

"RISING EXPECTATIONS"

The widespread social, economic, and cultural revolutions of our times can be traced, in large part, to the rising expectations of both individuals and large segments of our society. Our highly developed mass communications, such as television and the press, have been especially instrumental in allowing various deprived groups to see how the in-groups live -- and they want the same for themselves. The more they take the more they want, and the more they receive the more they expect. The disadvantaged expect advantages, the poor want wealth, the oppressed strive for liberation.

To a very large extent, this is a positive and welcome development. It has helped point to the moral inequities in our environment, and has spurred great equality and a fairer distribution of the goods and the privileges of the world.

However, rising expectations, if unchecked, can also prove destructive, both to the individual groups and to society as a whole. We may identify three particular negative consequences of rising expectations: psychological, political, and moral.

Psychologically, the constantly rising expectations produce a tendency to expect more than can realistically be achieved or delivered. And when such expectations are unmet, they lead to a feeling of frustration, which in turn leads to destruction and chaos.

I believe that in our highly mobile society, general rising expectations in all areas of life have led to the general malaise that most moderns feel, this formless and vague anxiety that we are not getting enough out of life, that somehow we have not yet drained the cup of pleasures, that there are sensations which we have not felt and experienced. And so, no matter how much we have, we are unhappy because we feel we ought to have more, that something is missing.

Perhaps the most prominent example of this psychological difficulty is marriage. Divorce is often justifiable. Indeed, if modern society has made couples feel they ought to get more out of marriage, it is a welcome development -- even if it leads to divorce by encouraging people, who otherwise would be trapped all their lives in long and sustained misery, to find a way out and perhaps to happiness. Yet, very often, divorce is the result of unrealistic expectations and demands that the couple makes on each other and on marriage as such. Even without spelling it out just in this fashion -- doing that often reveals its absurdity -- so many moderns seem to enter marriage with the belief and the demand that life prove

a string of unrelieved party-going, a uniform experience of "happiness." We expect love and pleasure in ever increasing intensity. And so we are unrealistic, we forget that love cannot be uniform, that it is a very delicate thing that is often the expression of a whole person's existence and the hidden streams of his or her soul, that sometimes it is strong and sometimes it is faint, and that even two people who are not necessarily experiencing romantic love for each other can be civilized and build a decent home for themselves and their families. More important, in our wide open society with all its plain talk and sophistication and lack of inhibition, our devastating frankness about the most intimate aspects of marriage has had a deleterious effect on marriage. Husbands and wives make not only outrageous psychological, but extravagant and grotesque physical demands of each other. Such totally unrealistic and unreasonable expectations often lead straight to the breakup of marriage, with children as the main victims.

The second is a political problem: the rising expectations of one group are usually in conflict with those of other groups. A stable, equitable society cannot possibly satisfy everyone's constantly rising expectations.

For example, the blacks demand that the neglect of their just cause for so many centuries be compensated for by very quick educational progress in the course of one generation. And from their point of view, they are right. The Jews, however, believe that they have worked very hard and very strenuously for their hard-earned positions on the basis of merit, and they have no intention of becoming the sacrificial lambs for the sins of all the rest of white society. And from their point of view, they are right. But both these expectations are in conflict, and at least one party cannot have all these expectations fulfilled. It is like the story of the rabbi who heard the arguments of the husband and of the wife, and told to each, "You are right." Then, when his own wife who was listening in from the kitchen, said to him, "But how can they both be right?," he said to her: "And you are right too!"

Or, to take another example which has forcefully come to our attention: the poor demand better housing for themselves in a more stable and a higher class community in order to give their children a better chance. And they are right. The community itself, however, has a survival instinct, and refuses to accept a lower class element with all its criminal overtones which will cause this community, like so many others before it, to disintegrate. And they are right. So politically, we have a conflict of expectations.

Both these elements, the psychological and the political consequences of rising expectations, are exemplified in the Purim

story. You recall that Vashti was dethroned because of her negative response to Ahaseuerus' royal command, and she certainly was right. In his drunken fit, and in his empty boasting, he demanded that the queen appear before him and his royal court in nothing but her *תכאורה*, her royal crown. She refused.

There is not much more we know from the text of the Book of Esther. But here Jewish legend and tradition fill in the gap in the megillah story. What they reveal is the problem of rising expectations -- psychologically and politically. Apparently, the conflict turned largely on the matter we would call in Hebrew and Yiddish *גאון*, nobility of ancestry. Vashti was the daughter of Belshazar and the granddaughter of Nebuchadnezzar, the great Emperors of Assyria, whereas Ahaseuerus was a commoner who had usurped the throne. And so, the conflict: Vashti was anxious to demonstrate her superiority over the commoner who was her husband, and Ahaseuerus was equally eager to manifest his superiority even over the scion of the emperor's family.

Hence, when Ahaseuerus made his demand upon Vashti -- which now seems to be psychologically and politically motivated as well as the result of his drunkenness and boasting -- her response was not merely negative, but arrogant. She sent a messenger to the King calling him a drunkard and a fool, reminding him that if her father and grandfather had been alive, they would never have consented to her marriage to a man who cannot hold his liquor and who, anyway, was a consummate idiot.

Further, there was a subtle political element. Vashti had her own power-play and expectations. She was anti-Jewish and had thwarted the attempt to rebuild the Temple. Also, in order to demonstrate the subjugation of the Jews in her realm, she forced her Jewish female subjects to work on Shabbat in a state of humiliation. (So, she herself was punished in kind: on the seventh day of the royal party she was commanded to submit to the same humiliation by Ahaseuerus.) From later remarks, it was obvious that she was thinking not only of defending women's rights, but of the domination of the kingdom by herself and all other women. Truly, this was a case of "sexual politics" in antiquity.

And so, Vashti's rising expectations of her own powers were countered by Ahaseuerus' escalation in his move to exercise his power. Hence, his remarkably stupid legal decree that *היה זה המלך*, that every husband is "boss" in the family, and *היה זה המלך*, by royal decree, the law of the land now forced all women to love their husbands...!

The rising expectations of each thus resulted in a comical and

absurd, yet fateful, conflict between the primitive forces of what now would be known as Women's Liberation against Male Chauvinism.

In addition to these two elements, there is a third negative consequence to rising expectations, the moral one. Unrestrained expectations lead to a "perfectionism of the appetites," to the feeling that if everything I want is not satisfied, then life is not worth living, and no stone must be left unturned in my quest for the perfection of my wants. Such an attitude can lead a man to his downfall when any of his expectations remain unfulfilled in the slightest way.

There is a remarkable passage in the Talmud: ^{האם ידוע} How do we know Haman is mentioned in the Torah? And the answer the Talmud gives is a verse in Genesis:

^{אדם ואישה} After Adam and Eve have eaten of the forbidden fruit of the Tree of Knowledge, God said to Adam: "Did you eat from the tree...?" The first word in this accusation is ha-min, which, in a play on words, sounds like Haman. Thus we know of Haman from this verse.

Now, this is a remarkably peculiar passage. Unless it is an example of Talmudic humor, which it may be in some way but certainly not entirely, why does the Talmud have to seek a source for Haman in the Torah? Is not the Book of Esther part of the Torah? Furthermore, does this rather hilarious pun -- Hamin-Haman -- really solve the problem?

The answer -- and it is remarkably perspicacious insight -- was offered by the late Sage of Kletsk and then Lakewood, Rabbi Aaron Kotler ^{רבי}. The Talmud, he tells us, is pointing to a remarkable similarity between Haman and Adam in their approaches to life. (We might add that the attribution to Adam means that it is a universal quality of man.) Both Adam and Haman are guilty of partially unfulfilled rising expectations, causing them to insist that they must get everything, without exception.

Thus, Adam in the Garden of Eden would seem to have had everything a man could want: an inexhaustible food supply, the loveliness of Paradise, a wife, rivers and trees and mountains gold and silver, everything -- except for one little tree the fruit of which is forbidden to him. And that, Adam cannot abide; it grows and gnaws in his imagination until it tempts him and Eve. Everything he has means nothing, it is only that one tree which he must have. Hence, his expulsion from Paradise.

Haman goes through a similar process. He has everything that

a politician can want: power, glory, the envy of his colleagues and subordinates, riches and a large household. He is a man who effectively runs the entire Persian Empire, because the King is, after all, a fool. Only one little thing is denied Haman: a solitary Jew outside the Court refuses to bow to him. This proves to be such a maddening factor to Haman that he proposes a plan for genocide and ultimately is ruined and executed because of it.

Each of them is, therefore, undone by rising expectations.

It is instructive to use a quasi-Freudian approach to analyze, in a similar manner, the differences between Jacob and Esau in their famous confrontation. When they meet, they each exchange greetings with the other. Jacob says *כי ידוע*, I have everything. Esau says *כי ידוע*, I have much. Jacob demonstrates that whatever he has is sufficient for him, he seeks nothing more. Esau shows that despite his 400 men and all his wealth -- there are always more things that he wants, he is never satisfied. His expectations rise without end.

So that rising expectations, while certainly justifiable and necessary for constituting a moral and fair and equitable society, entail dangers in the realms of psychology and politics and morality.

Perhaps the most moral and Jewish approach to rising expectations, both of the Purim epoch and our own, should lead us to a modification of this theme. Rising expectations, yes -- but not expectations of others; rather, of ourselves.

Selfish Man asks, what has the world done for me lately? What is life going to give me? Moral Man asks, what have I done for the world? What have I contributed to life?

Immature Man imposes his rising expectations on others: his wife, his family, his society. Mature Man subjects not others but himself to the critique of rising expectations: what more can I give to the world, to family, to children, to my people, to humanity and God and Torah? In what way, he constantly asks himself, have I made the world a better place to live in than the state in which I found it when I entered it?

No wonder that, chronologically and in order of value, the last mitzvah of Purim is the Seudah, to eat and drink. But prior to that come the commandments of giving *וְשָׁמַח בְּאִתּוֹ*, gifts to friends and charity to the poor. And, according to some Talmudists (the Rama as opposed to *ב"ר ירמיה*) the commandment

of giving gifts (*נתינת חסד*) is fulfilled as long as I give, even if my friend refuses to receive the gift!

To give rather than to receive, to turn my rising expectations on myself rather than on others -- that is the teaching of Purim. Haman fell because he always demanded of others to satisfy him and his wants and his expectations. Mordecai succeeded because he devoted his life not to himself and his appetites, but to his niece and then to his people and to his God.

And on this note does the great megillah close.
כי אברהם היה צדיק ויחסידיהו, Mordecai was a Jew in that he was great not for himself, but for other Jews, other people, selflessly. *אברהם ראה את צדקתו*. He sought the welfare not of himself and his own glory, but of his people. *אברהם ראה את צדקתו*, he sought peace for his children and his posterity after him.