

ONE DEED

By RABBI BENJAMIN BAK

One of the most solemn prayers of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur is the prayer Unesane Tokef. In that prayer we are told in simple words the essence of the holiday: "On Rosh Hashanah it is inscribed and on Yom Kippur the decree is sealed, who shall live and who shall die."¹ This phrase of our prayer book is based upon a Talmudic statement which has been incorporated in Jewish law.² "On Rosh Hashanah Almighty G-d opens up three books, one for Tzadikim, the perfectly righteous; one for R'shoim, the completely sinful, and one for the intermediate class, for the average. The fate of the perfectly righteous and the completely sinful are determined instantly. The righteous are immediately inscribed in the book of life, the wicked are immediately condemned, while the fate of the intermediate group is suspended, hanging in the balance, until Yom Kippur." The definition for Tzadik and Rosha, is most precisely stated in the Talmud. We all perform mitzvot as well as commit avairos. A person whose mitzvot or good deeds exceed his avairos is a Tzadik, a person whose offenses exceed his good deeds is a Rosha, while a person whose virtues and vices are evenly balanced belongs to the intermediate class.

This statement of the Talmud, my friends, which has been codified in Jewish law, immediately, presents a theological challenge. The question that comes to mind is whether we are to take it literally or symbolically. More specifically, when we state in our prayers that on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur it is determined who shall live and who shall die, does it refer to physical life in this world, or does it refer to spiritual life in the hereafter.

Suffice it for me to say that many of our greatest Rabbinic authorities debated this problem. A great many of these authori-

ties have openly stated that it cannot possibly refer to physical life in this world, for as they argue, is it not common knowledge that many sinful and wicked people live and thrive and prosper. These scholars have therefore concluded that the three books spoken of in the Talmud concerning our judgment on the holy days refer to spiritual life in the hereafter.³

The Rayvad, who wrote many dissenting views on the Rambam, resolved this theological problem differently. He maintained that it does refer to physical life in this world, but asserted that it is not our immediate welfare that is at stake, but rather the measure of years allotted to every individual at birth.⁴

Now, my friends, let us turn to Maimonides, Israel's greatest codifier and philosopher, and see the remarkable way he solved this perplexing problem. Maimonides takes the Talmudic account of the judgment of the righteous and the wicked literally. However, when confronted with the challenge and the undeniable fact of the many wicked who seem to escape G-d's punishment, he offers a most heartwarming solution. And here let me quote from the Rambam: "Each and every one of the sons of man has virtues and vices. He whose virtues exceed his vices is a righteous man, and he whose vices exceed his virtues is an evildoer; if both are evenly balanced, he is average. But the weighing of this is not according to the number of virtues and vices but according to their importance. There may be one virtue that outweighs many vices. Moreover these cannot be weighed and measured by any mortal, except by the all-knowing G-d. Only He knows how to estimate and how to appraise virtues against vices."⁵

My friends, what a remarkable theological doctrine. What a heartwarming philosophy. What a blessed message. According to Maimonides, Israel's greatest codifier, no man can point at any Israelite and call him wicked. We simply do not know of any wicked people in Israel. For one deed, one mitzvah at the proper moment may outweigh the countless sins of a life time, instantly transform a man into a Tzadik and gain for him his salvation.

The Talmud tells the moving story of Rabbi Chanino Ben Tradyon, the famous martyr, and the Roman guard who guarded him while he was being tortured by his tormentors. The Romans caught this great sage studying Torah. They took the Sefer-torah, folded it about him and set fire to it. In order to prolong his torture they placed moist wool upon him. The Roman guard witnessing this scene was moved to pity, and inquired of the dying sage if he would promise him Olem Haboh, everlasting life, if he were to remove the moisture from the martyr's body. The sage made the promise and the guard removed the watery material. When Rabbi Chanino Ben Tradyon expired, a heavenly voice was heard to proclaim: "Rabbi Chanino Tradyon and the Roman guard are both destined for Olem Habah." Hearing this heavenly proclamation, Rabbi burst out in tears and wept aloud repeating the phrase: "For some men it takes a life-time to gain salvation, while others earn it in one slight moment."⁶

My friends, Rabbi Yehuda Hanose was not envious of the Roman guard who gained his world with one deed. He did not lament his own fate that he had to devote a lifetime to religion in order to secure for himself everlasting life. What caused him to weep was the realization that there are moments in people's lives when with one deed they can secure their future and yet do not take advantage of it. There are some sacred moments when religious opportunity knocks at our door and yet we ignore it.

Yes, one deed, and one deed alone determines our judgment on Yom Kippur. One mitzvah at the proper moment can gain for us our salvation. Such a moment, my friends, is Shabbos Shuvoh. The Talmud and Rambam tell us that on Shabbos Shuvoh we should all look upon ourselves as belonging to the intermediate class and that one deed is all we need to tip the balance.⁷

What deed shall it be? What mitzvah shall we choose on this sacred Sabbath? May I recommend to you the strengthening of the traditional character of the synagogue, Israel's most important institution, as the mitzvah for this moment. The synagogue is the fortress of our faith and the source of our survival, and must therefore be kept free of all secular and irreverent influences. What a de-

pressing thought it is to contemplate on the problems facing the synagogue today when contrasted with the Jewish synagogue of 150 years ago. Today, the synagogue has become the center of all types of theatrical performances and undignified entertainment, while 150 years ago, when the Vilna Gaon passed away, many of the great scholars of the day felt that to conduct his funeral from his synagogue might set a dangerous precedent for the future sanctity of that great institution.⁸

One of the great sages, Rabbi Yehoshuah Ben Levi, urged his children to attend the synagogue early and late in order to merit G-d's blessing for long life.⁹ If we cannot all daily attend the Shul early and late, let us at least make certain that its traditional, unadulterated character is maintained. In European communities, the synagogue, the home, as well as the outside environment combined forces to mold our religious character and outlook. But who can deny that in our country in this age, the environmental influence is certainly not conducive to religious idealism. And the home too, is no longer the sanctuary it once was in Jewish life. The synagogue, therefore, is the only religious fortress which we have, and which is to supplement for the other two lost influences. Let us strengthen and reconsecrate the synagogue and in the "zchus" of this mitzvah, G-d will inscribe us all in the book of life and salvation.

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