

"THE UPS AND DOWNS OF LIFE"

Our Sidra opens this morning with a revelation of God to Moses at the very eve of the great redemption from Egypt. Moses is told that the Patriarchs -- Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob -- perceived God only through the Name ^{יְהוָה}, which implies promise; that is, they lived out their lives under the great promise by the Lord that some day their descendants would form a people who will go into exile and then be redeemed. However, ^{אֲבֹתֵינוּ}, they never attained to the experience of God in the form of the Tetragrammaton (the four-lettered Name of God) which implies fulfillment and vindication. Moses, however, was to receive the revelation of God under the guise of fulfillment (symbolized by the Tetragrammaton) and, therefore, to attain a much higher understanding of the divinity. For the Patriarchs, their perception of God was that of faith; for Moses, that of knowledge.

It is apparent from the plain text of the Scriptural account that Moses was superior to the Patriarchs in his religious conceptions and experience. And yet, in a surprising twist, the Rabbis drew diametrically opposite conclusions. The Midrash tells us: ^{אמר לו הקדוש ברוך הוא אל משה ואל אברהם ואל יצחק ואל יעקב}, "the Lord said to Moses, 'Oh, for those who are gone and cannot be replaced!'" They then contrast Moses unfavorably with the

Patriarchs: ^{הרבא פלגא דאברהם ויצחק ויעקב ואל משה}
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"Many times did I reveal myself to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and they never questioned Me or challenged Me; they never said to Me, 'what is Your Name?' And you, Moses, at the very beginning you questioned Me, saying: 'what is Your Name?' And now you revealed your impatience by challenging Me with the words, 'but You still have not saved the people.'"

The Patriarchs, who flourished in times of promise and never were able to see the fulfillment, lived during a difficult period, and one that taxed their confidence in the Lord. Yet, no matter how difficult and severe and depressing the conditions were, they responded with hope and faith and serenity. But Moses was buffeted by the powerful winds of circumstance, harbingers of imminent redemption, the revolutionary turmoil that always precedes liberation, the ups and downs of life; good news alternating with bad, incipient happiness with foreboding disaster. Moses found the punishment of these vicissitudes unbearable. And so he submitted to his vexation and impatience and he complained.

The Biblical scholar, Professor Fivel Meltzer of Jerusalem, lists some of these severe ups and downs that afflicted our people during the Egyptian period. They came to Goshen and lived in prosperity -- that was an Up. Then a new king or dynasty arose and began to persecute the Israelites, and that was a Down. The birth of Moses and the promise it held was an Up, but when he (as all other children) had to be thrown into the Nile, that was a Down. When Moses, in his basket, was saved by the daughter of Pharaoh and raised as a Prince in the palace, that was an Up. But when the same Moses, after identifying himself with his own people and attempting to help them, was forced to flee to the Desert of Midyan, that was a Down. Then with the revelation to Moses and the challenge he flung at Pharaoh, that was an Up. But the reaction of Pharaoh rejecting Moses and the Israelites, was a Down. Later, during the plagues, we find Pharaoh retreating, and a high point is reached, but then his heart hardens, and that is a Down. And so the story goes. No wonder that Moses couldn't take it!

However, this agitation of Moses and Israel was absolutely necessary for them. You strengthen iron by tempering it with the extremes of hot and cold. So too, a people is prepared for the transition from dependency to independency, from slavery to freedom, from shame to dignity, by going through the ups and downs of history. It will either make them or break them, but a change will certainly be effected. Hence, the gentle chastisement of Moses by God: *וְיַדְּבִילֵם יְהוָה וְיִסְּרֵם*, Oh for those who are gone, for those irreplaceable Patriarchs who knew how to respond with faith to the fluctuations of life. The Rabbis do not blame Moses, but they point out that the Patriarchs were made of stronger mettle.

This is an insight which we must apply to our own lives as well, in the United States and in the world. There is much to drive a man to despair in our times: mass massacres in Vietnam, horrible earth quakes in South America, senseless murder in this urban jungle we call our city -- the whole catalogue of ills to which we are heir. But while all these are depressing, they must be construed as a challenge to us to help and to improve insofar as it is given for us to improve our situation; but never must it be an invitation to the paralysis of despair. Because if we submit to the downs, we are then victimized by the ups, ^{and} we turn irrationally euphoric when dramatic predictions are made of "peace at hand." We need, therefore, the quality that the Patriarchs embodied. Assuredly, the simplicity of those more placid and irenic ages will not

return. But we must seek to recapture the hard-nosed and realistic optimism and self-confidence that our ancestors once knew and which sustained them in their individual ups and downs.

The same is true of Jewish life. We must not go overboard with Messianic fervor when we hear of paratroopers praying at the Wall, or Jews heretofore distant from Judaism returning. And we must not become too depressed by the disgraceful controversy concerning the Chief Rabbinate, one in which all parties are tainted. We must not become too euphoric when Israeli diplomacy wins certain support in Washington, and we must not plunge into the doldrums when we discover that four Israeli kibbutzniks have betrayed their land as spies for a country which seeks to dismember Israel.

We must beware of the gyrations of Jewish life in our country as well. We must respond with concern and even alarm to the "Jews for Jesus" movement, but never with panic. We are entitled to a certain satisfaction over the positive phenomenon on the campus, where young Jews are no longer anxious to "make it" with others, and rather seek to identify themselves as Jews -- satisfaction, but not smugness. We must beware of the ups and downs. *ישראל | כל | יצא | כל | יאן* -- we must relearn how to deal graciously and soberly with good news, and how to confront bad news with courage and dignity.

But above all, the personal life of each of us can and must be steered consciously and deliberately to avoid the irrational acts that often are the results of the inevitable changes of mood by which we are periodically seized. For we are all of us subject to these fluctuations in our daily lives. A little good news sends us spiraling upwards, and the first note of disappointment plunges us downwards. Often, even a man who knows all the ins and outs cannot manage the ups and downs. So our Sages tell us that, with forethought, we can retain a semblance of sanity and spiritual steadfastness when we are battered by life's changing winds.

Naturally, I am not speaking of a manic situation in which the highs and lows of delirium and depression are of pathological psychic and organic origin. Such a person can hardly will himself into a different state, and it is cruel to expect him to do so. I am concerned not with mental disorder, but with the normal variations of sadness and happiness. Of course, there are objective situations which cause joy and grief, and Judaism expects us to bring our passions to these situations. Without passion, life is only superficial. Only an insensitive person

does not react appropriately to good news and bad news. But in general, it is possible to attain equanimity. Judaism holds that we can mold our own characters, that we can learn not to act on the basis of temporary whims and caprices. It tells us to be happy at weddings -- but there is one week of festivities, and then the first year that the novelty is still there -- *halele norel*. It tells us to mourn when bereaved -- seven days, and thirty days, and then one year -- but no more than that; afterwards, normalcy must be reattained.

Hasidism was born 200 years ago into a Jewish world which has been battered by ups and downs. There was a period of spiritual devastation that came about us as the result of political and economic and spiritual deprivations. Our people were sorely depressed. Because they submitted to the downs, they were victimized by the ups that followed, namely, the pseudo-Messiah Sabbatai Zvi. Too many Jews throughout the world followed him in their sudden zeal and fervor -- only to plunge again into collective grief when he turned out to be a mentally unbalanced man who himself converted to another faith. The devastation seemed to be complete, until Hasidism appeared on the scene.

Perhaps that is why Hasidism taught the principle of *halele*, which might best be translated as "holy indifference." This does not imply apathy to life. It does not mean not to care for others. It does mean to achieve the maturity and stability for which we aspire by being less involved in our own egos and in our own welfares. *halele* is what makes a man feel that he is not going to allow his inner life to be overly affected by good news or bad news. Since God is everywhere, we must have quiet confidence in Him. Too often people are artificially buoyed up by a casual compliment and feel inwardly devastated by the slightest word of criticism. *halele* means: *ale nore ale*, it is all the same to me. Since God is everywhere, a compliment cannot be greater than that good news, nor can a criticism do very much to destroy my serenity.

This is how the Besht, founder of Hasidism, reinterpreted, in a characteristically quaint Hasidic way, the verse from Psalms: *ale nore ale*, which literally means: "I have placed the Lord before me at all times." The Besht interpretation is: *ale*, it is all *ale* or the same to me, I shall remain unaffected internally by all the external conditions. The reason for this? -- *ale nore ale*, because God is before me at all times, and since He is everywhere, I cannot be shaken in my self-confidence. A truly

religious individual will keep his cool even when life blows hot and cold. He will keep on an even keel even when circumstances go up and down.

So our tradition taught us that in moments of supreme joy, we must be sober and break the glass at the wedding; when in the throes of grief, we must think of hope, and therefore when returning from the cemetery to the house of mourning the first meal consists of an egg, which represents the cyclical nature of life, symbolizing the fact that birth is followed by death, and that by rebirth and immortality.

The tradition tells the man who is on top: don't let it go to your head; and to the man at the bottom: don't let it affect your heart. It warns the man who is on the upswing and a success, that he should not be deluded by what might be called the psychology of "the right of eminent domain," namely, the feeling that his eminence gives him the right to his domain. And it reminds the man who has suffered defeat that he is created in the image of God and hence must never despair. To the successful man in the heights, of life, it issues a warning against excessive self-confidence:

לֹא תָתַן וְעָזָב אֶת הַיְּהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ בְּשׂוֹנְאוֹתֶיךָ וּבְמִצְרֵיךָ וּבְכָל מִצְרֵי יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ לֹא תָתַן וְעָזָב אֶת הַיְּהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ בְּשׂוֹנְאוֹתֶיךָ וּבְמִצְרֵיךָ וּבְכָל מִצְרֵי יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ

losing, suffering defeat, retreat. And to the man who is suffering such retreat and defeat, it says, simply: לֹא תָתַן וְעָזָב אֶת הַיְּהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ, don't give up.

The ideal state of man, according to Maimonides, is neither extreme: 2. 151 16 24 203 52 216 1

One should not indulge in jesting and mockery, nor be melancholy and mournful. What then? -- not I c/c. He should be cheerful!

What an easy prescription for the doctor of the soul to write! But where is the pharmacist who can fill this prescription?

The answer is that each of us is that pharmacist, each of us can achieve this ideal of spiritual and psychological equanimity which comes to us from the Patriarchs. For Judaism asks of us not apathy and placidity, but also not narcotic highs and psychedelic ecstasy. Rather, the way to *anem*, to cheerfulness, is: *anin* *anem*. That means, the quiet joy that comes from preoccupation with mitzvah, with doing something for others, or creative work, or spiritual growth, or constructive contributions.

Whoever is not busy enough with mitzvah, will never be happy. Show me a man or woman who has time on his hands, and I will show you a man or a woman ready to receive grief in his heart.

It is the mitzvah which brings us to *anah*. It is real achievement -- each at his own level -- that gives us not pointless fun not superficial kicks, but stabilizing and profound *anah* that will keep us growing higher and teach us to avoid the momentary allure of unreal ups and the doomsday but equally unreal dangers of devastating downs.

This is what the Rabbis meant when God said to Moses *וְיָחַדְתָּ אִתָּם* *וְיָחַדְתָּ אִתָּם* *וְיָחַדְתָּ אִתָּם*, Oh for those who are gone and cannot be replaced. What a pity that they are gone and irreplaceable! But it is also a challenge to us. Each of us can replace them in our own lives by learning from them the wisdom and the insights that they bequeathed to us. When we will have replaced them in this sense, it will be less of a pity, for they will not really be lost to us and to our children after us.