

HOPELESSNESS BREEDS HELPLESSNESS

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I. Israel in Egypt

As the story of the redemption of Israel from Egypt unfolds, God encourages the oppressed slaves with an impressive historical record and an emphatic promise for the future.

"And God spoke to Moses and said: 'I am the Lord. I appeared to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob as E-l Sha-dai. I established my covenant with them to give them the land of Canaan . . . I have now heard the cries of the Israelites . . . Say, therefore to the Children of Israel: . . . I shall *free* you from the burdens of Egypt and *deliver* you from their bondage. I shall *redeem* you . . . and I shall *take* you to be my People and I will be your God . . . and I shall *bring* you to the land which I swore to give to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and I will give it to you for a possession, I am the Lord.'"²

The history and the promise — particularly the five verbs of redemption which account for our five cups of wine at the Seder (four plus Elijah's) — should have been a great source of confidence and encouragement to the bedraggled slaves. Strangely, however, the reaction is negative.

"And Moses spoke these words to the Children of Israel but they would not listen *mi-kotzer ru'ach u'me-avoda kasha*, because of a shortness of spirit stemming from their oppressive burdens."³

Clearly the Israelites suffered from a lack of faith—despair, if you will — occasioned by their intolerable, overwhelming crisis. They heard God's promises but they were not tuned in to the message of redemption. Their depression was too great.

Moreover, their depression was contagious. When God told Moses to tell Pharaoh to let his people go, Moses, who had previously undertaken this mission — albeit somewhat reluctantly — now demonstrates a total loss of confidence: "And Moses spoke to God saying: 'Behold the Israelites would not listen to me; how then should Pharaoh heed me—and I have impeded speech!'"⁴

All the old doubts which had been laid aside by God well up in Moses' mind. We can see them clearly in the Bible's simple allusion to the impeded speech, a problem which had previously been solved but which now, revived by the sickness of despair and depression, appears insurmountable.

God's reaction is swift and decisive. He does not engage in debate. He does not try to reassure the doubters, to embolden the timorous, to relieve the depressed. None of this will be effective. He simply orders Moses and Aaron to get on with the task of redemption, willy nilly.

"And God spoke to Moses and Aaron, '*vay'tzavaim*,' and He commanded them to the Israelites and to Pharaoh, King of Egypt, to take out the Israelites from the land of Egypt."⁵

II. Today's Despair

We understand this dialogue painfully well today. In fact, we are reliving the dialogue. God, history and Jewish leaders are calling upon us to exert the fullest effort for our own redemption. But "they could not listen to Moses because of shortness of spirit stemming from their oppressive burdens."

The burdens are real ones, just as they were in Egypt.

1. The Arab oil weapon has effectively — at least in the short run — changed the geopolitical map of the world, posing a terrible threat to Israel.

2. Israel's economic plight is far more serious than her military situation and much harder to correct. The consequences in terms of morale, aliyah, yeridah and even the viability of the state ought not to be underestimated.

3. The world is facing a possible world-wide depression which poses grave problems for Israel and for world Jewry.

4. American support for Israel, which in the light of the Yom Kippur War has become indispensable, is now uncertain. The whims and vagaries of a Kissinger diplomacy, complicated by Russian truculence, Arab threats and an unstable American public opinion, are difficult to assess at present and impossible to predict in the future.

5. Complicating all of these problems — and contributing to their deepening and proliferating — is the disappointingly weak leadership that exists in the western world today. More than ever before we live in a *makom she-ein ish*, a place where there is no personality of strength.

It is not surprising, in view of all this, that we cannot listen to the voice of redemption in our time. We are realistically burdened by *avoda kasha*, oppressive problems. The consequent *kotzer ru'ach* — shortness of spirit, lack of faith, feeling of hopelessness, mood of depression — is quite understandable.

III. We Dare Not Despair

Understandable, but not acceptable!

First, despair cannot be tolerated because it is a crippling malady. The feeling of impending doom tends to be self-fulfilling. People who fear the worst tend to invite the worst. Heads that are bowed in fear cannot scan the horizons for new possibilities. Defeatism does not breed energy and triumph. Ultimately, helplessness leads to hopelessness.⁶

But there is a second, more compelling reason why we must not give in to despair. Despair is an unacceptable quality for the Jew. It contradicts everything in which we believe and every moment of history that we have experienced. Despair and Jewish existence are mutually

exclusive. If our survival has taught us anything it is that we *must* not despair and we *need* not despair.

Our existence is not rational. It cannot be explained on rational grounds. By the laws of historical causation we have no reason to be here today in America or in Israel. We should long ago have been engulfed by a wave of history in which our Jewish identity and heritage would have been completely submerged.

That we are here is a testimony to a Divine Hand that influences the course of events. That we are here is evidence that the accidents of history are not accidents but rather the result of a Higher plan.

So, why should we despair? Because we have problems? Serious problems? Are our problems greater than those faced by Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai who experienced the destruction of Jerusalem? Did he despair?

Are our problems more oppressive than those faced by the scholars of Mainz and Worms who were annihilated in the first Crusade in 1096 but whose Talmudic interpretations we study through Rashi today? Did Rashi despair? No, he wrote his notebooks because he knew that scholars would study them long after the barbaric crusaders were forgotten.

Are our problems more overwhelming than those of the Jews in Spain who were persecuted, tortured and finally expelled in 1492? Did they despair? Their descendants are now in America in large numbers, in an America that was discovered by "accident" in that same year, 1492. It was an "accident" which guaranteed the safety of three million Jews from Eastern Europe. It was an "accident" that provided the political and economic base upon which the State of Israel could be built and sustained.

Jewish history is filled with such "accidents" which are the most eloquent arguments against our despair today. In October of 1894 the lives of two assimilated Jews crossed: Alfred Dreyfus and Theodor Herzl. Out of that "accident" was born the political movement called Zionism. Two years ago the granddaughter of Alfred Dreyfus arrived in Israel as a new *oleh*.

"Behold the guardian of Israel does not slumber or sleep."⁷ As long as He does not sleep, we have no need — or right — to despair.

IV. They Did Not Despair — How Can We?

Our rational response today *could* be despair, but the Jew has never been rational about survival. Our his-

tory — and, therefore, our future — can only be understood in mystical terms. And our faith has been mystical too!

"If I forget thee O' Jerusalem . . ." was recited not by a resident of Me'ah She'arim but by Jews who had seen their land and Temple destroyed, who had been carried into exile and who sat down by the waters of Babylon and wept. They wept but they did not despair. And because they did not despair there is a Jewish State today.

Sisu v'simchu b'Simchat Torah — "Be joyous and happy on Simchat Torah" has been sung by Jews for centuries. It was most poignantly sung by an old rabbi in the barracks of a German concentration camp who urged his fellow prisoners to dance with him. Lacking a Sefer Torah, the old sage picked up a little child and held him in his arms, dancing with joy on Simchat Torah, even as Zahal soldiers danced around their tanks in the Sinai in the midst of the Yom Kippur war.

How dare we despair? How dare we allow depression to overwhelm us when only thirty years ago our brothers and sisters marched to the gas chambers of Auschwitz chanting *Ani Ma'amin*, I believe! Even if the Messiah tarries, I shall wait! I shall not despair!

V. "Yidden: Zeit Zich Nisht Meya'esh"

The great Hassidic Master, Rabbi Nachman of Bratzlav, epitomized perhaps more than any other single Jew the refusal to be depressed in the face of the cruel realities of Jewish existence. He was once receiving a series of reports from his Hassidim about pogroms, the burning of synagogues and Torah Scrolls and the killing of Jewish women and children. He sat silently for a long time. And then he looked at his Hassidim and said to them kindly, sympathetically but most commandingly: "Jews; do not despair!"

That directive, in its Yiddish formulation, was inscribed over the door of the Bratzlover Shtetle in the Warsaw Ghetto as the terrible reality of the annihilation of Polish Jewry unfolded. "Jews, do not despair!"

Why? Because it was not rational to despair in Bratzlav or in Warsaw? No! It *was* rational to despair;

but it *was not* and *is not* Jewish to despair. We are not allowed to submit to *ye'ush*. Our history tells us this. Our survival affirms this. Our faith demands this.

The Talmud records several questions which will be posed to every Jew when he is ultimately judged.⁸

Did you conduct your business affairs honestly?

Did you study Torah regularly?

Did you bring forth children?

And, above all, *Tzipita li-'y'shu'a* — did you expect the fulfillment of the prophetic promise of God's help and man's redemption?

Such faith is required of every Jew, not because it is natural but simply because Jewish life demands it and deserves it.

It is because of this repudiation of despair as an ingredient in the life of a Jew, that God pays no heed to the fright or hopelessness of the Israelites in Egypt. He has no patience for their shortness of spirit stemming from their oppressive burdens.

"And God spoke to Moses and Aaron—*Vay'tzavaim* — and *commanded* them . . . to deliver the Israelites from the Land of Egypt."

God's command to us is the same today. Let us heed that command. Let us banish despair. Let us dispel the gloom. And let us see speedily the fulfillment of God's promises to Israel. Amen.

¹ I am indebted to my friend and mentor, Elie Wiesel, whose Louis A. Pincus Memorial Lecture, "Against Despair" (UJA National Conference, December 8, 1973, available on tape) inspired this sermon and provided both insight and illustrative material for its theme.

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² Exodus 6:2-8.

³ *ibid.* 9

⁴ *ibid.* 12

⁵ *ibid.* 13

⁶ cf. Norman Cousins, editorial. *Saturday Review*, Dec. 14, 1974, p. 4.

⁷ Psalms 121:4

⁸ Shabbat 31a, *vid.* Rashi *ad locum*

