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WORSHIP - WORK - REVERENCE
THE HEBREW CONCEPT OF AHVODAH

High Holiday Sermon by
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(Part two of a series)

THE TALMUD STATES, "THE WORLD STANDS ON THREE PILLARS - ON TORAH, ON AHVODAH, AND G'MILUT HASADIM". WE HAVE ALREADY SPOKEN IN THIS HOLIDAY PERIOD OF TORAH, OR LAW, AS OUR FATHERS UNDERSTOOD ITS SIGNIFICANCE. WE SPEAK ON THIS NIGHT OF NIGHTS IN OUR CALENDAR, OF THE SECOND PILLAR ON WHICH/^{our} FATHERS SAID THE WORLD RESTS. THIS PILLAR IS "AHVODAH", THE HEBREW WORD FOR "WORSHIP".

FOR THOSE WHO LIVE IN THE WESTERN WORLD IN THE 20th CENTURY, THE WORD "WORSHIP" DOES NOT HAVE THE POWER IT HAD FOR OUR FATHERS; YET IF WE STUDY THE WORD CLOSELY, WE MIGHT COME TO SHARE SOME OF THEIR APPRECIATION OF ITS MEANING. IT IS INTERESTING THAT THE WORD AHVODAH COMES FROM THE VERB MEANING "TO WORK". ONE COULD NOT WORSHIP, OUR FATHERS TAUGHT, WITHOUT INTENDING TO TRANSLATE ONE'S PRAYERS INTO ACTION. ONE SHOULD NOT WORK, THEY FELT, WITHOUT THE KIND OF PRAYERFUL ATTITUDE WHICH GIVES HEIGHTENED MEANING TO ONE'S WORK.

PERHAPS A LITTLE STORY WILL HELP US UNDERSTAND WHAT OUR FATHERS MEANT BY THE CONCEPT OF AHVODAH. THE STORY, WHICH IS FROM OUR TRADITION, TELLS US THAT ON A CERTAIN COLD WINTER NIGHT, TWO BROTHERS SAT AT HOME NEAR THEIR FIRE IN THEIR RESPECTIVE HOUSES. ONE OF THE BROTHERS WAS MARRIED. THE OTHER WAS NOT. ON THIS FREEZING, WET NIGHT, THE MARRIED BROTHER THOUGHT TO HIMSELF, "HERE I AM WARM AND COZY, BASKING IN THE LIGHT OF MY FIRE AND IN THE LIGHT OF MY FAMILY'S LOVE. MY POOR BROTHER IS ALONE THIS BLEAK NIGHT. SURELY, HE NEEDS COMFORTING AND HELP." ACCORDINGLY, THE MARRIED BROTHER, TOOK SOME BREAD, WRAPPED IT IN A PACKAGE, AND SET OUT IN THE NIGHT FOR HIS BROTHER'S HOUSE.

MEANWHILE, THE UNMARRIED BROTHER SAT BEFORE HIS FIRE AND THOUGHT TO HIMSELF, "HERE I AM, WITH A HOUSE FULL OF FOOD AND WELL SUPPLIED WITH MONEY; BUT THERE IS ONLY MYSELF TO DRAW UPON THIS SUPPLY OF PLENTY. ON THE OTHER HAND, MY BROTHER HAS A WIFE AND THREE CHILDREN. HE COULD USE SOME OF WHAT I HAVE, AND I WOULD STILL HAVE ENOUGH".

ACCORDINGLY, THE SINGLE BROTHER TOOK HALF OF HIS MONEY, AND SET OFF INTO THE COLD NIGHT TO HIS BROTHER'S HOUSE, WITH THE INTENT OF GIVING THE MONEY TO HIS BROTHER. ALONG THE ROAD, SEVERAL MILES FROM EACH BROTHER'S HOUSE, THE TWO BROTHERS MET, TOLD EACH OTHER OF THEIR RESPECTIVE MISSION, EMBRACED, AND WEPT. ON THIS SPOT WHERE THE BROTHERS MET, SAYS OUR TRADITION, THE TEMPLE OF JERUSALEM WAS BUILT!

THE STORY GIVES THE SERMON. HE WHO SERVES HIS BROTHER, PARTICIPATES IN AN ACT OF WORSHIP. HE WHO WORSHIPS MUST DWELL UPON WAYS OF SERVING HIS BROTHER.

THE WORD AHVODAH MEANS NOT ONLY WORSHIP AND WORK. IT ALSO MEANS REVERENCE. OUR FATHERS CLEARLY IDENTIFIED REVERENCE FOR GOD WITH ^{reverence for} LIFE. FEW PEOPLE ARE CAPABLE OF GRASPING AN UNDERSTANDING OF GOD IN THE GRAND SENSE, AND OUR FATHERS UNDERSTOOD MAN'S DIFFICULTY IN ADDRESSING GOD HIMSELF. THEREFORE, THEY ATTEMPTED TO PLACE IN THAT SAME SPHERE WITH GOD, A SET OF ULTIMATE IDEALS OR GOALS. THEY IDENTIFIED GOD WITH HIS LAW, WITH JUSTICE, LOVE, AND MERCY. LET A MAN COME TO UNDERSTAND THESE THINGS, THEY SAID, AND HE WILL COME CLOSER TO GOD HIMSELF. SO AHVODAH OR REVERENCE BECOMES, IN PART, AN ATTITUDE ABOUT LIFE, AN ATTITUDE ABOUT WHAT IS IMPORTANT AND UNIMPORTANT, AN ATTITUDE ABOUT WHAT IS PRECIOUS AND WHAT IS EXPENDABLE, ABOUT WHAT TO HOLD ON TO AND OF WHAT TO LET GO.

YOU WILL RECALL THE FAMOUS STORY IN THE BOOK OF KINGS ABOUT KING SOLOMON AND THE TWO WOMEN WHO CLAIMED TO BE THE MOTHER OF ONE BABY. AS A TRICK TO DISCOVER THE TRUE MOTHER, THE KING SUGGESTED THAT EACH WOMAN SHARE ONE-HALF OF THE CHILD IN DISPUTE. "NO", THE TRUE MOTHER SAID, "GIVE THE CHILD TO THE OTHER WOMAN, RATHER THAN DIVIDE IT". THE WOMAN FALSELY CLAIMING TO BE THE MOTHER WAS SO OVERCOME AT THE LOSS OF HER OWN BABY, WHO HAD DIED SHORTLY AFTER BIRTH, THAT SHE COULDN'T BEAR TO SEE ANOTHER WOMAN WITH A BABY, WHILE SHE WAS WITH EMPTY ARMS. THE TRUE MOTHER, ^{however,} WAS READY TO GIVE UP THE BABY RATHER THAN SEE IT KILLED. SHE WAS CAPABLE OF REVERENCE FOR THE CHILD AS A BEING APART FROM HER PERSONAL INVOLVEMENT WITH IT. SO JEWISH PARENTS, TRAPPED IN THE CHURNING HATRED OF ^{the} EASTERN EUROPE, ^{of} 75 YEARS AGO, USED THEIR LAST PENNIES TO SEND THEIR CHILDREN TO FREEDOM IN AMERICA, NEVER KNOWING WHETHER THEY WOULD EVER SEE THEM AGAIN. YOU HAVE TO REVERE SOMETHING A GREAT DEAL TO BE ABLE TO GIVE IT UP FOR ITS OWN GOOD. SO A ^{can not see} CONNOISSEUR OF ART WOULD RATHER SURRENDER AN ANTIQUE STATUE THAN SEE IT BROKEN IN AN ARGUMENT WITH THIEVES. TO DEMONSTRATE PROPER REVERANCE IN LIFE ONE MUST UNDER-

STAND GRADATIONS OF VALUE, SO THAT HE CAN DEVOTE HIS ENERGIES TO SAVING THAT WHICH IS MOST WORTH SAVING.

IN THIS SENSE, ONE IS AS REVERENT ABOUT VALUABLE THINGS IN LIFE AS HIS EDUCATION AND SENSITIVITIES ENABLE HIM TO BE. AN IRREVERENT PERSON MIGHT NOT HESITATE TO CURSE A DEAF MAN OR STICK OUT A FOOT TO TRIP A BLIND MAN. OUR BIBLE SPECIFICALLY FORBIDS THIS KIND OF ACTION WHICH SHOWS A LACK OF SYMPATHY FOR THE WEAK AND HANDICAPPED. AN IRREVERENT PERSON WOULD NOT TROUBLE TO CHECK ON A RUMOR BEFORE HE HASTENS TO SMEAR A PERSON'S REPUTATION. OUR BIBLE EXPRESSLY FORBIDS THE SPREADING OF MALICIOUS RUMOR. IN FACT, IT SAYS THAT HE WHO DESTROYS A MAN'S NAME IS AS IF HE HAD KILLED THE PERSON HIMSELF. AN IRREVERENT PERSON COULD RIDE BY THE SHACKS IN WHICH THE POOR LIVE AND NOT FEEL INSULTED IN BEHALF OF THE HUMANITY RESIDING THERE, BUT OUR TRADITION BIDS US TO BUILD SUKKAHS AND TO DWELL IN THEM SO THAT WE CAN UNDERSTAND THE PLIGHT OF THE UNDERPRIVILEGED. AN IRREVERENT PRIEST MIGHT THINK SO LITTLE OF GOD THAT HE COULD STRESS RITUAL ^{rather} THAN THE PERFORMANCE OF HUMANE DEEDS. OUR BIBLE IS FILLED WITH THE PROPHETIC ATTACK ON PRIESTS WHO HAD FORGOTTEN THE DEEPER MEANING OF RELIGION.

REVERENCE FOR LIFE CAN EXTEND TO THE SMALLEST OF THINGS. DID NOT THE POET SAY, "LITTLE FLOWER, IF I COULD KNOW WHAT YOU ARE, ROOT IN ALL AND ALL IN ALL, I SHOULD KNOW WHAT MAN AND GOD IS"? SO DR. ABRAHAM MASLOW, PRESIDENT OF THE AMERICAN PSYCHOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION, IN EXPLAINING WHY HE GAVE UP A CERTAIN APPROACH TO PSYCHOLOGY STATED, "WHEN MY BABY WAS BORN, THAT WAS THE THUNDERCLAP THAT SETTLED THINGS. I LOOKED AT THIS TINY, MYSTERIOUS THING AND FELT SO STUPID. I WAS STUNNED BY THE MYSTERY AND THE SENSE OF NOT REALLY BEING IN CONTROL. I FELT SMALL AND WEAK AND FEEBLE BEFORE ALL THIS". THIS IS THE SAME SENSE OF HUMILITY AND WONDER THAT THE PSALMIST EXPRESSED WHEN HE SANG:

"WHEN I BEHOLD THY HEAVENS, THE WORK OF THY FINGERS,
THE MOON AND THE STARS, WHICH THOU HAST ESTABLISHED;
WHAT IS MAN THAT THOU ART MINDFUL OF HIM?
AND THE SON OF MAN THAT THOU THINKEST OF HIM?"

SO MANY RELIGIONS MAGNIFY THE SIGNIFICANCE OF GOD, BUT BELITTLE THE IMPORTANCE OF MAN. THE PSALMIST WAS LED TO THAT BRINK TOO, BUT HE CONCLUDES WITH A TYPICALLY JEWISH RESPONSE:

"YET THOU HAS MADE HIM (MAN) BUT LITTLE LOWER THAN THE ANGELS AND HAST CROWNED HIM WITH GLORY AND HONOR. THOU HAST MADE HIM TO HAVE DOMINION OVER THE WORK OF THY HANDS. THOU HAST PUT ALL THINGS UNDER HIS FEET....."

IN THIS PSALM THE JEWISH RELIGIOUS GENIUS SHINES FORTH. NOT ONLY DOES IT EMANATE REVERENCE FOR GOD, THERE IS ALSO REVERENCE FOR GOD'S NOBLEST CREATION, MAN. FURTHER, THERE IS A DEEP APPRECIATION OF GOD'S PARTNER IN THE UNFOLDING OF CREATION. IT IS AT THIS POINT THAT AHVODAH TAKES ON ITS MEANING OF WORK. THERE CAN BE NO TRUE UNDERSTANDING OF OUR DEPENDENCE ON OUR CREATOR, WITHOUT AN UNDERSTANDING OF HIS DEPENDENCE ON US AS HIS AGENTS AND MEDIATORS.

"WHAT IS MAN"? ASKS THE PSALMIST. THE RABBIS ANSWERED IN THE TALMUD, "HE IS THE APEX OF CREATION". THE TALMUD TEACHES, "HE WHO TAKES ONE HUMAN LIFE IS AS IF HE HAD DESTROYED THE WORLD , AND HE WHO SAVES ONE HUMAN LIFE IS AS IF HE HAD SAVED THE WORLD". THE MEANING OF THE WHOLE WORLD, STATED THE TALMUDIC MASTERS, IS CONTAINED IN ONE HUMAN BEING, IN EACH HUMAN BEING! THE SCIENTISTS HAVE TAUGHT US THAT EACH PERSON IS BIOLOGICALLY A UNIVERSE IN MINIATURE, A CONSTELLATION OF BILLIONS OF ATOMS, WHICH ARE, IN THEMSELVES, PERFECTLY ORDERED WORLDS. IN SPIRITUAL TERMS, MAN IS THE QUINTESSENCE OF THE UNIVERSE, THE ONLY PART OF CREATION ABLE TO THINK AND LOVE. WHAT HAPPENS TO THE INDIVIDUAL, THEN, IS AS PRECIOUS A MATTER AS WHAT HAPPENS TO THE HUMAN RACE. IT IS IN THE LIGHT OF THIS TEACHING THAT ONE SHOULD COME TO APPRECIATE HIMSELF, AND TO SAY, "I AM THE GROWING TIP OF CREATION. THE CROWN OF ALL THAT HAS COME BEFORE" IN THE LIGHT OF THIS TEACHING ONE SHOULD LOOK UPON HIS SPOUSE, HIS CHILDREN AND FRIENDS, AS PRECIOUS JEWELS ALIVE WITH POTENTIAL AND WORTH. "HE WHO TAKES ONE HUMAN LIFE IS AS IF HE HAD DESTROYED THE WORLD". IT IS IN THE LIGHT OF THIS TEACHING THAT WE SHOULD LOOK AT THE VIET NAM WAR, AND AT THE WHOLE SYSTEM OF MILITARY ACTION AS A PART OF FOREIGN DIPLOMACY. IT IS IN THIS LIGHT THAT WE SHOULD ALSO CONSIDER THE POVERTY AND SICKNESS THAT PLAGUES MOST OF THE EARTH'S TEEMING MILLIONS. "HE WHO SAVES ONE HUMAN LIFE IS AS IF HE HAD SAVED THE WORLD". AND IF ONE DOESN'T SAVE OR HELP A HUMAN BEING WHEN HE HAS THE POWER TO DO SO, WHAT THEN?

OUR FATHERS TAUGHT THROUGH THE SCRIPTURE THAT THE PERSON WHO HIDES HIMSELF FROM A PERSON IN NEED IS LIKE CAIN WHO HID HIMSELF FROM GOD'S CALL. IT IS NOT ONLY THE STRONG, THE

INTELLIGENT AND THE BEAUTIFUL PEOPLE WHO ARE MANIFESTATIONS OF THE DIVINE. SO ARE THE WEAK AND THE POOR AND THE SEEMINGLY LESS ATTRACTIVE. DID NOT GOD CAUSE LEAH, THE UNLOVED WIFE OF JACOB, TO BEAR CHILDREN FIRST IN ORDER THAT JACOB MIGHT LOVE HER AS MUCH AS HE LOVED THE BEAUTIFUL RACHEL. SO WE ARE TO SHOW SPECIAL REGARD FOR THOSE WHO SEEM LESS BLESSED THAN OTHERS. AND HOW ARE YOU TO TREAT YOUR ENEMY? THE BIBLE MAKES THIS SPECIFIC POINT. WHEN YOU SEE YOUR ENEMY'S DONKEY CRUSHED UNDER THE WEIGHT OF ITS LOAD, AND THERE IS NO ONE PRESENT TO HELP IT, (LO TU-CHAL L'HITALEM), YOU MAY NOT PASS IT BY. YOU ARE OBLIGATED TO HELP THE DONKEY. YOU ARE OBLIGATED TO ACT NOT ONLY BECAUSE THE DONKEY IS THE VALUABLE PROPERTY OF A HUMAN BEING, BUT BECAUSE OF THE PAIN OF THE ANIMAL ITSELF. IT MUST NOT BE PERMITTED TO SUFFER. THIS SAME SENSITIVITY TO THE NEEDS OF ALL CREATED THINGS IS SEEN IN THE COMMANDMENT TO OBSERVE THE SEVENTH DAY AS A DAY OF REST. THE COMMANDMENT IS NOT MERELY FOR FREE MEN AND WOMEN, BUT IT POINTEDLY INCLUDES, HIRED HELP, SLAVES, AND ANIMALS. WE JEWS CAN BE PROUD THAT OUR TRADITION IS NOT JUST ONE OF ABSTRACT ETHICS. IT IS FULL OF THAT KIND OF DETAILED INSTRUCTION WHICH, IF WE ATTEND TO IT, CAN HELP US DEVELOP A REVERENCE FOR LIFE. OUR TRADITION RECOGNIZES THAT, FOR MOST PEOPLE, THE ART OF EXPERIENCING AND PRACTICING REVERENCE IS ACHIEVED ONLY AFTER A LIFE-TIME OF TRAINING IN THE FOLLOWING OF SPECIFIC HABITS AND IN THE DEVELOPING OF SPECIFIC ATTITUDES. TO BE A JEW, IN THIS HIGHER SENSE, IS NOT MERELY A MATTER OF FAITH OR AN ACCIDENT OF BIRTH, IT IS A STATE OF MIND, A PATTERN OF BEHAVIOR ATTAINED TO BY YEARS OF CONDITIONING AND POINTED ACTIVITY.

The Significance of Time

WE HAVE SEEN THAT AHVODAH, WORSHIP, INVOLVES SEVERAL NUANCES. IT INVOLVES A SENSE OF WONDER IN BEHOLDING THE MIRACLES OF THE CREATED WORLD. IT INVOLVES AN APPRECIATION OF THE INFINITE COMPLEXITY AND FRAGILITY OF HUMAN AND ANIMAL LIFE, AND IT INVOLVES A COMMITMENT TO WORK IN AN ATTEMPT TO FULFILL THE IDEALS THAT WE ASSOCIATE WITH A LOVE-GIVING GOD. THERE IS ONE FINAL ASPECT OF THE CONCEPT OF AHVODAH THAT WE OUGHT TO DISCUSS TONIGHT; THAT IS THE ASPECT OF THE SIGNIFICANCE OF TIME. ON YOM KIPPUR, THE JEW, FITTINGLY, IS ASKED TO REMIND HIMSELF NOT ONLY OF THE VALUE OF HUMAN LIFE, BUT OF MAN'S FLEETING DAYS. ON YOM KIPPUR AFTER-NOON WE READ THE WORDS, "MAN IS LIKE THE GRASS THAT WITHERETH, THE FLOWER THAT FADETH". PART OF THE YOM KIPPUR THEMATIC IS THAT WE WILL NOT ALWAYS HAVE THE OPPORTUNITY TO RIGHT THE WRONGS

WE HAVE DONE. WE WILL NOT FOREVER HAVE THE OPPORTUNITY TO GIVE WHAT WE HAVE, THUS FAR, WITHHELD. WE WILL NOT FOR TOO LONG HAVE THE CHANCE TO SAY THE WORDS OUR LOVED ONES LONG TO HEAR. IF WE PROPERLY REVERE HUMAN LIFE WE WILL UNDERSTAND THE PRECIOUS NATURE OF THE PRESENT MOMENT, WHICH ALL TOO QUICKLY PASSES US BY. "IF NOT NOW", TAUGHT RABBI HILLEL, "WHEN?" "ACT TODAY", TAUGHT ANOTHER RABBI, "FOR TOMORROW YOU MAY NOT HAVE THE OPPORTUNITY TO DO SO". "WHILE THE CANDLE STILL BURNS", WROTE A JEWISH SAGE OF THE MIDDLE AGES, "I STILL HAVE TIME TO MEND".

WHILE THE CANDLE STILL BURNS, WE HAVE TIME TO SEEK FORGIVENESS AND TO FORGIVE. WHILE THE CANDLE STILL BURNS, THE MOTHER, WHO SHALL NOT FOR MANY YEARS HAVE HER CHILD BESIDE HER, HAS THE OPPORTUNITY TO BE PATIENT AND WARM. WHILE THE CANDLE STILL BURNS, THE FATHER WILL HAVE THE OPPORTUNITY TO EMBRACE AND LEAD HIS CHILDREN. WHILE THE CANDLE STILL BURNS, SISTER AND BROTHER, WHO SHALL PROBABLY LIVE IN FUTURE YEARS IN DIFFERENT CITIES, HAVE THE CHANCE TO COOPERATE AND TO PLAY TOGETHER. WHILE THE CANDLE STILL BURNS, HUSBAND AND WIFE HAVE THE CHANCE TO TALK TO EACH OTHER, TO UPHOLD EACH OTHER IN THEIR WEAKNESSES. THE YOM KIPPUR MOOD INCLUDES A REVERENCE FOR TIME. OH, HOW QUICKLY TIME ROBS US OF OUR CHANCE TO DO WHAT WE HAVE ALWAYS WANTED TO DO! ALL TOO MERCILESSLY THE CLOCK TICKS ON; BUT THERE IS TIME ENOUGH STILL. GOD'S MERCY IS ANOTHER CHANCE. "WHILE THE CANDLE STILL BURNS, WE HAVE TIME TO MEND". LET US CHERISH THIS MOMENT, O LORD, AS A TIME FOR REVERENCE.