

"THE FOUNTAIN OF LIFE"

During my trip to India six months ago, I had the occasion to visit one of the most fabulous cities in the world. This small city, containing about one or two dozen exquisitely ornate buildings, was built by King Akbar, who lies buried in the nearby Taj Mahal, for himself, his two queens, and about 2,000 concubines. It is a most striking example of Oriental opulence and incredible splendor. Built four hundred years ago, these breathtakingly beautiful structures are made of marble, semi-precious stones, and extremely valuable building materials and composed in a marvelous architectural style. Fahtepur Sikri, as the city is called, has an unusual, wierd story behind it. After spending what today would be millions upon millions of dollars to build it, employing thousands of slave laborers for many, many years, the King and his court never had much of an opportunity to enjoy the wealth and beauty of Fahtepur Sikri. For shortly after they moved in, they discovered, to their dismay, that the architects had built the city without thinking of a water supply. And since there was no well or other source of water in the vicinity, they all had to move out, and Fahtepur Sikri has been a ghost town for these past four centuries. Rich, exquisite, glorious - but empty, dead, a ghost town.

I mention this today -- the day of self-judgment and self-criticism -- for the story and fate of Fahtepur Sikri is to me both a symbol of and a warning to American Jewry. Remember that a well or a fountain of water is more than just a supply problem for an

engineer or city planner. It is a life-giving necessity for everyone and, as such, a poetic symbol in religion for G-d Himself. In the words of Jeremiah, oti azavu, mekor mayim chayyim, My people have abandoned Me, says G-d, the Fountain of living waters. G-d, as the Creator and Source of all life and existence, is the Well or Fountain of the waters of life.

And we have indeed abandoned Him. Like the foolish builders of Fahtepur Sikri, we have laid our plans, worked at building family and fortune, attended to a myriad of complex details in establishing ourselves and our reputations -- and forgot to arrange for the water supply, forgot that for a meaningful life you must have G-d, the Fountain of Life. We have become, in the words of King David (Ps.9:18), shekhechei elokim, those who forget G-d. For American Jews rarely deny G-d; they usually ignore Him, even as the architects of King Akbar simply forgot about a source of water.

As a community, we American Jews have come dangerously close to doing just that. In too many instances we have built fabulous public Jewish institutions - charitable, educational, social - without any regard to G-d, Torah, Judaism, which are the mekor mayim chayyim, the Fountain of Living Waters, without which no Jewish institution has the right to call itself Jewish. A Jewish-sponsored university in Massachusetts is one of the most heavily endowed schools in the country. But its builders ^{have all but} forgot ^{ten} all about G-d, and so if a student should by some miracle develop a bit of thirst for a word of Torah, a taste of Judaism, a drop of Yiddishkeit, he will find nothing to satisfy him. Federations in Jewish communities around the country

support almost every cause -- except for their Day Schools, the guarantee of Jewish perpetuation and the survival of G-d's word. Jewish country clubs in the most fashionable neighborhoods are

elaborate, ornate structures which have everything -- except the ^{Even many of our synagogues & Temples offer a member every convenience and service - except G-d!} vital source of Jewishness, G-d and Torah. ^ Shades of King Akbar!

I fear we may have been building for ourselves another Fahtepur Sikri -- beautiful, opulent, imposing, but lifeless; a well-appointed ghost city, a place where the death of the spirit stalks the gilded chambers, because the architects of our community forget the mekor mayim chayyim.

This holds true for us as individuals as well. We live the major part of our lives, until well into our middle ages, building family, business, reputation. And then when the major part of the structure of our lives is completed, we realize, with a rude and cruel shock, that we have made a tragic omission. Everything is there but that which counts most. There is no G-d. Life is only a shell. We are, spiritually, well-dressed corpses. Like a ghost city gone dry, our lives have all but that which can give us meaning, vitality, joy, peace. No wonder so many of us succeed, yet inwardly regard ourselves as failures. No wonder so many of us are secretly bitter and do not know why. No wonder we have so much and enjoy so little. For we have become Fahtepur Sikris, having everything but the Source of living waters -- G-d. Life has run dry. Our social lives are bathed in cocktails, but the soul is parched. Outside we are the envy of our neighbors; inside we are dried up. We have been so busy with the details and facade of our lives that we forgot the Fountain of Living Waters. And when oti azavu, mekor mayim chayyim, when you forget G-d, the Fountain of Life, then you must turn into a ghost, a shell.

Appropriately, it is on Rosh Hashanah afternoon that we perform the tashlikh; we go to a body of water and recite certain prayers. A major reason for this is to emphasize one of the major themes of this holy day, that of Malkhuyot, the celebration of G-d as King of the world. At the coronation of ancient Jewish kings, the anointing would always take place at the side of a stream. When we declare the coronation of G-d, so to speak, we do so near water -- for, just as a well or fountain is the source of water so is G-d the Source of all life and existence.

See introduction

[Let us continue our critical analysis, our self-judgment as American Jews, by drawing again on this metaphor of water for G-d and Torah to describe a second class of Jews who have not forgotten G-d, but have committed a greivous error in another way. They are the ones who, a generation ago, thought that only from Europe could true Judaism be imported into the U.S., and who, today, rely upon the State of Israel to "inspire" Judaism and Jewish content in America. The feature common to both is: a sense of resignation about developing a true Jewish renaissance here in the U.S., one which will proceed under its own steam. And, as a result of this despair or resignation, they have considered it a waste of time to build our own schools, our own truly Jewish institutions, our own Torah life. "This is America" has become the stock excuse as to why it is not worth even trying to establish true Judaism here. Whatever can be had, can be obtained only by filling your jug at the fountains of European or Israeli Jewry -- but never at your own American wells.

Remarkably, just such a situation is figuratively described to us in Genesis, or that portion of it which we read today. Hagar had fled into the desert with her infant son Ishamel, and Abraham

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had given her a chemet mayim, a bottle or jug of water to sustain her and the child. After a while, however, va-yikhlu ha-mayim min ha-chemet, the water was spent and the bottle remained empty. And so, in the heat of the desert, Hagar cast the child under one of the shrubs and abandoned him, thinking, al ereh be'mot ha-yelled, I don't want to look and see how the child dies. Va-tisa et kolah va-tevk, she raised her voice and wept. Suddenly, however, an angel appeared to her and said, mah lakh hagar, what is wrong with you, Hagar? Kumi, s'i et ha-naar va'hachaziki et yadekh bo, arise, lift up the lad, and hold him with your hand.. And thereupon G-d opened her eyes and she realized that in front of her, all along, there had been a well, and so she went, filled the bottle at the well, and slaked the thirst of her child.

How well this incident describes, in symbolic terms, those Jews who have branded America a midbar, a spiritual desert or wasteland in which the living waters of Torah could never flow of themselves. They are the people who have tried to subsist on the little water in the bottles brought over from Poland or Lithuania, or those they think we can now painfully import, a bit at a time, from Israel. They are the people who remember the Jewish training they received in the homes of their immigrant or first-generation parents, who reveal in it and delight in it, but are convinced that this kind of warm and vibrant Judaism can never be discovered in native America. And so they deride any attempt to dig wells here, to build yeshivot, to found Torah institutions, to teach their

children, in the bosom of the family, Shabbat and Kashrut. Instead they hoarded the bit of mayim be'chemet until it ran out, and busied themselves with all kinds of activities, business and social, so that al erah be'mot ha-yelled, so that they not notice how their children's souls are drying up, how their children are spiritually expiring.

Talk to such people about the chances for Jewish life in this country -- not the ersatz Jewishness of a Chanukah ball and High Holidays in a non-kosher hotel, of gala Bar Mitzvahs and plush, vulgar weddings, but real, authentic Orthodox Judaism -- and, like Hagar, all they can produce is a dirge and a sigh: va-tisa et kolah va-tevk.

Today, Rosh Hashanah, that same angel that appeared to Hagar, stands here and speaks to the heart of each of us, of any of us who have entertained such dreary thoughts: mah lakh, Hagar, what is wrong with you that you have fallen into this Hagar-type thinking? Why have you abandoned your children to an emptiness of the spirit, to the nightmare of a life that has everything but a neshamah? Get up, shake yourselves out of your lethargy and fruitless despair, hold tight to your children, their hands in your hands, and lead them not to a bottle of borrowed water, but to the well that stands in front of you all these many years, ready to be tapped, ready to gush forth the delightful, clear waters of a vital Jewish life. Don't moan that New York is not Vilna, that Manhattan is not Warsaw. Open your eyes and you will find the be'er, the well of Judaism, the mekor mayim chayyim, in neighborhood schools, in yeshivot and Talmud Torahs, in your synagogue -- if you attend it regularly -- and your own homes. There is not a person here who cannot, given the will and desire, find a well of Jewishness in his or her own home. No,

do not look upon your children as they suffer spiritual extinction, as they go farther and farther afield, as they ultimately seek to intermarry. But do not, like Hagar, abandon them merely because you do not want to look. Instead, taking the advice of the angel, open your eyes to the opportunities you have of digging a well of Jewishness in your own home and slake ^{their} ~~his~~ thirst. Do not try to survive on the waters of other wells you have saved up in a lone bottle. Dig your own wells. And live on as proud Jews.]

And then, friends, there is the third and final category of misdirected Jew. He is, likely as not, a member of our younger generation. He has not forgotten about the Fountain, ^{hoarded some stale drops} or ~~despaired~~ ^{of it;} ~~because~~ he simply has never heard of it. ^{Yet in} ~~in~~ some indirect way he has come to Judaism, ^{from} but he does not even know it. But let me explain by referring to the second half of today's Torah reading.

Abraham had some disagreement with a local potentate, ^{a desert chieftain} by the name of Avimelech. Ve'hokhiach Avraham et Avimelekh al odot ha-be'er asher gazlu avdei Avimelekh. Abraham reproved Avimelech because of the wells of water which the servants of Avimelech had stolen from him, from Abraham. [Ⓡ] This is indeed what has recurred in our days. The wells of Judaism have fed sparkling waters of idealism and nobility into the lands of the West, but little people, motivated by a combination of pettiness and ignorance, have stolen the wells and declared that the waters belong to them. The servants of Avimelech have taken away the wells of Abraham.

Let me illustrate this with something that has happened to me and, I suppose, to almost every other Rabbi. A young lady, away from home for the first time at an out-of-town college, comes home for vacation and her parents notice a change in her demeanor. Upon inquiry, she challenges them with the fact that she has little feeling left for Judaism and the synagogue, despite her intensive Sunday School education. And when she comes to me, brought by her worried parents, she begins to spell out her complaint. "Why," she says, "don't we Jews have anything as noble and beautiful as the Christians do, for instance the statement 'thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself?'"

We ought not laugh but sympathize with this deluded typical youngster who does not realize that thirteen hundred years before the Common Era a voice issued from Sinai, recorded in the Third Book of Moses, that said ve'ahavta le'reiakha kamokha, thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself. Novelists like Faulkner and journalists like Arthur Krock have made equally ignorant errors, attributing whole phrases and thoughts from the Chumash to the Christian gospels. The wells are the wells of Abraham -- but the little servants of Avimelech have stolen them and claimed them for their own.

One can give example upon example. There is the young man in his first flush of idealism who shuns the synagogue and Shabbat because he has discovered ^{in reading modern history,} the secret of social idealism in the New Deal. Why doesn't Judaism speak about such things as Relief and Social Security? The poor boy does not realize that the

avdei Avimelech have been using the wells of Abraham, for in our Torah we were commanded to support the orphan, the widow, the stranger -- the laws of leket, shikechah and pe'ah. It is the fountain of Torah under a strange name. Is it old-age insurance and respect for the dignity of an older person? -- return to the wells of Abraham: mi-pnei sevah takum, rise before the hoary head and reverence the face of the elderly. Peaceful coexistence was not invented by the servant of Avimelech known as Khruschev, though he doesn't really mean it. Amos spoke of every nation coming under the banner of its own God -- in peace. Social justice issued not from the wells of Rome, but from the Torah -- tzedek tzedek tirdof. The protection of the proletariat was not original with Marx. The Torah, the well of Abraham, issued the words, "thou shalt not oppress the laborer" and commanded us to pay him on time. The ideals of peace were not new with Woodrow Wilson, nor even with the founders of Christianity. The Torah commanded it, Isaiah preached it, Amos prophesied it. Perhaps if some of these lofty ideas and ideals, so attractive to our youth, were correctly labeled as Jewish, as the wells of Abraham instead of Avimelech, our newer generation would have a much healthier respect for the tradition of their forbears. Maybe if they knew of the tremendous stature of Jewish social and ethical teaching they might act with greater reference to Jewish ritual teaching,

such as the dietary laws, the Sabbath observances, the holiday strictures. ^{For if the moral teachings of Judaism can save the world, its ritual teachings can save Jews.} Ve'hokhiach Avraham, it is time that we, the descendants of Abraham, accepted the reproof and called the wells by the names

of their rightful owners. I do not maintain that all wisdom - including science and technology - comes from Judaism. But the greatest part of the ethical and moral verities of the West do.

To summarize, then, the theme of Malkhuyot, of G-d's kingship which is celebrated at the side of a brook or stream, reminds us first not to forget Him in constructing the city of life, for He is the Fountain of Living Waters; second, we must not try to live on ~~borrowed~~ ^{hoarded} resources, but tap the wells in our own homes, and in ~~our own~~ ^{Communities} America; finally, we ought to realize that a great deal of the moral and ethical wisdom of Western civilization is the result of Judaism and its direct effect.

Today, with the sounding of the Shofar and the declaration of G-d's Kingship, we are invited to take ourselves, and our families with us, and refresh ourselves and our souls with the sparkling waters of Torah as they issue from the Fountain of Life. U-she'avtem mayim be'sason mi-maynei ha-yeshuah. "And ye shall draw water in joy from the wells of salvation". Amen.

and before we were turned out into the outside world which appeared to us like a desert or jungle. The little bit of knowledge we acquired in training for Bar Mitzvah, the minute amount of insight we gained in Hebrew School, the residual custom of going to "shul" only on High Holidays and on very special other occasions, a little bit of Kashrut, the gesture of Sabbath observance in the form of lighting the candles -- this is the water we carry around in the bottles of the heart. And we do not even bother to look for new wells in our lives, for opportunities to progress and grow spiritually, to increase our reserves and our reservoir. Soon, then, our water runs out, va-yikhlū mayim min ha-chemet. We lose interest altogether. Nothing can inspire us any longer. The desert has won over us. Worse yet, as the water turns stale it fails to satisfy whatever we give of it to our children. They are not fooled by our empty gestures, and they are not moved by our urgings for them to remain within the fold. Our children have a natural, healthy thirst for the holy, the transcendent. They thirst for meaning, for the sublime, for the lofty. If all we can give them are a few drops of stale water that we still retain but which is utterly lacking in enthusiasm and wholesomeness, we are consigning them to spiritual extinction. We know it - but we try not to look. Like Hagar, we keep busy with everything as long as we don't see what is inevitable. We concern ourselves with business, the children's food and clothing and social life. But that is all. And a young generation threatens to be stillborn. die of Thirst for the word of g-d.

On this day, friends, the angel that appeared to Hagar speaks to us: mah lakh hagar, what is wrong with us that we emulate that half-barabrie nomad woman? Go quickly, pick up your children, take them in hand, and dig new wells of inspiration and learning and practice right where you are, for there is the possibility for you to do so, and thereby to draw upon the life-giving waters of Judaism that lie waiting to be tapped. Advance your ~~high~~ education, give your family the charm and beauty of a Shabbat table, attend "shul" regularly -- give your family living waters from the Well, not stale drops.