

"IN PERSEVERANCE"

Those who delight in playing the game of typology, dividing mankind into different types, often say that there are two kinds of people: the doers, those who create and produce, and the non-doers -- those whose production is minimal but who are primarily consumers. I should like to make a further subdivision in the category of the doers, by saying that there are two types of doers: the initiators and the maintainers or developers. Of course, it must be remembered that these are pure types, and that hardly anyone conforms exactly to these requirements; each of us is a mixture of types, more of one than of the other.

The initiators are the beautiful people. They lead an exciting life, they are beset by risk, they possess superabundant energy, and they evince courage in their career of innovation. The maintainers are less creative. There is little thrill in their daily life. There is no dash and no flash in the process of developing and maintaining ideas that others have innovated.

Nevertheless, the world could very well plod along without the initiators; with all the great value of new ideas, we might well survive without any new ideas. But the world would fall

apart without the maintainers, without those who spend most of their lives developing and executing the ideas that others have proposed. For creativity has no value unless it is developed; no plan is worthwhile unless it is acted upon; no new conception is effective unless there are those willing to execute it; no risk succeeds unless there are those who persist in the determined struggle to make it pay.

The maintainers and the developers know the secret of perseverance -- and it is a miracle! It is a miracle because it is so difficult a vocation. It is hard to hold on when the audience has gone home and there is no applause to encourage you. It is not at all easy to maintain an idea or a plan or an institution when the going is rough, cynics overabundant, when everything seems dull and tedious and lacking in novelty and excitement.

Perhaps this was in the back of the minds of the Rabbis when they adopted as a simile for that which is difficult the expression

קשה כקריעת ים סוף, "It is as difficult as the splitting of the Red Sea." Thus, in speaking of marriage, the Rabbis said that קשה כקריעת ים סוף, "It is as difficult to match a husband and wife as the splitting of the Red Sea."

(Sanh. 22a; Lev. R. 8:1).

What is the source of this simile? What is, after all, so difficult about splitting the Red Sea? If you accept the anthropomorphic picture of divine action, then all it required was for God to take a deep breath and blow and, lo and behold, the Sea is split. Is that so difficult for God? Or, if you take a more sophisticated and less primitive view, why should it be considered difficult for an omnipotent Deity to cause a strong wind to focus on one segment of the Sea and thus dry it up and separate the waters?

A great homiletician of our times has suggested that the true miracle of the splitting of the Red Sea was not the original dividing of the waters, but rather the separation of the waters while Israel passed through. Not the splitting was the great miracle, but rather: *וַיִּפְּץ אֱלֹהִים אֶת-יָם סוּף*, "The waters were a wall unto them on their right and on their left." To divide the Sea was a great feat, but the real miracle was -- to keep it that way, to maintain the waters apart from each other and prevent them from collapsing, flowing into each other, and drowning the Children of Israel who were passing through.

So it is with a *השואה*, or marriage. Getting married can be hard or easy for different individuals, but essentially it is a simple thing: a man gives a ring to a woman before two

qualified witnesses and recites the marriage formula. It is not getting married that is hard but -- staying married. That is *שי"ו פ' מ'ת'ק'כ'ט' כ'ט'ב'ט'*, that requires a miracle of perseverance that was manifested in the miracle of the Red Sea. That is why I often tell young couples who come to me for pre-marital counseling that they ought not to lose their perspective in their preoccupation with the details of the wedding. It is not the wedding that is really so difficult and so important -- but the marriage. It is a marriage that is *שי"ו פ' מ'ת'ק'כ'ט' כ'ט'ב'ט'*.

So that the splitting of the Red Sea has, in addition to its historical significance, the importance of teaching us a homey but practical and universal principle : to preserve, to develop, to maintain.

Innovation without persistence, initiation without perseverance, splitting the Sea without maintaining it -- is wasted effort. A man who stumbles upon a great idea and does nothing with it, might just as well have stumbled onto a puddle on the ground. One who "falls in love," and does nothing to develop that tender relationship, might just as well have "fallen in."

What is true of the Red Sea and marriage is true of business and the professions as well. Thus the Rabbis state in the name

of Rabbi Elazar Ben Azaryah that *פיו פ' מתיב פאל סו מללגן יו, ת,*  
"It is as difficult to earn a living as it is to split the  
Red Sea." It is not really that difficult to get a job or to  
start a business or to invest your money. It is miraculously  
difficult to keep the job, to build the business, and to invest  
wisely. Many great ideas have come to nought. Most successful  
people are those who have perseverance, energy, the quality  
of following through a great idea and being willing to stick to  
it.

It is told of the great Rabbi Levi Yitzchak of Berditchev  
that he heard of a Jewish family that had been imprisoned by  
the paritz or Polish nobleman who had incarcerated the entire  
family because they defaulted on a loan. The Rebbe was moved  
by the principle of pidyon shevuyim, the ransoming of captives,  
and made his way to his various Hasidim to solicit funds for the  
redemption of the captives. He spent a whole day going from  
place to place, appealing to one person after another, but he  
was a failure. He had not collected enough money to help the  
unfortunate family. In exasperation, he said to himself, "Why  
am I wasting my time with this? Should I not have kept to what  
I am best equipped to do and what I want to do with my life: to  
study Torah, to pray, to serve the Lord? Now I have accomplished

neither!" As he was ruminating in this manner, he returned to Berditchev and there saw a commotion in the city square. The people had caught a  $\approx$  and the thief was being soundly beaten as he was hauled into the center of town. The Rebbe approached the thief and said to him, "Son, aren't you sorry that you have done such a dastardly thing? Don't you see that it's not worth it to be a thief?" Whereupon the  $\approx$  smiled at the Rebbe and said to him, "No, Rebbe, I have a different philosophy. What I don't accomplish today, I will do tomorrow. When I am not successful at first, I just keep on trying and eventually I will succeed. So if I did not steal enough today and I was caught -- tomorrow  $\approx$  I will try again!" The ignorant thief of Berditchev knew the secret of  $\Phi$  and the Rebbe learned from the ganav! So the Berditchever Rebbe abandoned his books and went right back to collect the money for the poor family which he ultimately succeeded in ransoming.

Of course, I would not want to be overly simplistic. The advice of perseverance is not a magical answer to everything. It all depends upon the goal we are persevering for. Sometimes the goal is unworthy -- as in the case of the ganav -- whereupon the perseverance and the persistence become criminal. More often it happens in life that the goal is trivial and it is simply

not worth all the effort of persistence. Not every business is worth developing, not every idea worth executing, not every career worth succeeding in, and not even every marriage worth saving. There is simply no substitute for intelligent judgment, for wisdom in decision-making. But if the goal is positive, if it is worthwhile, then perseverance is indispensable even if it is "as difficult as splitting the Red Sea."

Surely we have been taught this lesson by our fellow Jews behind the Iron Curtain. After more than fifty years of Communism, there are Russian Jews who still persevere in their identification as Jews, who have learned anew the value of Jewish loyalty. The Israeli press (Maariv) this past week contained an interview by an Israeli reporter of a Russian Jewish couple recently arrived in Israel. They were brimming with enthusiasm and energy. The husband wore a kippah and told the reporter that not only here but even "there" they kept kosher and he never failed to don his tefillin. The wife was a graduate of Komsomol, and he was a brilliant soldier who was in the advance guard of the Red Army as it marched into Berlin, and who resigned from the Army with the rank of Captain at the age of twenty-one. But he ate kosher and put on his tefillin -- in Stalin's Russia! Imagine that: here are young people, grown up

in an atheistic and materialistic society, who, at the risk of life and limb, dared to eat kosher and put on tefillin. Compare that, if you will, to what some of us American Jews who should know better fail to do in conditions of freedom and affluence... The reporter inquired as to where they had gotten all this perseverance and persistence from. He learned the source: the young lady's father was one of those stubborn old Jews who refused to abandon his Jewishness in the worst days of Stalinism. Stalin had him sent to that dreaded prison, Varkuta, from which very few people emerged alive. The old man went, staunchly and proudly, and in order to maintain his Jewishness wrote out by hand almost the entire book of Psalms from memory! And the young couple showed the reporter the manuscript, the token of their father's perseverance, which they somehow managed to take with them out of Russia -- the physical symbol of the miracle of Jewish perseverance, a miracle as hard to accomplish as it was for God to split and maintain the Red Sea.

I suggest that American Jewry has to learn some of this perseverance with regard to problems in the Middle East today. I do not necessarily identify as a complete hawk, although most of my Israeli friends are hard-liners with regard to withdrawal from the occupied territories. Yet such terms as "hawk" and "dove"



are fairly irrelevant to the Israeli scene. If Israel seems obstinate today on the matter of territories, it is because they have longer memories than we do, because they are at the situation of greatest risk, and because they know very well the value of American diplomatic commitments. We American Jews, no matter how we try to disentangle ourselves from galut-psychology, are usually unsuccessful. We are frightened by the isolation of Israel from the rest of the world. We pick up our New York Times in the morning with the greatest apprehension about the scoldings it will receive from editors and anonymous State Department spokesmen. But we must, in this instance, learn from the Israelis to persevere and to persist in the face of risk and in the face of even universal reproach. It is difficult, hard <sup>בדיוק</sup> <sup>לדאוג</sup> <sup>לדאוג</sup> but persist and persevere we must if ultimately we are to prevail.

And so too, perseverance becomes terribly important for each and every individual in his own religious situation. Young people who are first coming to intellectual maturity should recognize that they are not the first ones ever to entertain religious doubts. Doubting is a universal phenomenon, it is quite natural and normal, and all of us have gone through such a period. But it is only the immature who will allow their religious commitments to collapse upon the first assault of doubt.

It is like the young man who will run away from home as soon as he has the first hint of a suggestion issuing from his subconscious that maybe his mother doesn't love him that much. A mature person will persevere, will persist, will learn that in life it is our fate to live in doubt, that we never have all our questions answered, but that faith has a much deeper level of meaning than mere assent to every intellectual proposition. It is a difficult task -- doubt is the cause of an existential anxiety that is as hard as the splitting of the Red Sea; but now, as then, we must persevere.

Indeed, that is the essential theme of the Song of Songs that we read on Passover. Shir Hashirim is the song of longing and perseverance in the face of threatening frustration. Belover and beloved seek each other and, just at the point they believe they are about to find each other and stay with each other, they are separated. *וְעַתָּה יֵשׁוּבָה וְהִנֵּה אֲנִי וְהִנֵּה אֵלֶיךָ יֹשֵׁב וְהִנֵּה אֲנִי וְהִנֵּה אֵלֶיךָ יֹשֵׁב*  
"On my bed at night I sought him whom I so loveth, I sought him but I found him not." This is the story of the love between God and Israel. Man seeks God, and when he thinks he has finally found Him, he lapses once again into the feeling of loneliness and alienation. But the Jew, the God-lover, is willing to risk frustration without ever yielding to despair. For a people that has come through the Red Sea knows that it is worth persisting and

persevering.

Indeed, that is how the Rabbis understood the closing verse of that great song: *מִן הַיָּד הַזֶּה תִּפְּדֶנּוּ*, "Flee my beloved and be thou like unto a gazelle" or deer. What was the meaning of this simile? The Rabbis answered:

*וְהָיָה כְּיָמֵי חַיֵּי הַיְּדֵי הַזֶּה וְהָיָה כְּיָמֵי חַיֵּי הַיְּדֵי הַזֶּה*  
*וְהָיָה כְּיָמֵי חַיֵּי הַיְּדֵי הַזֶּה וְהָיָה כְּיָמֵי חַיֵּי הַיְּדֵי הַזֶּה*

"A deer, when it sleeps, it has one eye closed and one eye open; so, the Lord always, has, as it were, one eye open; as it is written, 'the eye of the Lord is upon them that fear Him.'" That is what gives us the courage to hope and the strength to persevere: the knowledge that even if no one else cares and no one else is concerned, God does care and He is concerned.

We persevere, though it be as difficult as the splitting of the Sea, because we know that the prize is worth it -- God's love.