

"IN THE HIGH TIDES OF LIFE"

Some time ago, at Long Beach, N.Y., I witnessed a scene that both frightened and inspired me. It was frightening because danger to life was involved. And it was inspiring because, though it was an actual event, it was also a parable containing a truth that is universal and of particular relevance this Rosh Hashanah.

Three boys had ventured far out into the water, farther than common sense and safety regulations permitted. They frolicked there for quite a while, and before long they discovered that the high tides had set in and they were hopelessly caught, unable to make it back to shore safely. When the ever-careful life-guards noticed the predicament of these careless boys, they immediately threw out life-lines to them, expecting them to grasp the lines and be hauled in to safety. The three boys, however, were too proud to do that. They had some friends on the beach and they were ashamed to have it known that they had to be towed in by life-lines. Thus having lost the lines, they tried again to head for shore. This time it was even more futile, and the situation seemed one of sure catastrophe when the first of the life-guards came to them at what was certainly the last possible minute and brought them back to shore. All onlookers, including this speaker, heartily applauded the heroic feat of the life-guards and, not realizing the details of the rescue and near-disaster, were puzzled at what had happened to the 3 boys. When I inquired of one of the life-guards, a rather young boy, he replied, "The trouble is that some people are fools. They are not good enough to make their way back to shore in the high tides, and they are too proud to grab the life-line thrown out to them."

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What a profound truth that young, brave, and outspoken life-guard articulated! For is it not so with all of life? We are often in the predicament of the three boys: we are caught in the high tides of life, bobbing up and down on the waves of crises of all kinds, thrashing about in constant danger of drowning, not strong enough to find safety and security by ourselves. Yet we are too proud to use the life-lines that are available to us. We look longingly to the Land - to the goal of

spiritual rootedness, moral stability, religious attainment, of a higher kind of usefulness and a life that is meaningful. Yet we do not take advantage of the "Life-Line". And all the while the Divine "Life Guard" continues to call to us to turn back, to head back to shore. That call to return is the call of Shofar. Alah Elokim bi-teruah, ha-Shem be'kol shofar. It is the Almighty, the Life-guard of each and everyone of us, calling us back to shore, to safety. The voice of the Shofar calls out to us: shuvu, return, you have gone too far out. You are endangered by the high tides of life; head back to the terra firma, the safe land of Torah and Judaism.

~~We all sometimes find ourselves in high tides - the time when adversity and ill-fortune seem to crowd us, when we feel rocked to death by the steep ups and downs of life, disgusted with the incessant ebb and flow of our fortunes, wondering if we shall ever be able to stop struggling and find dryness and warmth and security.~~

~~At moments of this sort, we wonder too at the undulatory, wave-like nature of our moral lives, the high-points and low-points of our ethical and religious living. Here too we are taken up by High Tides - we rise to the crest and fall to the bottom with our co-swimmers, with our friends and neighbors. We do what they do, we rise and fall with them, we imitate their mores and their ethics and their religiosity of their lack of them, and we think that being in company of others will somehow save us, when usually all it means is that we are equally threatened with drowning.~~

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Whether in our financial, professional, or family lives, or the development of our moral, ethical, and religious characters, the rate and tempo of life today makes us feel that we are caught up in high tides indeed. Life is sharper, more precarious, more precipitous; it is more given to great successes and abysmal failures than it once was in a more serene age. Think back to last Rosh Hashanah or the one before that, and consider what has happened to you, not only externally but also internally, since then. So many of us feel that we are all but drowned in woes and worries, in our feelings of inadequacy and failure. We are pummeled by the waves of events, *spiritually confused by the noise and the tumult*, carried along by tides we don't understand, longing for the shore of spiritual peace and contentment and serenity that others know. *It* If that is your feeling, all or in part, then listen well to the sound of the Shofar. It is the voice of the Divine Life Guard calling out to you: Come home, back to a life of Torah with its beauty, its meaningfulness, *its clarity*, its intelligent assurance that every individual is worthy, its offer of a life where hope and faith prevail.

But, you say, we have heard that call before, for more Rosh Hashanahs than we care to remember. It has moved us, perhaps, momentarily; but how do we really get back to this sort of Jewish life when the tides draw us out and away, when we are ineffectual against the undercurrents that pull us into our misery once again?

Listen, then, my friends to the Talmud's tale of two great Jews who had to swim. Consider the stories of two Rabbis, travelling on different ships, both of whom were washed overboard on the high seas. R. Akiva related that while travelling aboard ship one day he noticed that another ship was floundering on the high seas and ultimately was shipwrecked, and that he was particularly distressed because R. Meir was aboard the ship that had come to grief. Then, however, when he came to the land of Kapotokia, he was astonished to see the same R. Meir come to him and discuss

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Torah with him. He said to him, beni, mi he'elkha, my, son, who saved you from drowning? And R.Meir answered, gal tirdanⁱ la-havero, va-havero le haveiro at she'hikiani la-yabasha - I was cast from the top of one wave to the top of the next wave until I ultimately was washed ashore. That is the story of one rescue.

But in addition, the Talmud records another rescue - this time of R.Akiba, who had told of R.Meir's rescue. R.Gamaliel related that he was aboard a ship when he noticed another ~~one~~ shipwrecked and he was terribly distressed because R.Akiba was aboard the wrecked boat. However, when he came to shore he found R.Akiba lecturing in Talmudic Law. And when he asked R.Akiba, bni, mi ke'elkha... he answered: daf shel sefinah nizdamen li ve'khol gal ve'gal she'nizdamen li ne'eneisi lo rosh. I grabbed, he said, a floating plank - a sort of make-shift life-line, and I ducked under every wave that came until I was washed ashore. (Yevamot 121a).

Here then are 2 ways of surviving the High tides of Life - one can, like R.Meir, ride the waves; or like R.Akiba, grab hold of the Life-Line and duck.

Those of us who are of strong physical, mental, emotional and spiritual constitution can, of course, follow the advice of R.Meir. Never mind planks of life-lines - ride the waves, take advantage of every crest, exploit the High Tides themselves. From crest to crest of crisis, such people hurl themselves closer to their goals. The rougher the sea, the harder do they swim and the greater the ^{achievements}. They gain strength from sickness, courage from crisis, fortitude from failure. They are the great swimmers of life who need no life-line, for the higher the tide, the greater is the challenge and ~~and~~ the surer their chances of reaching the goal. They are their own life-guards.

Yes, there are such people - like R.Meir himself who began as a complete unknown. He is one of the very few giants of his era whose origin and ^{Jerusalem} birth and ancestry we know nothing of. Likely he was descended from proselytes. Yet he rode on the crest of obscurity and the High Tides of

of anonymity to become the great, immortal R.Meir. He was marked as the student of Elisha, the disciple of a renegade, an apostate, a traitor to his faith. Yet he rode that wave until he brought him higher in the esteem of his colleagues and closer to his appointed historical destiny. He lost both his young sons in one day - and from the point of being drowned in grief he used that occasion to hurl himself into even higher spiritual spheres, and found untapped sources of courage where others might have preferred to despair.

They are the Beethovens who compose immortal music when they are deaf; the Franz Rosenzweigs who write monumental works of religious philosophy when 99% paralyzed; the Steinmetzes who achieve world-wide fame in Science when horribly crippled; the FDRs who begin to flourish after they are stricken; and the repentant and pious and saintly of all ages who return to Torah despite original ignorance, poor upbringing, years of looseness and an immoral, cynical, and mocking society.

Would that everyone could use the teachings and techniques of R.Meir - to go from wave to wave and to arrive safely, solely because he has the strength and fortitude to be a good swimmer in the Sea of Life and can use the High Tides to his own good advantage.

What, however, of us ordinary people, those who are not so strong and do not have that spirit? What of those of us who hear the call of G-d through the Shofar beckoning us to return to Judaism, and who would like to do so -- but cannot swim alone and unguided?

To us, R.Akiba's answer is of inestimable value. Do not despair. There is a way to survive the treacherous tides and to respond to the call of the Divine Life Guard. Grasp the daf shel sefinah, take hold of the life-lines cast out to you by Him. These life-lines are the individual mitzvot you have long neglected. Kashruth is a life-line for those whose homes have been emptied of Jewishness. The lighting of candles of Friday evenings, the

making of Kiddush, bringing a child to a Jewish school or to a synagogue --- those are life-lines to Judaism. Read a Jewish book, study Torah according to your ability so that your faith will be intelligent and not by rote and merely intuitive -- that is a great life-line that the Shofar pleads we grasp. Practice integrity in your business, treat an employee or maid well, speak only the truth --- these are Jewish life-lines. Learn to share your wealth and give generously to a stranger in trouble, to a Yehivah, to a synagogue, to Israel. Those too are powerful life-lines that can draw you close to the rest of Jewish life and to tranquility and peace. Do not be too proud to grasp these lines; do not be overly concerned by cynical, foolish friends who may utter sarcastic remarks about your renewed interest in Yiddishkeit. Hold on to the life-lines of Torah and they will pull you through every wave of worry and misfortune. They will steady you and bring you through the tumult of life with dignity and honor. When you hear the call of the Shofar, determine that this year you will grasp at least one new life-line --- whether Kashruth or Shabbat or Synagogue or Study or any of those we mentioned and the many more we did not --- and hold onto it for dear life.

P Let us conclude with the words of David (Psalm 69): Hoshieni Elokim, ki va'u mayim ad nefesh, ~~Save~~ Save me, O G-d, for the waters are come even unto the soul. I am sunk in deep mire, and cannot stand; I am come into deep waters and the flood overwhelmeth me..." Elokim, be'rav hasdekha, aneni be'emet yishekba -- "O G-d, in the abundance of Thy mercy, answer me with the truth of Thy salvation... Let not the waterflood overwhelm me, neither let the deep swallow me up...." Ve'zera avadav yinhaluha, ve'ohavei shemo yishkenu vah --- "the children of those who serve the Lord shall inherit His blessing, His land, and they that love his Name shall dwell therein."