

Novelty and Renewal

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Ours is an age characterized by an insatiable appetite for the new; we literally live by the news. We jump with glee at the latest headlines, the newest models, the most recent designs, and the most up-to-date fashions. We abhor the old and the tried, and we treat with studied contempt the set and the stable. We speak derisively of "the same old thing"—it is so uninteresting!—and we greet the words "brand new" with the eager delight of a five-year-old embracing a new toy. No wonder that our childish penchant for novelty is exploited by industry for profit, so that, no matter what the true facts are, the word of the manufacturer cometh forth from Detroit every year blaring "new, new, new!" No wonder that our cities are becoming progressively uglier, and as those immense boxes with the shiny tinsel-like facades go up, they displace old historic landmarks which are wrecked indiscriminately, thus destroying whatever charm and character our cities have. Even in religion we are given to the kind of spiritual adolescence which condemns all that is old to obsolescence, so that Jewish modernist deviationism, for instance, has substituted vacuous new ceremonies and empty and artificial rituals for the landmarks of kashrut and Shabbat and family purity which have been thoughtlessly destroyed.

We who are Orthodox Jews, however, take exception to this fawning worship of the new. We are committed to tradition, to a sense of reverence for the glories and the sancta of the past. We do not believe that truth, values and holiness should be treated in as fickle a manner as the style of hats.

Yet it would be wrong to let the matter rest there. For, after all, does not our tradition too speak lovingly of the new? The psalmist proclaims: *Shiru la-Shem shir hadash*, "sing ye to the Lord a new song" (Ps. 96:1, 98:1, 149:1). In the Haggadah we say, *ve-nomar lefanav shirah hadashah*, "and may we recite before Him a new song." And every day we pray: *Or hadash al Tziyyon ta'ir*, "may You cause a new light to shine on Zion." Obviously, Judaism is not against the new as such. It does not subscribe to a reactionary conservatism. To be traditional does not mean to submit to a spiritual hardening of the arteries. New problems demand new solutions. Some of the new solutions we have arrived at in the past several years have proved to be among the most constructive in Jewish history: the State of Israel, the Hebrew day schools with their dual programs, Yeshiva University, organized community kashrut, the United Jewish Appeal. These are all new, and they are all good for the future of our people and our faith!

The problem, therefore, is how to accommodate the new within a religion which reveres the old. It is not a question of halakhah and the degree of change, if any, which is permissible or

advisable. Rather, the issue is: how does a religion which reveres tradition deal with the all-too-human desire for newness?

Three insights commend themselves to us. First, the yearning for newness ought be applied to one's own life and spirit rather than to the outside world. Thus, the prophet Ezekiel quite properly pleads for *lev hadash ve-ruah hadashah* (Ez. 36:26), "a new heart and a new spirit," not merely for new techniques and new objects. The halakhah declares that *ger she-nitgayyer ke-katan she-nolad dami*, "a proselyte has the status of a newborn child" (Yevamot 22a). And, in the same spirit, Maimonides declares that the repentant person must experience the feeling of spiritual rebirth; religiously he is a new individual (Mishneh Torah, Hilkhot Teshuvah 7:7).

Perhaps it is best to distinguish between these two elements of newness by using two different terms: "novelty" and "renewal." Novelty is the misuse of the inclination for newness for things, for gadgets, for "kicks." Renewal comes about when we apply the desire for newness to man himself, to achieve new insights which result in the transformation of his soul and his spirit. Novelty is extrinsic; it is a question of packaging. Renewal is intrinsic; it is a matter of content. Novelty is the seeking of thrills; renewal is the thrill of seeking. The desire for novelty is what leads a young man from a Jewish home to date non-Jews and ultimately to intermarry. The search for renewal leads a young person from a background of little or no Jewish education to seek out Torah and mitzvot. If we are concerned only with novelty, then we change Judaism in order to make it palatable for most Jews. But if we seek renewal, then we try to change Jews to make them more worthy of Judaism.

The great Hasidic teacher, the Gerer Rebbe, author of the Sefat Emet, discovered this teaching of renewal in the great law which we read this morning and from which derives the name of this special Sabbath. The Torah commands us: *Ha-hodesh ha-zeh lakhem*, "this month is unto you" (Ex. 12:2). We are instructed to base the Jewish calendar on the moon, which revolves about the earth once in twenty-nine or thirty days, rather than on the sun, as do other people. What is the significance of this sanctification of the month as a special mitzvah? The answer he offers is the doctrine of renewal. According to the halakhah, thirty days of usage establishes the entity of habit. Thus, for instance, if we see a friend whom we have not seen or heard from for more than thirty days, we are required to pronounce the blessing of *She-heyehanu*. It is an occasion of joy. Not having seen him for thirty days, we have become habituated to his absence, and therefore the encounter with him is something new which should prompt a blessing. Similarly, there are many blessings we must make upon witnessing marvelous natural scenes or phenomena, or chancing upon spots where miracles were performed for our ancestors or ourselves. In all these cases, if we have been there, or seen them, within thirty days, we are not required to pronounce the blessing, whereas if we have not been there for more than thirty days, we are obligated to make the berakhah. In all these cases (and many more instances may be cited from Jewish law), whatever we have done or have not done persistently for thirty days becomes customary for us.

That is why, the author of Sefat Emet tells us, we must sanctify the moon, and, as it were, renew ourselves before thirty days have passed and we have become encrusted in the routine and the regular. *Ha-hodesh ha-zeh lakhem* is a commandment to experience renewal, the relief from stultifying and crippling conventionality; it is the mitzvah to redeem ourselves from wearying

and fossilizing habit and paralyzing patterns. It means that we must make a conscious effort to do things differently. We must challenge ourselves, for instance, not always to sing the same songs, to extend the same greetings, to pockmark our speech with the same clichés, to respond with the same stereotyped reactions, to affect the same study habits, the same grudges and affections, the same likes and dislikes. Above all, it means not always to adhere to the same level of observance of Judaism, but always to try to reach new heights and new enthusiasm. We must never be satisfied with *mitzvat anashim melummadah*, doing things in a mechanical, heartless, soulless way. Rather, we must experience renewal, with its consequent blessings of growth and development. How much different is this from the craze for novelty! This, indeed, is the creation of what the prophet commanded, the *lev hadash ve-ruah hadashah*, the new heart and the new spirit in accordance with the will of God, rather than the search for *elohim hadashim* (Judg. 5:8), for new gods in accordance with the whim of man.

The second insight follows upon the first. Just as the object of our desire for newness must be renewal, directed inwards, to within ourselves, so the source for this renewal must come from within. It means that we have within ourselves the hidden talents and capacities to renew ourselves.

Perhaps it is best to explain the relation of newness to talents already available by referring to the prayer mentioned previously, *Or hadash al Tziyyon ta'ir*, "May You cause a new light to shine upon Zion." The Sephardic sages, following R. Sa'adyah Gaon, deleted this phrase from our prayerbook. It appears, you recall, in the first blessing before the Shema, in which we praise God for having created the luminaries, the heavenly bodies. This phrase, the Sephardic sages maintained, is out of place in this blessing, for the blessing speaks of the creation of the luminaries during the six days of creation, and this particular passage appeals for a new light in the end of days; past and future, old and new, are incommensurate and cannot be included in one blessing. Nevertheless, we follow the Ashkenazic decision, formulated by R. Asher, who justifies our practice on the basis of the well-known and beautiful aggadah that when God created the sun and the moon and the stars, they originally were endowed with much more light than they have at present; but God set aside a great part of the light that he originally created and is keeping it for the end of days, when this light will be used to illuminate the lives of the righteous who live in accordance with the will of God. This is the *or hadash al Tziyyon* for which we pray: the release of light, in the future, from that which was already created at the beginning but has remained unused. The prayer, then, is not out of place in this blessing: the new comes from the old, the future issues from the past. Hence, the word *hadash*, "new," may properly be used in the sense of the first expression of that which was long in existence but hitherto unexpressed.

So it is with man: the great act of renewal issues from within, it is the transformation of luminous potentiality into brilliant reality. It means that we have within ourselves, unconsciously, immense reservoirs of ability and courage and untapped potentials far beyond our fondest hopes and greatest dreams. When we apply our penchant for newness not to superficial novelty, but to the renewal of our personality and spirit and character; when we break out of our old habits and molds and endeavor to reach new spiritual heights, then we will have made use of these vast resources, of which we may never have been aware, for creative and constructive ends.

Finally, the concept of renewal means not only to discover within ourselves unused treasures of personality and character, but also it bids us to undertake a new orientation, whereby we look differently at the old. In the second paragraph of the Shema, we are promised the rewards of heaven if we will obey the commandments “which I command you this day” (Deut. 11:13). What does “this day” mean to those generations that were not present at Sinai? Rashi, based upon the Sifrei (Re’eh, 58), answers: *she-yihyu aleikhem hadashim ke-illu shematem bo ba-yom*, that whenever you perform the commandments of the Torah, they should appear to you as fresh and as new as if you had heard them from the mouth of God, as it were, on that very day! What is old so often bores us, it elicits no response from us; whereas what is new is always more urgent and more stimulating. We are charmed by the newly-wed and saddened by the newly-dead. Whatever is new is always more invigorating, and attention-capturing.

But whether a thing is old and dilapidated and uninteresting, or new and fascinating and challenging, depends primarily on your point of view! It is so with all of life: whether it is our study of Torah or our daily prayers, our daily associations, from school friends to business associates to our marriage partners -every Jewish and human obligation must be such that *she-yihyu aleikhem hadashim ke-illu shematem bo ba-yom*, we must treat them as if they have just occurred, as if they are newly developed, newly emerged, newly reborn. Then we shall be able to experience the gift and the blessing of renewal. This indeed is what the Pesikta Rabbati (15) meant when, in commenting upon the key phrase of our maftir reading, *Ha-hodesh ha-zeh lakhem* (Ex. 12:2), it links the Hebrew word for “month” with the Hebrew word for “new” (*hadash*) and says: *haddeshu ma’aseikhem*, “renew your deeds”: From within your own heart and soul, find the untapped resources with which to transform your own character and personality, and look with a new light upon all the ancient blessings and hoary gifts which God has given you.

This month of Nissan, which we initiate today, is one which we hope and pray will be for us a month of renewal, in which we will sing a new song of redemption not only for all the people of Israel but for each of us individually. Our dream and our prayer is not for novelty but for renewal, for the kind of inner transformation whereby all that is precious in the past will come to life in us once again.

Such is our prayer: *haddesh yameinu ke-kedem*, “make our days new – as of old!” Amen.