. It will even be accompanied with an admission to the effect that the other side has a point too. The only Jews of whom we have a right perhaps to be intolerant, are Jews who hate their Jewishness, Jews who are anti-Semites themselves, and there perhaps we might even blame it in part on their background. But if we want to attract a younger generation to the fold, to love the people of Israel and all that the people of Israel have accomplished throughout the ages, then we can only do so by learning how to control that which we say about Jews and Judaism and I tell you this on the basis of long experience. I can tell you that more children learn to hate the Synagogue because of things said at home about the Synagogue rather than because of their disinterest in what takes place in the Synagogue. I can tell you that more children are estranged from going to Hebrew School because of what parents say about other Jews than because of the worst instructors we could possibly have. And therefore, I make this one plea and it is a plea I direct to yourself and myself. Let us learn to be cautious with regard to everything we say about our fellow Jews and particularly about movements within the Jewish fold and as we induce a love of Jews in the hearts of our young, they will love Jews and Judaism and return unto God with all their hearts, that our Redeemer might come soon, Amen!