

For What Shall a Man Live

- Nisson Shulman.

A sermon by Rabbi Rackman, We live for those values which are important enough to us to be ready to sacrifice our very lives, if called upon to do so.

YOM KIPPUR NEILA: FOR WHAT SHALL A MAN LIVE?

Based on a sermon by Rabbi Emanuel Rackman (with very slight changes)

1. Rabbi Moshe Hayim Luzzatto was a brilliant Jewish ethical philosopher. One of his immortal works was MESILAT YESHARIM, "The Way of the Righteous" He began this beautiful book by saying: "It is every man's duty to ask himself what is his purpose in life". That is a fitting question for this Rosh Hashana, when God judges all men; for what shall we live?

2. There is one negative answer that we all know: LO AL HALECHEM LEVADO YIHYE HAADAM". "Man does not live by bread alone". But what positive answer shall we give? Certainly we want to know how to best use the blessing of life for which we pray this day.

3. There is a mysterious Midrash, which, if truly understood, gives us a clue. The Midrash refers to the verse in the Bible, where "God beheld his work, and behold it was TOV MEOD, very good." But Rabbi Meir, in the Midrash, twists the Hebrew phrase TOV MEOD, and reads it quite differently, to give it an additional meaning: And he reads them - "TOV MAVET", what was especially good about creation was death.

What could Rabbi Meir have meant? Surely not what the famous philosopher Malthus said that death is good because it makes space available for more people on an overcrowded world. Many today hold this belief, but that is not the Jewish way, and certainly not Rabbi Meir's philosophy - Torah has commanded us to procreate, to populate the earth and to use it in the service of mankind. Rabbi Meir well knew what some scientists claim today, that if we would turn our efforts to using this world and its blessings properly, we would find its blessings ample for all.

Nor did Rabbi Meir mean that life is worthless; that death is better than life. There are many faiths of today who believe that man, as well as this world is basically corrupt; but that too is not the Jewish way. Judaism teaches that this world can be good. It teaches that creation is blessed.

What then did Rabbi Meir mean?

4. I suggest he was teaching a basic Jewish idea: He was saying: Do you want to know what is most important in life? What we should cherish? What a man should live for? What is TOV MEOD? Then consider for what a man would be ready even to give up his life - For what shall a man live? For that for which he is ready to die. A paradox? Perhaps. But how true.....

5. Is there anyone who would willingly sacrifice his life for wealth? Or honor? For a high position? On the contrary: We would readily give up all this in order to buy health, to delay death - As Job said "Vechol Asher Lo, Yiten baad nafsho".

6. On the other hand, are there not mothers who would sacrifice even their own lives for the life of their children? Aren't there many who would die for freedom and peace? A boy who was lost in the battle of Britain wrote to his parents saying: "You must not grieve for me. I have no fear of death. I would have it no other way. The universe is so vast and so ageless that the life of one man can only be justified by the measure of his sacrifice.

At my early age my earthly mission is already fulfilled and I am prepared to die so that you will live in peace and freedom and I shall have directly contributed to that, so my life will not have been in vain."

Your loving Son.

7. And that is why on this Neilah, after RH, ten days of Penitence, and entire YK service, I ask you - "For what are we living? What are our goals in life? More income? Perhaps at the sacrifice of much needed love and attention to the families for whose sake we would even be ready to give up our lives?

Profit? Perhaps at the expense of some honesty and much truth?

A good time? Perhaps at the expenses of morality and decency?

What other values have we neglected? Justice? Righteousness? Kindness? Charity? Torah? God? Israel? Goals of our faith, for which, under certain conditions, we might even be ready to give up our lives?

Our people, during our history, have often been called upon to make the supreme sacrifice. At those times, before our fathers and mothers, the issues were clear. And there was usually little doubt about the choice they would make. To give up one's life for our faith, was always considered an act of the greatest sanctity.

Even in our own generation, when we know that many Jews have drifted away from Judaism, there are yet many among us who would react heroically if faced with the ultimate choice. This has been true in all the wars of Israel's defense, and it was true through all the years of refusenik heroism, and it is still true in many Jewish hearts today, and it is true in every part of Israel today.

Now what about us? Are we ready to be heroic for the sake of our faith?

8. But you will say, and with some justice - "Rabbi, perhaps we too could be like them, but God has not tested us. He has not put us in a position where we can show such heroism.

That is a fair question.

But the fact is that we are tested more often than we think. Milder challenges, which we frequently don't recognize, come every day.

A boy is in love with a non-Jewish girl. He sees what it is doing to his parents. He sees the pain he causes, the anguish. He senses the damage intermarriage does to the future and promise of the Jewish people. Yet he refuses to sacrifice what he, mistakenly, thinks is his own happiness, for a cause beyond himself.

A man is asked to give to a great cause for the sake of his people. The State of Israel, for instance, or a Synagogue, or a Yeshiva, a cause which spells survival or doom for our people. And many give even generously, but not sacrificially; not in any way that shows that these are life giving causes; that these are causes for the sake of which many noble Jews have in the past even given their lives!

Let Rabbi Luzzatto teach us the lesson of Yom Kippur, and especially at this Neila time. For what shall a man live? For those ideals for which he is even ready to give up his life. What shall give us life? Living for those ideals which are worthy of greatness, and even great sacrifice.