Thoughts for the Seventh Day of Pessah, and for Parashat Shemini

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By
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Q. What is the text of an Emergency Alert sent out by a Jewish Organization?
A. Start worrying! Details to follow.

This joke reflects an ongoing reality of Jewish life. There always seems to be something to worry about, some crisis that is about to erupt, some threat to our survival. Even when we don't yet know the details, we are called upon to get into the worrying mode.

The late Professor Simon Rawidowicz wrote a fascinating essay which he entitled: "Israel--the Ever-Dying People." He points out that in each generation, going back many centuries, Jews thought that Jewish history was coming to an end. They worried about destruction at the hand of vicious enemies; they worried about exiles and expulsions; they worried about spiritual decline; they worried about assimilation. It seems that since the time of Abraham, we've been worrying about our imminent demise. Although we have been "ever-dying", Professor Rawidowicz reminds us that after 3500 years we are still alive!

Perhaps our very awareness of the fragility of our existence has given us an added tenacity to survive, to find ways of solving problems. The 19th century Rabbi Israel Salanter once quipped: "When people come to a wall that they can't go through, they stop. When Jews come to a wall that they can't go through--they go through."

The Torah reading on the Seventh Day of Pessah includes the dramatic episode of the Israelites crossing the Red Sea. When they reached the shore of the sea, they faced an existential crisis. Behind them, the Egyptian troops were coming to destroy them. In front of them was the Red Sea. They were trapped, with no obvious solution to their dilemma.

The Midrash tells of various reactions among the Israelites as they pondered their imminent destruction. Some said: we should have stayed in Egypt! Others said: the situation is hopeless; we and our families will perish. Woe unto us.

The common denominator of these approaches is that they led to psychological and emotional paralysis. Crying over what they could have done or should have done did not address their current crisis; it stifled their ability to cope. Declaring the situation to be hopeless led to despair. They came to a wall--and they stopped.

The Midrash tells that Nahshon ben Aminadav, head of the tribe of Judah, walked into the Red Sea. When the water reached his neck, then the sea miraculously split--and the Israelites were saved. Nahshon is described as a great hero because he took things into his own hands; he acted decisively; he risked his own life.

Yet Nahshon’s heroism was not the result of a sudden burst of desperation. Rather, we can imagine that Nahshon deliberated carefully before entering the sea. He might have thought: God performed so many miracles for us in Egypt; God obviously has unlimited power; if God wanted us to be liberated from Egyptian servitude and to be brought into the Promised Land, surely God can and will make good on His promises to us. Armed with this reasoning, Nahshon entered the Red Sea. He was confident God would redeem His people. Nahshon came to a wall--and he went through; and he brought the rest of the people through as well.

When we receive Emergency Alerts from Jewish organizations telling us to start worrying because we are facing enormous threats, we should worry. But we should worry in the right way. Worrying that stems from regret that we should have or could have done things differently--such worrying is negative and self-defeating. The past is over, and we need to confront the crisis as it faces us now. We don’t have the option of returning to the past to undo decisions. (Hopefully, we can learn from these past decisions when we get through the current crisis, and contemplate how to make future decisions.) Likewise, it is not productive to sink into self-pity and passive despair. Indeed, despair feeds on itself and infects others with a spirit of helplessness.

We should worry like Nahshon worried. We should not minimize the dangers and the risks; but we should deliberate on what is at stake and how we can overcome the difficulty. We should have confidence that if God has brought us this far, He will keep His promises to us and bring us ultimate redemption. We should be ready to act decisively, to think "out of the box", to maintain forward momentum.

THE SOUNDS OF SILENCE…AND SCREAMS, THOUGHTS FOR PARASHAT SHEMINI

by Rabbi Marc D. Angel

Aaron's sons Nadav and Avihu brought a "strange fire" to the altar and were immediately stricken as Divine punishment for their sacrilege. Upon learning of the tragic deaths of his sons, Aaron must surely have been horrified. Yet, the Torah reports: Vayidom Aharon, and Aaron remained silent.

Silent? How was he able to remain silent at such a moment? We would have expected an emotional outburst, a cry of grief…anything but stone silence.

Perhaps we can gain deeper insight by focusing on the word "Vayidom," and he was silent. This word is related to "dam," blood. What the verse may be saying is that while Aaron remained silent on the outside, his blood was raging with emotion inside of him. Vayidom: and Aaron was silent: in his great wisdom he realized that he had to accept the reality of the death of Nadav and Avihu. What could he possibly say at such a moment? Words were meaningless in the face of death. The wise response is—silence. Vayidom, and Aaron's blood was seething. Although his mind understood the futility of crying out, his heart was a father's heart. His anguish was real. If he did not express his grief outwardly, he certainly cried inwardly.

Aaron had the mighty wisdom and self-control to remain silent, even while he was experiencing emotional turmoil deep inside himself, in his very blood. Surely, silence is a wise response to many tragedies that have taken place and over which we have no control whatsoever.

But sometimes silence is the wrong response. Sometimes we must cry out. A Talmudic passage (Sotah 11a) offers an imaginary scenario relating to when Pharaoh was deciding to enslave the Israelites and murder their male babies. "Said Rabbi Hiyya son of Abba in the name of Rabbi Simai: Three were involved in that decision: Bilam, Job and Yitro." Bilam, who advised in favor of these evil decrees, ultimately died a violent death. Job, who remained neutral, was later punished with horrible sufferings. Yitro, who opposed Pharaoh's decrees, had to flee, but was ultimately rewarded so that his descendants were great teachers of Torah. Bilam went along with Pharaoh's decisions either because he actually agreed with Pharaoh, or because he thought it was in his own best interest not to resist the monarch. By being a "yes man," Bilam would gain power and favors from Pharaoh. He had no qualms about becoming an accomplice to enslaving a whole nation and murdering their babies. Justice demands that Bilam be punished

for his moral turpitude. Yitro resisted Pharaoh's decisions, even at personal risk. Yitro would not be party to wicked decrees. He stood up on behalf of the endangered Israelites and was compelled to flee from Pharaoh's wrath. Justice demands that Yitro be rewarded for his moral heroism.

But what about Job? What is the nature of his sin that made him deserving of terrible sufferings? After all, Job did not say that he agreed with Pharaoh; he did not validate Pharaoh's decrees. He simply stayed silent. He was prudent. He may have thought: "Pharaoh is going to do this regardless of what I say. Why should I endanger myself? Why should I incur his anger? Why should I stand up for the Israelites, or for righteousness, or for compassion? The safest thing for me is to remain silent."

Rabbi Chaim Shmuelevitz (d. 1979), for many years associated with the Mirrer Yeshiva, commented that Job was punished precisely because he remained silent. When one sees injustice, one must scream out in opposition. Silence is not an option for a good person. Even if one suspects that his/her words will have no positive impact, one must not remain silent. Perhaps words will bear fruit; perhaps resistance to evil will empower others to add their voices of protest. Perhaps the words will have no impact at all right now but may provide courage to others in the future. If one does not scream out in the face of injustice and suffering, this indicates a lack of identification with the victims; it reflects a moral callousness deserving of rebuke.

In the face of past tragedy, silence may often be the appropriate and wise response. No words can change what has already happened. But in the face of contemporary evil, silence is morally repugnant. One must scream out, one must protest, one must demand justice. Remaining silent makes one an accomplice, puts one in the category of Job. The silent onlooker is a tragic figure who, because of moral weakness, brings suffering upon him/herself and upon others.

Angel for Shabbat