

"HOW MUCH IS THE WORLD WORTH?"

If I were a bit more frivolous, I would entitle this sermon
"How to be happy though frustrated."

All of Shir ha-Shirim is the story of happy frustration.
Indeed, the theme of disappointment breathes in every chapter,
every page, every passage of this consummately beautiful book which
our Rabbis consider "holy of holies." In this song between the
shepherd and the shepherdess, who symbolize God and Israel, we find
over and over again the frustration of aspirations, of dreams, of
hopes.

Thus, she pleads with him, "Draw me, we will run after thee"
(1:4) -- only to remind herself that "look not upon me that I am
swarthy, that the sun hath tanned me" (1:6), that she is uncomely
and not worthy of being eloped with.

Then the beloved suddenly appears, -- "Behold, he standeth
behind our wall, he looketh in through the windows, he peereth
through the lattice" (2:9); -- only to disappear into the night.

Or, again: "Hark! my beloved knocketh... my beloved put in
his hand by the hole of the door, and my heart was moved for him.
I rose up to open to my beloved... I opened to my beloved" (5:2,4,
5,6) -- but: "My beloved had turned away, and was gone" (5:6).

How frustrating is this tender and sweet relationship! "I
sought him but I could not find him, I called him; but he gave me
no answer" (5:6).

Yet, throughout the entire book, we find no sign of irate protest, no bemoaning of a cruel fate, no resentment or agitation. The disappointments seem maddening, threatening to drive one to distraction. But there is no trace of bitterness or self-pity or melancholy. In Shir ha-Shirim, despite all the frustration and disappointment, there is much wine and little whining; much song, little sighing; much love, little lowing; much elation, little ululation; much joy in life, even without a life of joy.

Indeed, it seems that Shir ha-Shirim closes on a note of joyous farewell which is really an affectionate embrace of frustration itself: "Make haste, my beloved, and be thou like to a gazelle or to a young hart upon the mountains of spices" (8:14) -- though my heart yearns for consummation and reunion, I bid you farewell as you spring and leap away like a young deer.

Now, this is no mean achievement. It is worth asking, therefore, how one can accomplish this minor miracle of being happy though frustrated. Of course, there are no cook-book recipes on how to do this in three easy lessons; but there are certain guide-lines that our tradition offers us.

First, there is a very prosaic and quite obvious point that must be kept in mind: frustration sometimes is the result of insufficient effort! You cannot make a fortune, find a wife, or build a career, without working or searching or studying. Although one may do all of these and still not succeed, yet without this effort

nothing can usually be accomplished.

King Solomon knew this secret. Thus, his shepherdess sings, "By night on my bed I sought him whom my soul loveth" (3:1) -- she dreams and pines away for her beloved -- "I sought him but I found him not" (ib.). But she knows that simply by lying in bed and thinking and wanting and desiring, her aim will not be achieved. Therefore, "I will rise now, and go about the city, in the streets and in the broad ways, I will seek him whom my soul loveth" (3:2). My point is not only that the best way to treat frustration is by avoiding it through succeeding in the first place, but that frequently effort itself is its greatest reward; the very endeavor even without fulfillment of success is satisfying. Frustration usually sours a person if, in addition to not having what he wants, he feels guilty within for not having tried hard enough. When we have tried our best, then frustration is manageable. So, try we must.

However, my next point stresses the opposite theme: don't push too hard! After we have reached the maximum of our effort, we reach a critical point beyond which there can be only heartache. When we have done all we can -- it is best to desist, and go on to something else. It is like putting water on the stove to boil; if you watch the water, every moment seems like a year. It is best to do something else meanwhile and then return to the water and discover that it is boiling, almost without realizing it. In Hebrew this is called hesah ha-daat, distraction or, preferably, creative distraction. It means to occupy yourself with something else for a

creative purpose, to achieve the kind of success which time itself
which alone
brings on and/effort/cannot. Thus, in the Song of Songs too, we
hear of the solution that time itself brings. The dark, dismal,
long, and loveless winter lingers on, and only afterwards does
Nature itself arouse the old love and kindle the old flame: "For,
lo, the winter is passed, the rain is over and gone; the flowers
appear on the earth, the time of singing is come, and the voice of
the turtle dove is heard in our land" (2:11, 12). In Yiddish there
is an old and wise proverb: "Az men vart--dervart men!" -- If you
wait long enough, you may find your dreams come true.

Hence, if our first answer was to try harder, our second is
that of creative distraction.

There is another point worth considering. Sometimes the
pain of frustration lies not so much in the disappointment itself
as in what other people will say about me. The frustration itself
might be manageable; what is unendurable is the sneering or the pity
of others to whom my failure is a mark of moral weakness or lack of
will. The answer to this must be hishtavut -- indifference, a holy
indifference! This comes from the Hebrew word shaveh, which means
"uniform," that it is all the same. If I know that I have done my
best, then it should make no difference to me whether people compli-
ment me or insult me, whether they praise me or revile me, whether
they criticize me or laud me. It should be shaveh, all the same.

The founder of Hassidism, the Besht, taught us this principle

of emotional distance, of hishtavut, by referring to the famous verse in the Psalms: shiviti ha-Shem le'negdi tamid, which literally means, "I have placed God before me at all times." Besht interprets this verse as follows: shiviti -- this comes from the word shaveh -- refers to hishtavut, I have learned the secret of hishtavut, holy indifference, of inuring myself to the comments and opinions of my fellow men and my neighbors. How do I accomplish this miracle of hishtavut? How do I achieve this protective armor of shiviti? The answer: ha-Shem le'negdi tamid, by having God before me at all times! As long as in truth, in the eyes of God, I know in my heart of hearts that I have tried my best, as long as my conscience is clear that I have done what is right, then it should make no difference to me what uninformed and sometimes malicious people think or say.

But creative distraction and holy indifference should not be mistaken for apathy, for simply giving up all ambition and goal and ideals. Were it so, we would never recommend, as a first point, activity and effort.

The combination of both attitudes, of involvement and indifference, should give us an awareness of the inevitability of some frustration in all of life. If our ideas are so simple that they are easily obtainable, then indeed we will experience no frustration; but such ideas are hardly worth having in the first place. If our goals are impossibly high, then we will fail to strive because of

ready-made despair. If they are low enough to make us try, and high enough to keep us trying -- low enough to ensure our aspiration and high enough to assure us inspiration -- then, despite the inevitable frustration, they will prove to be liveable and serviceable ideals -- and we shall be happy despite the frustrations.

Let me put it another way. A person has certain ambitions: wealth, luxury, status, professional achievement, reputation, a creative contribution in writing a book or making a discovery or painting a picture, idealistic accomplishments. He is, as we have said, bound to encounter some degree of failure and frustration. How can we avoid becoming miserable as a result?

The answer is, primarily through perspective -- by not taking too seriously his ambition, the whole enterprise, himself -- in fact, the whole world!

There are two opposite views towards this world as such. To simplify the matter, let us refer to them as the Oriental and the Western views.

In the Oriental view, that of the ancient Gnostics and the Eastern Mystics, this world, with all its material dimensions, should be negated. The Oriental is other-worldly, he has nothing but contempt for this-world's values, goals, and demands. He seeks to flee from it, considers it evil, he holds that all worldly ambition is a diabolical illusion to ensnare the soul.

Western man -- the modern materialist, the positivist, in

fact, the whole modern temper -- takes the reverse attitude: it takes this-world too seriously. It believes that this is all there is, that nothing else counts.

For the Oriental, the whole world is nothing, and all ambitions are wrong. For the Westerner, there is nothing else but this world, and our ambitions are all we have to live for.

The Jew takes exception to both extremes. He maintains that there are two worlds, the olam ha-zeh (this world) and olam ha-ba (the world-to-come). Each plays a role of significance within its own context. To the Oriental, Judaism says: this too is God's creation; this world is the scene of Torah and Halakhah, and therefore should not be ignored or denigrated. And to Western man Judaism says: this imperfect, disintegrating, malicious alma de'peruda, world of disunity, is not the whole story. There is another realm -- non-physical, spiritual, ideal, holy -- and it is as real or more real than this world. That is the olam ha-emet, the world of ideal truth.

The Yalkut expresses this in an unusual way. As you know, the Name of God consists of four letters, the Tetragrammaton. Yet, in the most popular expression of praise in the Bible, we only use the first two letters of these four: the expression Hallelu-yah, "Praise Yah." Why so?

In response, the Yalkut quotes the statement of R. Jeremiah b. Elazar: ein ha-alom kedai le'hallel be'khol ha-Shem ela be'hetzyo,

this world is not worth more than half the Name of God, it is not worthy enough to offer praise for all four letters of God's Name, but only for the first two, for thus is it written in the Psalms: kol ha-neshama tehallel yah, "Let every soul praise Yah."

Indeed, this world is only half the story. The world is not worthless -- but it is not all. Only two letters of God's Name -- that is what the world is worth; not more, not less.

So then, it is worth entertaining great ambitions and goals. But it is not worth fretting over failure, brooding over frustration, writhing in resentment over our inability to achieve success. For there is a God who transcends the world; and man, created in His image, transcends his very own ambitions which, in the light of eternity, reduce to the trivial, the petty, the picayune.

It is true that Shir ha-Shirim is a story not of frustrated worldly ambition, but of a divine frustration! For it is a story of the love of God, the search and the quest for communion with Him -- and this is a quest which is doomed to fail, for the love must forever remain unrequited.

But if this great love leads to the experience of great frustration -- and yet this great frustration can leave in its trail not rage and resentment and anger, but joy and vigor and the resolve to try again -- then most certainly all lesser ambitions, the kind that motivate most human beings, should not break our morale and wreck havoc with our equanimity when we fail to achieve them.

For a people inspired by God know that the whole world is not the whole story. This world is not everything, yet it is something worth working for and in.

With this kind of religious perspective, we can pursue our worldly ways actively, yet with creative distraction and holy indifference. Then, we can weather the storms of frustration, and emerge happy nonetheless.

Indeed, we can then proclaim that King David: kol ha-neshama tehallel yah -- let every human being praise the Lord -- even if only half His Name -- with all his might and all his soul.