

Neither Here Nor There

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This derasha was originally delivered in the Jewish Center on March 9, 1968. It is taken with permission from the Yad Norman Lamm Heritage collection of Yeshiva University.

Towards the end of the Book of Esther, which we shall read this week, we are told that after their miraculous deliverance the Jews accepted upon themselves the observance of Purim forever after. *Kiyimu veKiblu*, the Jews "confirmed and took upon themselves" and their children after them to observe these two days of Purim.

Now, logic dictates that the two key verbs should be in reverse order: not *kiyimu ve'kiblu*, but *kiblu ve'kiyimu*, first "took upon themselves," accepted, and only then "confirmed" what they had previously accepted. It is probably because of this inversion of the proper order in our verse, that the Rabbis read a special meaning into this term in a famous passage in the Talmud (Shabbat 88a). When the Lord revealed Himself at Sinai and gave the Torah, they tell us, *kafah alehem har kegigit*, He, as it were, lifted up the mountain and held it over the heads of the Israelites gathered below as if it were a cask, and He said to them: "If you accept the Torah, good and well; but if not, *sham tehei kevuratkhem* - I shall drop the mountain on your heads, and here shall be your burial place." Moreover, the Rabbis then drew the conclusions from this implication that the Israelites were coerced into accepting the Torah. R. Aha b. Yaakov maintained that if this is the case, then *modaa rabbah l'oraita*- this becomes a strong protest against the obligatory nature of the Torah, it is "giving notice" to God that the Torah is not permanently binding, for the Torah is in the nature of a contract between God and Israel, and a contract signed under duress is invalid.

The other Rabbis of the Talmud treated this objection with great seriousness. Thus, Rava agreed that, indeed, the Torah given at Sinai was not obligatory because of the reason stated, that *modaa rabbah l'oraita*; but, Rava adds: *af-al-pi-ken hadar kibluha biyemei Ahashverosh*, the Israelites reaffirmed the Torah voluntarily in the days of the Purim event, for it is written: *kiyimu ve'kiblu*, that the Israelites "confirmed" and then "accepted," which means: *kiyimu mah shekiblu kevar* — after the Purim incident the Israelites confirmed what they had long ago accepted, that is, now after their deliverance from Haman they affirmed their voluntary acceptance of the Torah which they originally were forced to accept at Sinai. Therefore, since the days of Mordecai and Esther, we no longer possess the claim of *modaa rabbah l'oraita*, of denying the

obligatory nature of Torah because we accepted it originally under duress; for we affirmed it out of our own free will in the days of the Purim episode.

What does all this mean? The Rabbis offer us a double insight into both theology and psychology.

A moral act is authentic only if it issues out of a genuine freedom of choice. The Torah is meaningful only if man is free to accept it or reject it. Spiritual life is senseless where it is coerced. "See," the Torah tells us, "I give you this day life and death, benediction and malediction, *u-vaharta ba-hayyim*-- and you shall choose life." God gives us the alternative, and we are free to choose.

Therefore, if I am forced at gun-point to violate the Sabbath, I cannot be held responsible for my action. I am not guilty, because my act partakes of the nature of *ones*, compulsion. But coercion can be not only physical, but also psychological, as when a man performs a criminal act in a seizure of insanity or other mental distress. Both the physical and psychological deeds are characterized as *ones*. Even more so, extreme spiritual excitement also implies a denial of freedom and therefore lack of responsibility. Hence, if suddenly I am confronted by the vision of an angel who commands me to perform a certain mitzvah even at great risk to myself, and I proceed heroically to do just that, no credit can be given to me for my act. My freedom to decline pursuit of the mitzvah has almost vanished as a result of my unusual spiritual experience.

Thus, too, Israel at the foot of Sinai was engulfed in the historic theophany; they heard the voice of God directly in the great revelation of Torah. Of course, under the impress of such revelation, they accepted the Torah; they would have been insane not to. The felicitous and full confrontation with God elevates man to the highest ecstasy. But it robs from him his freedom to say no, to decline, to deny. And as long as man does not have the option of saying no, his yes has no merit. If he does not have the alternative to deny, then his faith is no great virtue. Faith and belief and submission and renunciation are all meaningful only in the presence of the moral freedom to do just the opposite.

Therefore, when I am faced with extremely happy circumstances, my freedom is diminished; even as it is when I am faced with a very harsh situation. When God honors me with His direct revelation, when I am privileged to hear His *Anokhi*, "I am the Lord thy God," directly from Him, I am as unable to disbelieve and disobey as when He twists my arm and threatens me with complete extinction – *sham tehei kevuratkhem* - if I do not accept the Torah. God's promises and His threats, the blessing of His presence and the threat of His wrath, are both coercive and force me to do His will under duress, without making a free choice of my own. Only a demon in human form would have done otherwise.

That, I believe, is what the Rabbis meant by the interpretation of Sinai as *kafah alehem har ke'gigit*. They did not mean that literally and physically God raised a mountain over the heads of the assembled Israelites and threatened to squash them underneath. They did mean to indicate, thereby, that the very fact of God's direct revelation was so overwhelming that Israel had no choice but to accept His Torah, as if He had literally raised a mountain over their heads. The common element, in both the symbol and what it represents, is a lack of freedom to do

otherwise. For this reason the Rabbis conceded that *modaa rabbah l'oraita*, since the acceptance of the Torah was not voluntary, since we were morally coerced and spiritually forced and psychologically compelled to do what we did, then the Torah lacks that binding nature which can come only from free choice. Israel had no choice at Sinai; therefore, the contract called Torah cannot be considered obligatory.

I suggest that just as the felicity of God's presence is coercive and curbs the freedom to disobey, so too the opposite, the tragedy of His absence, is coercive, and denies us the freedom to obey and believe. And just as when God reveals Himself it is as if He threatened us with *sham tehei kevuratkhem*, making our obedience mechanical and not virtuous, so too when He withdraws from us and abandons us, it requires a superhuman act of faith to believe, obey, pray and repent. We are not morally responsible for lack of faith brought on by existential coercion.

At the end of the Biblical *tokhahah*, the long list of horrible dooms predicted for Israel, the climax is reached in the words: *v'amar ba-yom hahu, al ki ein Elokai be'kirbi metza'uni kol ha-raot ha-eleh*, and Israel shall say on that day, because God is not in the midst of me have all these evils befallen me. What does this mean? The commentator Seforno interprets this as the absence of God, the *silluk Shechinah*, the withdrawal of the divine Presence. This *silluk Shechinah* will make Israel despair of prayer and repentance, and this despair will result in a further estrangement of Israel from God. Now, this kind of irreligion is not a heresy by choice, it is not a denial that issues from freedom. It is a coerced faithlessness. There are times when man is so stricken and pursued, so plagued and pilloried, that we dare not blame him for giving up his hope in God. Not everyone is a Job who can proclaim *lu yikteleni ayahel lo*, Though He slay me, yet will I believe in Him."

When Elijah will come and proclaim the beginning of redemption, when the Messiah will appear and usher in the new age of universal peace and righteousness, when God will reveal Himself once again in the renewal of the institution of prophecy, at that time there will be no virtue in the return of Jews to Torah and the return of mankind to the canons of decency. For they will not have acted out of freedom, but out of moral compulsion and spiritual coercion. Similarly, we cannot really blame the victim of the concentration camp who called upon God out of his misery and received no answer, who was himself witness to the ultimate debasement of man created in the image of God. We cannot condemn him for abandoning religion, much as we would prefer that he emulate those few hardy souls who were able to survive the holocaust with their faith intact. For both the presence and the absence of God, the *silluk Shechinah* and the *giluy Shechinah*, take away my freedom from me. In one case I am forced to accept Torah; in the other, to reject it. Under such conditions, *modaa rabbah l'oraita*.

However, if freedom is denied to us in both revelation and withdrawal, if there is no praise for believing in God in the time of His presence and no blame for doubting Him during His absence, if both fortune and misfortune, happiness and tragedy, are equally coercive, if in each set of circumstances our attitude to Torah is considered involuntary — when then do we accept Torah out of freedom, and when is our loyalty praiseworthy and our *kabbalat ha-torah* valid? The answer is: When God is neither present nor absent; when He neither conceals nor reveals Himself; when Fortune neither smiles at us nor frowns at us - in a word: our freedom is greatest

when life is neither here nor there! For then, and only then, do we have genuine options: to accept God and Torah, or to deny them; to choose the way of life and blessing, or the way of death and evil.

And it is this situation, that of "neither here nor there," that prevailed during the Purim episode. The victory of the Jews over Haman and the frustration of his nefarious plot was a surprising triumph and showed that God had not abandoned us; but there were no overt miracles either, no clear and indisputable proof that God was present and responsible for our victory. That is why the Book of Esther is included in the Bible, and yet it is the only book in which the Name of God is not mentioned. That is why the Rabbis maintain that the very name "Esther" is indicative of the hiding of God, the lack of His full revelation and presence. The Megillah itself is described in the Book of Esther as *divrei shalom v'emet*, "words of peace and truth." By *emet*, or truth, is meant the action of God directing the forces of history. Intelligent and wise people reading the Megillah, or experiencing it during that generation, know that all that has occurred is the result of the actions of God "Whose seal is Truth." All these improbable events leading to the redemption of Israel were obviously the providential design of the God of Israel. But it was just as possible for one less endowed with spiritual insight to interpret all the events as *shalom*, "peace", as a result of fortuitous events helped by the stupidity of the Persian king, the arrogance of Haman, and the wisdom of Mordecai: a diplomatic exploitation of unusually happy circumstances. Thus, the astounding victory was natural enough; there was no supernatural intervention in the affairs of the Jews of Persia. Therefore, the Purim story was "neither here nor there." So, Jews were free, authentically free, to interpret the events of that historical episode as they wished. Hence, if - as they did - they turned to God and accepted the Torah, this was a genuine and binding choice: *kiymu ve'kiblu*. The first time, at Sinai, they accepted the Torah but without the freedom to reject it, and it therefore represented a *modaa rabbah l'oraita*, a protest against its obligatory nature because of the lack of freedom; but now, *kiymu mah she'kiblu kevar*, they confirmed in freedom what they had previously accepted out of compulsion.

This lesson should not be lost on us in our individual lives. It is often said that in crisis, in the extraordinary moments of life, you can test the true character of a man. I do not believe that this is true, except if his reaction is contrary to expectations. If a man, for instance, responds heroically at a time of tragedy, he may be commended. But if he falls apart in extreme adversity, he cannot be condemned; he simply was not free to do otherwise. The same holds true in reverse situations. One who is friendly and charitable as a result of the miraculous recovery of a sick child may not yet be considered a man of nobility and generosity. He has almost been forced into charm and sweetness by his overwhelming sense of relief and gratitude.

When then can we tell what a man is really like? When may he be held morally accountable for his acts, and considered either guilty or praiseworthy? When he is free. And he is free when things are neither here nor there, when he is subject neither to elation nor depression, neither to the distress of adversity nor to the uplift of felicity.

It is in the Purims of life, when we have no clear proof that God is with us or against us, that there is a special virtue to accepting the Torah. Those who come to the Synagogue and pray only during occasions of *simhah*, or when reciting the Kaddish, are doing the right thing. But the real

test comes after the simhah or the eleven months of Kaddish — then, when things are neither here nor there, is the religious fiber of a personality tested. And not only is it tested, but at that time the decisions are more meaningful, more enduring, more lasting; for then the act of *kiymu*, confirmation, has *kiyyum* -- enduring quality.

That is why I am not always happy with the famous statement of Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch that "the Jewish calendar is the catechism of the Jew." That might possibly be interpreted as saying that the high moments of simhah and the low moments of *tzarah* define the Jew's life. But I prefer the ordinary to the extraordinary. The real test of *kabbalat ha-torah* is not Shavuot but Purim. The real test of loyalty is not on Passover with its manifest miracles, but on Hannukah, which is more in the category of "neither here nor there." What is accepted in high moments or rejected in low moments does not always last the great majority of moments and hours, of days and months and years, when we live neither on the mountains nor in the valleys but on the boring plateaus; when the days in the office and the evenings at home follow each other in dull succession. Then does our commitment have the greatest value, the strongest effect. Then it deserves the highest praise.

Halakhah is the discipline of the Jew in his daily routines. The Western mentality has not always understood the Halakhah. The Halakhah teaches man to acquire faith, to search for God, to sanctify himself, in the hundred and one prosaic acts of everyday existence when man is seized neither by joy nor sorrow, neither by love nor hate. It does not trust the religious experience of narcotic ecstasy, the easy religion of LSD, the attractive luxury of following the Guru to India and meditating in silence — nor does it condemn the despair of the man who murmurs against God out of his misery. It challenges us to holiness in the course of a life that is neither here nor there. And when we respond to halakhah's call, when we answer with the act of *kiymu ve'kiblu*, it stands us in good stead and keeps us level-headed and stout-hearted ever in the extremes of life.

In decades past, in the horror of the Holocaust, we experienced many a moment when it seemed that God had abandoned us and forsaken us. Now, we look forward to the vision of the renewal of prophecy and our manifest redemption when God will reveal Himself directly to us once again.

But now, in between these two poles, these two extreme ages, we live in Purim-type days, times that are neither here nor there religiously and spiritually.

Now, above all other times, we have both the freedom and the responsibility to confirm with all our hearts and all our souls the rousing declaration of ancient days, the *naaseh ve'nishma*.

Let it be said of us, as it was said of the generation of Mordechai: *kiymu ve'kiblu ha-yehudim alehem v'al zaram*, that we confirmed and accepted Torah and tradition upon ourselves and our children.

And then it shall be said of us, as it was said of Mordechai himself, that we shall be *gadol li'yehudim ve'ratzuy le'rov ehav*, great Jews, beloved by the majority of our brethren, *doresh tov l'amo, ve'dover shalom le'khol zaro*, seeking only the welfare of our people, speaking only peace to all our children and descendants after us.