

One Issue Judaism - Our Religious Split Personality [2]

by Dr. Meir Tamari

For today's religious Jews there are, in addition to all the issues, areas prevalent throughout the ages, two areas where the danger of a religious split personality occur. They are the question of statehood in Judaism and the question of consumerism - the correct Jewish use of wealth. Unfortunately, in both of them, the split personality is very comfortable as it enables people to avoid dealing with these fundamental questions.

"Judaism is not a religion in the usual sense of the word but a nation-religion" (Rav Hirsch). As a social-political entity, this nation-religion requires a territorial basis on which it can fulfill its role. It is surely instructive that that this basis is established by Hashem's promises to Avraham in parshat Lech L'cha at the very birth of the nation-religion. The parsha starts with the commandment to go to an as yet unspecified land and continues to flesh out the promise till clear and determined borders are set. It is surely significant that these final borders are set and the son of Avraham and Sarah who is a further stone in the founding of the nation, before the announcing of Hashem as the G-d of Israel (B'reishit 17:7).; nation and land preceding religion.

The significance of this unique form of religion is borne out by two different stories in the Torah; the meraglim and

Balak's sending for Bilaam. Why did the meraglim not want to enter Eretz Yisrael? Why did Balak not desire to destroy Israel but simply to hire Bilaam to curse them that they should not enter their land? In both cases, there was no problem with Israel's religion as long as they were in the desert. There it involved personal piety, ritual, priesthood and a sanctuary etc. which would make them similar in concept to other religions. Shem MiShmuel writes that when they would enter Eretz Yisrael, however, they would have to make the normal and material things of life holy. Work, agriculture and industry, war and peace etc., would all have to be according to G-d's Torah. The meraglim doubted their religious ability to do this and Balak feared that Hashem would then demand similar behavior from him and the nations of the world.

This concept of the nation-religion is a difficult concept to understand and to live by, as we may see from the pages of Nevi'im Rishonim. These are often regarded as the historical books of Tanach depicting the events of Jewish independence in their homeland. Throughout, they tell a story of how Israel shied away from a unified political entity with a single religious aim. There was always a national sanctuary, first the Mishkan in Givon, Nov, Shilo and then the Bet Hamikdash in Yerushalayim. However, the nation persisted in also worshipping at the local Bamot which were raised altars throughout the country. David established a monarchy with the religious sanction of the prophets. Yet even in

his days the cry was often raised, 'we have no portion in Beit David' and in the days of his grandson the monarchy was divided into a kingdom of Judah of two and a half tribes and the kingdom of Israel. Within a short period both were exiled and Jewish monarchy ended till it was renewed temporarily by the Maccabees on Chanuka. This ceased when the Romans entered the country at the invitation of rivaling Jewish factions.

The other aspect of our split religious personality is the correct balance between our Torah study and ritual observance and the correct use of the wealth which Hashem grants us. This wealth is morally ours to fund our needs and those of our families, however, excessive emphasis on such spending breeds thinking and many practices which are contrary to Judaism and thereby create a split religious personality. Such spending has a modern name - consumerism, and is one that no other generation has ever faced before. Today's world is wealthier than any of the preceding generations so that whereas until even recently, poverty and scarcity were the universal problems, now we have the challenge of wealth. Chazal teach us that this is a challenge which is more difficult to overcome than that of poverty and the truth of their statement may be seen in the headlines of today's media.

At the individual level, we are bombarded by advertisers, by the media and by our peers to buy, consume, and spend. It is surely not difficult to see that this creates pressure on us to work

harder and earn more irrespective of our personal wealth. When legitimate and legal methods are insufficient to fund our consumerism, then people will knowingly or not turn to illegal and unethical ways to do so. Chazal already taught us that the yeitzer hara for money and wealth is almost unlimited; "one has 100 coins then wants 200". Few of us meet people who say they are incapable of needing more or have enough. Rather most people and societies consider that more is better than less but Torah teaches otherwise. The way to achieve spiritual unity in this respect is to "love the Lord your G-d with all your strength - b'chol m'odecha; "with all your possessions" (Rashi, D'varim 6:5).