

BERESHIT: GOOD BEGINNINGS by Rabbi Bernard Berzon, z"l

- The world is full of good beginners, but deficient in good finishers. Much promise, and in the end much disappointment.

a[This sermon was written by Rabbi Bernard Berzon, Z"l, and is the title sermon of one of his books. I do not know if it is still in print, but it is a good volume to have if you can obtain it. I include it as the first sermon, in tribute to his memory. Thbook,too, is called "Good Beginnings".

GOOD BEGINNINGS

The world is full of good beginners, but deficient in good finishers. Many who begin their lives with great promise end as failures. There are child prodigies of yesterday who displayed remarkable talent, but when they reach maturity descend into mediocrity. Are positions of prominence and leadership held by all who had brilliant records in school?

Think of the physicians who entered the profession with burning zeal in their hearts to cure or ease pain of ailing humanity, and ended as businessmen in the business of medicine; think of some nurses who started their careers with the dedication to help patients and ease their pain and suffering, and are among the few who now resort to gruffness and even heartless treatment of patients under their care.

If rabbis, and this is also true of the spiritual leaders of other faiths, remained fired with the zeal and the flame with which they entered their calling, they would not make peace so easily with the status quo, nor cater to the pressure groups and the affluent, and the powerful forces in their communities.

If lawyers maintained the principles of justice which permeated their hearts when they began their careers, there would be less corruption, less help for those who practice deceit and legal evasion. Louis the XII of France might have been speaking of some lawyers of today when he said "Lawyers use the law as shoemakers use leather; rubbing it, pressing it, and stretching it with their teeth, all to the end of making it fit for their purposes".

A doctor, an architect, a lawyer and a politician were arguing over which profession had been established the longest in the world. The doctor said, "Medicine is oldest. Eve was made from Adam's rib, and that was a surgical operation." The architect said, "True, but before Adam and Eve there had to be a place for them to live, and that was a job for an architect". The lawyer said, "Maybe, but before the architectural job there was chaos and that had to be straightened out by a lawyer". "Ah", said the politician. "But who created the chaos?"

I remember the story of a member of the New York State legislature who accepted 10,000 for his vote regarding a certain bill. Later he received 20,000 from the other side, and returned the 10,000. When he was asked why he returned the 10,000 he drew himself up to his full height, and in a voice that showed his scorn for the questioner answered, "I'll have you know that I am too honest to take money from both sides".

Obviously this is also a major fault of our social life. Think of the marriages entered into with so much love and promise and ended on the rocks, with heartache and infidelity. Consider the children for whom parents sacrificed so much in the hope they would become the pride of their mature years and the solace of their twilight. How many have brought disillusion to their loved ones by becoming callous, and heartless to their own flesh and blood!

There is a dramatic flaw in the character of many, and it is brought out clearly in the story of Adam. Our sages tell that when Adam foresaw what would be said of Moses, that there arose no prophet in Israel like Moses (Deut. 34:10), he protested, saying, "I am greater than Moses for I was created in the image of God". The answer he received was, "True, Moses did not have as great a beginning as you did, but he grew in holiness and wisdom and ended his earthly career in a blaze of glory. While you, Adam, had an unusual beginning but a poor ending. Despite the fact that you were created by God Himself, you violated the only command you were given on the very day of your creation. You were told not to partake of the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil, but were enticed by the serpent and by your wife to eat it. So in one day you lost Paradise." (Devarim Rabbah, 11:3).

It is almost hackneyed to speak about those who begin the religious calendar

year with a bang and end it with a whimper. But the truth, no matter how painful, may not be hidden. Judaism cannot subsist on good beginnings in the month of Tishrei to be followed in a religious sense by Mar Heshvan, the bitter and disillusioning month of Heshvan, when duties and observances are relegated to limbo.

We all know children who become bar mitzvah or Bat Mitzvah with pledges to remain loyal sons of the commandments, to be faithful to the teachings of Judaism, mindful of their Jewish responsibilities, but soon after we find them drifting away, often with the compliance of their parents, flaunting these violations of the sacred resolutions. In many instances we never see them again. In many more instances we see them in the synagogue years later, to recite Kaddish after a departed parent.

They tell a story about a man who wanted to open a department store in a certain community. With no experience in merchandising, he decided to look around to see what other businesses were doing. He noted one store with a huge sign, "Grand Opening". The store was jammed with people. Then he saw another with an equally large sign, "Going out of Business!" That place, too, was filled with customers. So the man opened his store and put two large signs in front, "Grand Opening" and "Going out of Business!"

That is what Adam did. That is what many adults do. That is what many young people are doing at their bar mitzvah celebrations. They have a grand opening, soon followed by going out of business.

What is required? What is required is growth; the example of Moses, to grow in loyalty and devotion to Judaism as the days and the years roll by.

[Ed. Note: If you want to see a classic treatment of this theme, Rabbi Amiel in Drashot El-Ami has a High Holiday Derasha on "Ahas Bashanah", in which he describes the lessons of Rosh Hashanah and especially Yom Kippur as one day which must effect the entire year.]

(Submitted by Nisson Shulman)