

"SUFFERING BY COMPARISON"

Making comparisons between people is a popular sport, one in which most of us indulge most of the time. Yet we all know that making such comparisons is usually invidious. Cervantes called all comparisons "odious." Shakespeare thought they were "odorous." Both are right. We have no business making such relative evaluations.

All of us recognize, for instance, how wrong it is to make comparisons between children. We rightly object when teachers foolishly ask younger siblings of former students if they are as good or as bright or as naughty as their older brothers or sisters. We ourselves sometimes take leave of our reason and make such comparisons, only to sow enmity in our own families. We should have learned from our Father Jacob, who compared Joseph favorably to his other children, only to discover that this comparing led to favoritism and rivalry. The Rabbis put it this way:

בשביל משקל שני סלעים חילת שְׁהוּסִיף יַעֲקֹב לְיוֹסֵף
מִשְׁאֵר אַחִיךָ נִתְגַּלְגַּל הַדָּבָר וַיִּדְּרוּ אֲבוֹתֵינוּ לַמַּצְרִים

"Because of two gelaim weight of fine wool that Jacob gave to Joseph more than to his brothers, the whole story came about whereby our ancestors went down into Egypt" for the long and bitter exile.

I usually warn people about to remarry to make every effort to avoid comparing and contrasting their new with their old spouses. Of course it is impossible to avoid this altogether. But one must try very hard indeed to judge every person on his or her own merits. And whatever one may do mentally, never should one utter a word of comparison, for better or for worse!

It is rather surprising, therefore, to find that the Sages constantly indulged in such comparing and contrasting. When we read the Midrash about the great biblical personalities, we find that the Rabbis are constantly measuring one against the other. Thus (see Duet. R., Berkahah, 11:3) we find the following comparisons:

Abraham is greater than Lot. Lot, who was a lesser man, beheld angels and recognized them as angels. Abraham, however, was a greater man, and so to him the angels appeared as merely people.

Noah and Moses are compared. Noah says to Moses
אֲנִי גָדוֹל מִמֶּךָ שְׁנִי צִלְתִּי מַדּוּר הַמָּבּוּל
"I am greater than you, because I was saved from the generation of the flood."

To this Moses responds, **אני נתעליתי יותר ממך**, "I am more exalted than you," because you only saved yourself, whereas I saved myself and also the people of my generation.

Noah comes out second best to Abraham too. Abraham, who was of greater spiritual stature, went "before" the Lord, whereas Noah's spiritual prowess was weaker, "walked with God."

The most intriguing contest is between Moses and Abraham. The Midrash decides that Moses was greater, because Abraham offered hospitality only in the settled areas, whereas Moses did so even in the desert!

Now, why all these comparisons?

Because, I believe, even if one is bound to suffer by comparison, the very act of such comparing yields didactic and educational results. It refines for us the kind of model we ought to set for ourselves. It sharpens our focus onto the kind of person we ought to become and the sort of qualities we ought to strive to attain. It reminds us that, right or wrong, we are always being compared to others, and may often be found wanting. Even God, as it were, judges us in comparison to our peers. (Charlie Brown, the cartoon character whom many regard as the philosopher of the younger generation, once commented that, "God marks on a curve"....)

Hence, comparisons may be made not for purposes of self-gratulation, not only as a "put-down" of others, not as a way of going on an "ego-trip" -- but in order to remind ourselves how much we can yet do, to stimulate and inspire us to growth and self-development.

What, then, are some of the non-odious, non-odorous, non-invidious comparisons that we ought to make -- though we may suffer some discomfort from the process?

First, let us compare Jews and Goyyim. I think I am fairly philo-Semitic. Yet, sometimes, I think we suffer by such comparison. Take the specific case of Israel and the United States of America. Permit me to quote to you several sentences in English translation of an article by Shlomo Nakdimon, a writer for Maariv, and not particularly known for his excess of religious zeal. He writes as follows:

Sometimes one cannot fail to be astonished at the fact that we, the people of the Bible, are estranged from the recognition of the source

and roots of our nationhood.

This thought arose in my mind when I listened to the inaugural address of Gerald Ford, the 38th President of the USA. At the end of his impressive remarks, he uttered the words, "may God help me."

... On American coins you will find the words, "in God we trust." However, for us, the Jewish people, who first brought about the enthronement of the Deity, He is almost non-existent. It seems almost as if we are ashamed to indicate that we are linked to Him.

The United States is not a theocratic country. Nevertheless it seeks opportunities to stress its relationship between man and its Creator.

...In Israel, however, when we open the Knesset, when we swear in a President, a Prime Minister, cabinet or Knesset members, we do not relate to the Deity. It was only with great reluctance that the non-religious groups agreed to include the words "Rock of Israel" in the State's Declaration of Independence, as a reference to a Supreme Being.

Quite frankly, the comparison hurts.

Next, let us compare Jews with Arabs. This has been a month of a great deal of diplomatic activity and travelling. The American Secretary of State was in Egypt, and the Israeli Prime Minister was in Washington. On October 10th or 11th, Mr. Kissinger went to meet with President Sadat. Sadat kept the Secretary of State of the most powerful country of the world cooling his heels during the daytime, and would not meet with him until after nightfall, because he did not want to violate the Islamic holy day of Ramadan. But when the Prime Minister of Israel came to America, and was told that the White House would be glad to offer him a kosher meal, he declined it! What a painful and humiliating comparison! Is this the "national pride" that Zionism promised us as a result of the founding of a Jewish state?

Now, let us compare Jews with Jews. We American Jews are rightly proud of our great charitableness. If nothing else, at least we have made history with our contributions to the UJA. So, let us compare ourselves to another Jewish community, one that is much smaller in size, South Africa. The Yom Kippur War stimulated a campaign by the five million Jews of the United States, who together pledged 750 million dollars, averaging \$150 per capita, for the UJA. In South Africa, 120 thousand Jews, who form the Jewish community there, raised 58 million dollars -- an average of \$480 per capita!

Or, compare American Jews with Russian Jews, other than the contrast between our relaxed attitude toward Israel and the obvious heroism of Russian Jews who are defying the might of the Communist empire in order to emigrate to Israel -- and most of them do emigrate to Israel and stay there.

In America, several weeks ago, a friend of mine uttered a contemptuous comment about New York Jews who are indelicate enough to carry the lulav and etrog in the street. The remark angered me greatly, because I have just read about Yosef Mendelovitch, internal¹¹¹ in slave labor camp in Vladmire who, despite the fact that he was with high blood pressure, risked extra punishment by refusing to appear with his kippah. Some comparison!

The Brith-Milah Board of New York informs us that circumcision is vanishing amongst non-Orthodox Jews in New York, who resort to physicians rather than to mohalim, and for whom circumcision has become a surgical procedure rather than a profoundly important religious ceremony. Compare that to Uri Wadka, who became religious in the course of agitating for emigration, and who achieved a degree of fame -- or notoriety, if you are a Soviet Communist -- in the slave labor camp at Perm, when he circumcized himself with crude instruments, and was denied medical attention for his efforts.

The same, above-mentioned Mendelovitch and Wadka, plus a man called Garilius, were together in a Soviet maximum labor camp, and were punished with solitary confinement. The reason was that they decided to finish their back-breaking weekly quota of work in one day less during the week so that they could rest on Shabbat. When it was denied to them, they went on a strike -- in a Russian slave-labor camp! -- and ended up in solitary confinement in prison. The comparison: I am told that there are even Orthodox Jews, or at least Jews who belong to Orthodox synagogues, who feel that they cannot take off Yom Tov, especially the second day of Yom Tov... What an embarrassment!

Such are the kinds of comparisons that occur to me. I confess that I suffer, we suffer, from them. Yet, such suffering

by comparison may be the stimulus we need to rouse us from our complacency, to make us aware of the goals that it is within our power to attain.

But perhaps more important than comparing oneself to others, is what Walter Scott advised, "comparing what thou art with what thou mightst have been." That is the true test -- measuring our reality against our potential.

Indeed, this is probably the meaning of one particularly striking comparison in the Midrash from which we quoted above. That is the comparison of Adam to Moses. In it, in a magnificent leap over the generations, Adam says to Moses that, "I am greater than you are, because I was created in the **צֶלֶם אֱלֹהִים** (image of God). Moses responds that no, I am greater, because you lost your **כְּבוֹד** (dignity) by sinning, whereas I was given **נֹרָא הַפָּנִים** (a special glow or halo) which I kept to the very end, to the very day of my death.

Here, I believe, we find not the comparison of one against the other, but each man measured against himself. Take Adam. Look at how he began. He had enormous promise; he was created in the very image of God. And yet, he disappointed himself. Compared to what Adam might have been, Adam was a failure.

Moses was born with great potential and he fulfilled it. Compare to what he might have been -- that, indeed, he was. He expressed all his talents and his abilities.

So, ultimately, the most important comparison, the one that may cause us to suffer most, but the one which is most creative, is each man against himself.

Perhaps if we compare what we might have been to what we are, we will assure that in the future we will be more than we would otherwise have become.