BEREISHEES

Expectations, Rewards, and Parental Approval

Children need to receive the approval of their parents. Instinctively, children want their parents' love and approval. One of the most heartbreaking tasks I have as a rabbi is to counsel youngsters, and even adults, who can never, no matter what they do, win the approval of their parents. Their parents, for whatever reason, will never give them any approval. This completely shatters these youngsters and adults. Many times it causes them to become mentally deranged and even to be hospitalized. They cannot understand that no matter what they do, they cannot win the approval of their parents. Perhaps the cruelest thing a parent can do to a child is to withhold capriciously his/her approval from a child, never allowing the child to feel any self-worth, never encouraging the child to achieve expected goals because these goals constantly change and, even at times, are contradictory.

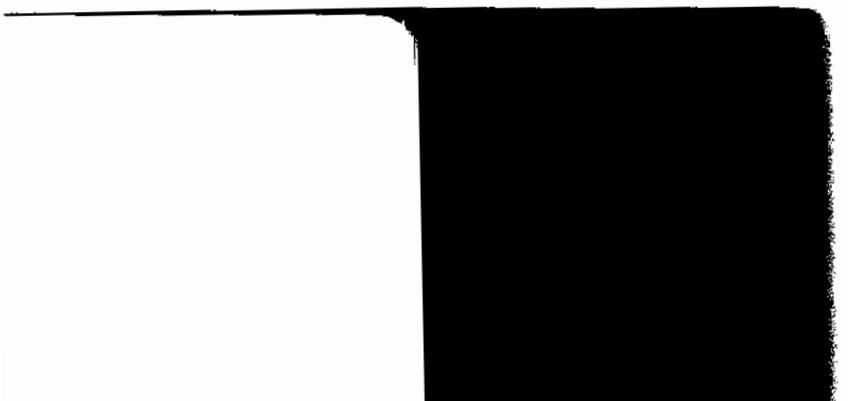
In the Torah portion Bereishees, we learn about the creation of Adam and Eve. According to our tradition, Adam and Eve were created on Rosh Hashonna. Rosh Hashonna does not celebrate the creation of the world. It celebrates the creation of man as we know him today. The rabbis say that there were 974 generations of man before Adam was created. Adam was special and unique because G-d breathed into him the breath of life. He gave him an added Neshoma, an added soul. That's why in our prayers on Rosh Hashonna, after we blow the shofar, we say, "Hayom Haras Olom", which is usually translated as, "Today is the birthday of the world," but that is not what it really means. It really means, "Today the world is pregnant." The world has endless possibilities. It is up to each of us to actualize these positive possibilities which exist for all of us. To do this, we must have clear goals enunciated. That is one of the interpretations of the Tekiah note that we blow on the shofar on Rosh Hashonna. The Tekiah stands for the clear expectations that our tradition and our parents give us to lead a moral, decent, and upstanding life.

G-d, when he created Adam, told him that he could enjoy all the fruits of the trees of the Garden of Eden, but he could not eat the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil. Adam and Eve sinned and ate of the forbidden fruit. G-d had told them that the day they would eat from the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil, they would die. They did not die. Adam lived another 930 years. The rabbis say that Adam and Eve were created on Rosh Hashonna, which was in that year a Friday; they sinned on Rosh Hashonna; and they were forgiven on Rosh Hashonna. Adam and Eve, after they sinned, hid and G-d had to go looking for them. G-d had to call, "Where are you?" G-d knew where they were but Adam and Eve felt that by sinning they had forfeited G-d's love and approval. They were ashamed. G-d told them that they had done wrong but that He would forgive them. He even allowed them to stay in the Garden of Eden over Shabbat. He expelled them after Shabbat from the Garden of Eden, but they did not die.

In our prayers, we refer to G-d as Ovinu Malkeynu, our Father and our King. G-d is our king. He sets standards for us that are clear and unambiguous. He expects us to live up to these standards. He has given us power and dignity, malchus, to try to live up to these standards. We say that G-d obeys the same standards that He expects from us. G-d is not like us mentally or physically, but we share a common morality with Him. He is bound by the same laws of morality that we are. That's why Abraham said, "Will the judge of the whole world not do justice?" when Abraham tried to save the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah. We, too, must set clear standards for our children. They must know what to expect. The same goes for employers or anybody else who directs people. They must know what you want. They must know what tasks you want done first. They must have clear goals. A parent must be bound by the same standards he expects from his children, just as G-d is bound by the same laws of morality as we are. A parent cannot demand of his child things that he is not willing to do himself.

That's one of the reasons for the moral breakdown in today's society. Many parents do not want to live by accepted moral standards so they do not feel they have the moral authority to make their children obey these standards. Children, too, will not respect parents who violate their own professed standards. I am reminded of the story they tell about a boy who turned eighteen and told his father that he wanted to go to one of those nude x-rated places. His father said that he could not go. The boy said, "Why not? I'm 18 years old." His father replied, "Son, you can't go because you are going to see something you should not see." Boys are boys, and he went anyway, and he saw something he should not see: he saw his father. Parents must live by the same standards by which they expect their children to live.

After parents have set standards, they must then reward their children for trying to live up to them. They cannot arbitrarily change the standards all the time. Perhaps one of the reasons why G-d forgave Adam and Eve was because G-d told Eve never to eat from the tree of knowledge of good and evil. He only told Adam. Adam told Eve. The rabbis say that it was not clear to Eve if G-d's command was only that she was not supposed to eat of that fruit, or His command was that she was also not supposed to touch the tree. Adam, according to the rabbis, had told her that she was not supposed to even touch the tree. When the snake tempted her, he first pushed her against the tree. When she saw that nothing happened after she touched the tree, she then ate of its fruit and gave it to Adam. G-d recognized that perhaps He should have more fully informed Eve. Adam and Eve did not die the day they ate the fruit. Instead, they were given the opportunity to develop their full potential and the full potential of this world by trying to make it into a Garden of Eden. Our children's efforts, too, must be appreciated even if they do not always attain the goals we wish for them or reach the standards we wish for them. As long as they are trying, that is what counts.

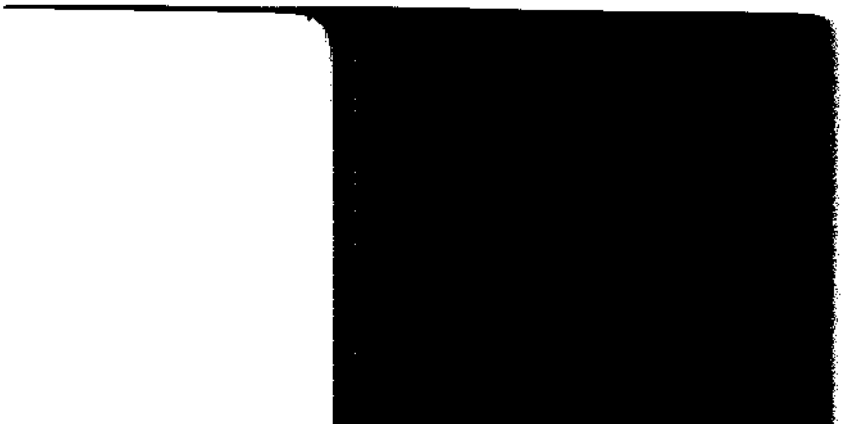


That's why the second notes of the blowing of the shofar are the Shvorim and the Teruah. The root of the word Shvorim in Hebrew, Shever, can mean "hope" or "to be broken". Children in their desire to achieve goals can be broken unless they are given encouragement. They always must be given hope. They must be given a pat on the back and recognized when they are making efforts to achieve the goals we want for them. The word Teruah, too, can mean "a cry of joy" or "an alarm". In Aramaic it also means "to be broken." Children can panic and get involved in frenzied activities if they feel that nothing they do matters or counts. Instead of the joy of working toward positive goals, they become overcome by frenzied activities and they get involved with dope and alcohol. We must positively acknowledge the efforts of our children and our workers if we expect them to achieve the standards and goals we have set for them.

When Rosh Hashonna falls on Shabbat, we do not blow the shofar, we do not say the prayer "the world is pregnant", and we also do not say the prayer "Ovinu Malkeynu, our father, our king". We do not have to because Shabbat, itself, is a day which strengthens family and allows each of us to appreciate what has been accomplished up to now. Sociologists have made a study which crosses all ethnic and religious groups to find out what makes students excel in school. They found only one common denominator among all these excellent students. All these students eat at least one meal a day with their entire family. The children, by sitting around the table with their parents, get to bring their achievements to their parents. After all, why try to achieve anything if nobody is going to appreciate it? Why do anything if you are only going to be criticized and made fun of? Children have the opportunity to speak to their parents about what their proper goals and aspirations should be, and parents have the opportunity to let their children know what their expectations of them are. Parents also have the chance to review with them what they have learned, what they have accomplished, how they are overcoming their problems, etc. Shabbat is just such a

day. It allows the family to come together to discuss things. It shows children what their parents think is really important, and that is relationships. It allows the child to gain the appreciation they need to grow and develop their potential. We only say the prayer "today the world is pregnant, the world is full of potential" after we blow the shofar. We can only raise children who want to develop their potential and the potential of the world if we first sound for them the Tekiah. If we first give them clear goals, then we also have to be willing also to reward them for their efforts and give them the necessary appreciation they need to continue to grow.

Let's hope and pray that during this coming year none of us will capriciously deny our children or our employees or anyone we direct the appreciation they need to grow. May we all develop our own potential and help others develop their potential so the Mashiach will come quickly in our day. Amen.

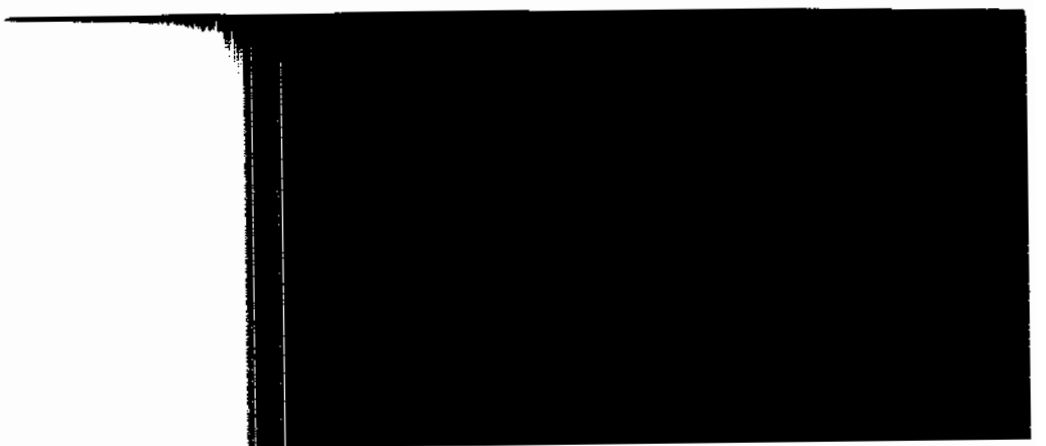


NOAH

Violence, Calling It Quits, Relationships

We are all faced with the problem of when to call it quits. When should one just cut his losses and start over again? Many times, we have invested so much time and effort in a particular course of action that it is very difficult to extricate ourselves from that course of action and start anew. After all, by doing so, we are admitting we are a failure. Even if the failure occurred through no fault of ours, we still know that we showed bad judgement by getting involved. We begin to doubt our abilities and to lose confidence in our judgement.

We learn about these things in the Torah portion, Noah. We learn how G-d calls it quits; how He regretted having made man on earth; how He said at the end of Bereishees: ' "I will blot out Man from the face of the ground—from man to animal, to creeping things, to birds of the sky; for I have reconsidered My having made them." ' "But Noah found grace in the eyes of Hashem." One of the underlying themes of the whole Torah is how G-d is a very poor teacher. G-d created man and tried to teach Adam and Eve how to live correctly, but they sinned. The same with their children; Cain killed Abel. We learn also how the generation of Noah was evil. Later on, in the same portion we learn how the people of the Tower of Babel did not listen to G-d even after the flood. G-d, at the time of Noah, was ready to call it quits — he was going to spare only Noah and his family from the flood. What tipped the scales to cause G-d to want to wipe out all mankind except for Noah? Violence is what tipped the scales. The Torah states: "And G-d saw the earth and behold it was corrupted, for all flesh had corrupted its way upon the earth." Some rabbis explain that the people at the time of Noah had broken the genetic code and were creating monsters, people who were half man-half beast. In fact, one of the interpretations of the phrase that Noah was a perfect man—tamim, in Hebrew—meant that

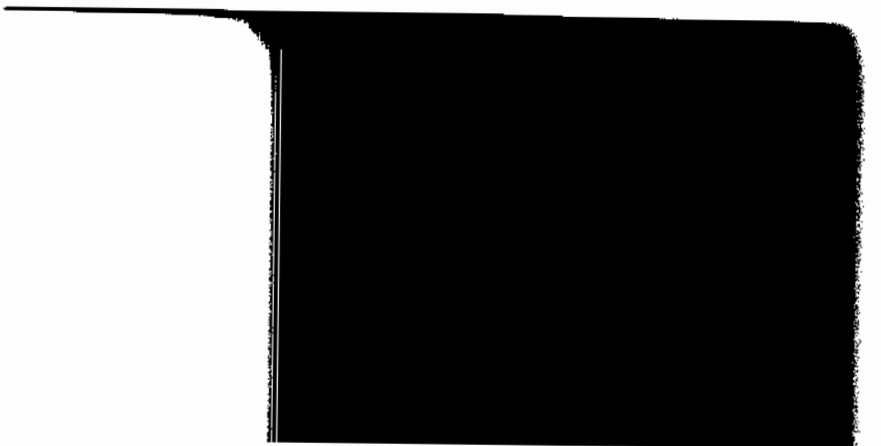


in that generation, only Noah had a complete set of human genes. The rest of the people had animal and human genes in their makeup. This could explain the propensity of that generation toward violence and robbery — 'flesh corrupting its way upon the earth.' People of that era used their great scientific knowledge to create what they thought were improved human beings or improved animals who could serve human beings better. We in our generation are on the verge of doing the same thing. We too have cracked the genetic code. Up to now, if a human and a monkey had mated, nothing would have happened; same thing with a cow, etc.

Today, we know how to bypass the normal reproductive process; we can extricate genes from animals and insert them in a petri dish, then insert them into the DNA of a human, thereby creating what some say is an improved human. Or vice versa: take human genes and put them into an animal's DNA and create a monkey whose heart would be so similar to a human heart that this money's heart could replace a human heart if need be. The supply of hearts would be endless, preventing us from being dependent upon car accidents and other tragedies for transplanted hearts. We could harvest the hearts of these partial monkey men; we could also produce a monkey to be the perfect servant. By inserting animal genes into human DNA, we could produce a human being with greater manual dexterity and extra strength. This is a perilous route to follow: Anything in the past that was scientifically possible was subsequently tried. We have just about opened the door for man-animal creation. We must be on our guard that we don't create terrible monsters. Perhaps this is how the caste system and rigid social class distinctions started. Maybe there was a dim memory of different classes of people of some who had more animal genes than others. These experiments will open up again the whole issue of racism and will bring democracy into question. What percentage of genes would you need to be considered human? G-d did not destroy mankind until violence and robbery were rampant on earth; when the strong felt they

could take anything they wanted from the weak with impunity. G-d destroyed the world with water, even though water is almost always considered a good thing in Judaism. We constantly pray for rain. However, too much of a good thing can be destructive. Science without moral restraint can also be very destructive. The generation of Noah felt their mighty scientific strides were greatly benefitting mankind, yet at the end, they brought upon mankind its destruction. We, too, in our own age know how much physics has raised our standard of living—making TV possible, creating new energy sources; but physics has also created the atomic bomb. Science is a two-edged sword.

G-d could countenance everything except violence. The rabbis declare that when G-d determined that He had to destroy mankind, He caused a star or comet to come close to the earth, causing a huge tidal wave that destroyed the world. At the time of the Tower of Babel, the people sinned again; they claimed another flood was coming—that every 1,650 years, G-d was going to send a comet either to hit the earth or pass it by, and cause a great destruction. These people were determined to build a tower so they could wage war with G-d, thwart His plans, and still live even after the new flood occurred. The tower would allow them to outlive the flood. G-d did not destroy them, however. They challenged G-d's authority, but they were working together. They would lament if a brick fell; if a human fell, they would continue working, but they still were working together. This working together moved G-d not to destroy them. Their goal was wrong, their mission wrong, but they were working together; they were not trying to hurt one another. G-d knew that after building the tower, these people would turn against each other, so He mixed their languages and scattered them onto the face of the earth. When they completed one cause — building the Tower, G-d knew they would need to find another one to work on. Some sort of human persecution would occur: like the Communists and others of this generation, who were willing to kill a large percentage of the population for the sake of an ideal. G-d had earlier stated to Noah that



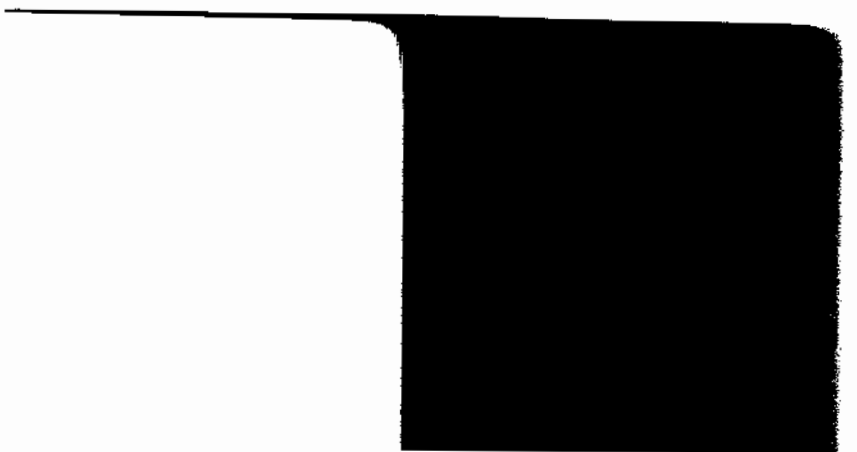
no world-destroying catastrophe would again occur, preferring other means to educate Man. He would make life more difficult by having seasons: the planet would not be so luxurious with vegetation; crops would be hard to obtain; but the people would be able to live together and overcome these obstacles if they observed the seven commands of Noah.

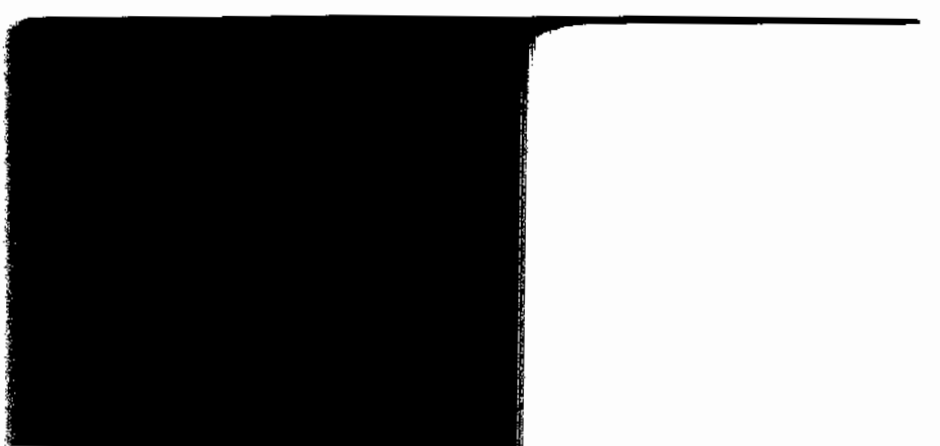
The people at the Tower of Babel did not believe G-d would not bring another destruction; in fact, some believed G-d had nothing to do with the first destruction, that it was a natural phenomenon, that a flood had to occur every 1,650 years. We know today the world is always in danger of being hit by a comet or asteroid; somehow, though, we've been shielded these last thousands of years and spared destruction. G-d designated the rainbow as a sign to remind us of his promise never to bring another deluge: the rainbow's composition of light and water reminds us to remember to balance our lives with light, science, intellectualism, and water, which the rabbis interpret as being Torah. Science must always be balanced by morality. We also have to remember that life is composed of tears and joy, which we have to learn how to balance.

When should we call it quits? In business, we know when our tears are greater than our joy, when we are continually losing money, when the prospect of turning loss into profit is nil, we should not stay open. We know it's time to get rid of the house when repairs cost more than the house is worth. We know to call our relationship quits when violence becomes part of it. G-d almost destroyed all of the world because of violence. We should also call a relationship quits when great dishonesty prevails, when the seven commandments of Noah are disregarded, and when only tears–not joy–exist. We should also quit a relationship after all efforts to educate the other party and counsel the other party on the importance of being a mensch have failed. Disagreements will always manifest themselves, especially in marriage, but most of the time they

can be overcome, as long as gross dishonesty does not prevail. They are usually just miscommunications. G-d works with each of us to ensure we try to do the right thing, as He did with the generation of the Tower of Babel. We, too, should work with each other to improve our relationships. However, if a person with whom we have a relationship fails to try to be honest and to be a mensch, then we must call it quits. If a business partner repeatedly cheats us, then that partnership should be ended. The Torah portion Noah teaches how G-d relates to us, and how we should relate to others. We should be very careful before we call it quits. G-d gave the people, even of the generation of the flood, many chances before He destroyed that generation. In America, we call it quits way too soon; we are too willing to destroy that which has a chance of being saved. Again, if violence and dishonesty exist, if tears predominate over joy, if unwillingness even to try to be a mensch prevails, then we have to call it quits.

Let us all hope and pray all of us will make those necessary efforts to live such lives that we will never have to call it quits with one another or with an enterprise upon which we have embarked. But that if we will have to call it quits, we will do it because we have no other option.

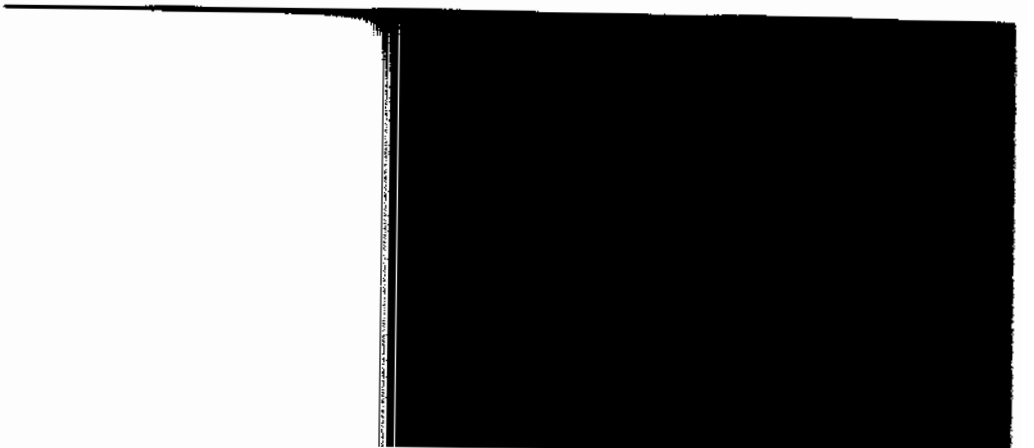




LECH LECHA

Morality, Getting Close to God, and Abraham

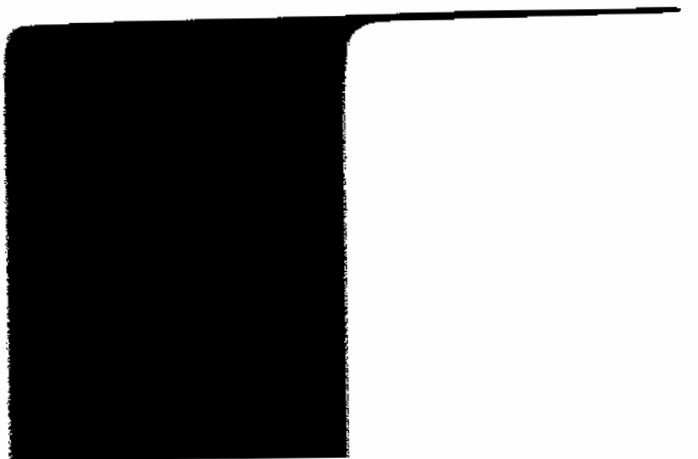
In the Torah portion Lech Lecha we learn how Abraham was commanded to go to a land which G-d would show him. Abraham was the first Jew. Abraham was not, though, the first one who believed in G-d. According to our tradition, there were many people before Abraham who believed in G-d. In fact, there was even a yeshiva run by Shaim and Aver which, according to our tradition, many of the patriarchs actually attended. Mal Kee Tzedek believed in G-d, as we learn in this Torah portion. Shaim believed in G-d. Chanoch believed in G-d. Noah and Adam believed in G-d. What was the new thing that Abraham brought to religion which allowed him to be considered the first Jew? Abraham's new thing, his Chidush, was that he proclaimed that nobody could approach G-d unless he was first moral. To a large extent, Judaism is irreligious. What do I mean by that? I mean that Judaism does not give initially prime importance to approaching G-d, to getting close to G-d, although that is its ultimate goal. Prime importance is given to being moral. It is only after you have become moral that you can approach G-d. Many times it happens that religion can have a devastating effect on people. We experienced this in Texas just a few years ago with the cult leader David Koresh. He misled so many people. Many of these were educated people, many of them had college degrees, and many had even attended Harvard, but, who, because they wanted to get close to G-d, felt that they had to surrender their moral faculties to their leader, David Koresh. Whatever David Koresh told them was right was right. We know in the ancient days there was child sacrifice and people thought that they had to sacrifice their children in order to get close to G-d. This is not hyperbole because when houses were excavated in Amon and Phoenicia and Carthage, they found in all these homes the bones of little children, so religion, itself, can lead to devastating effects. In Pre-Columbian Mexico and South America there was also a great amount of human sacrifice, especially child



sacrifice. Abraham's new thing was that you first had to be moral before you could be religious.

In next week's Torah portion, Vayera, we learn how Abraham mistakenly thought that G-d had ordered him to sacrifice his son, Isaac. When G-d gave Abraham the command to elevate his son, which in Hebrew could mean to sacrifice, it was not G-d who told him to stay his hand but an angel of G-d. The rabbis explain that the angel really was the Torah, that child sacrifice was and is completely against the teachings of the Torah, that we are not to act immorally, that G-d cannot ask us to do immoral things, that any religion that asks us to do immoral things is a false religion. Even in our own days, we say how Nazism and Communism with their false ideologies were based on immorality. Nazism, of course, was a Messianic movement which believed that it could save all humanity if it could only rid the world of Jews, that it was only because of Jews that the world was corrupt. Kill the Jews and the world would be redeemed, the Nazis said. Therefore, they adopted this terrible, vile philosophy that if they could eradicate the Jewish people, the world would be perfected. Communism, initially, had a good philosophy: from each according to his ability, to each according to his need, but they felt that in order to accomplish their goals they could do anything they wanted and Stalin killed 20 million people in pursuit of Communism's goals. In order for us to approach G-d, we must first be moral. We can't be religious if we're immoral.

That, of course, is what the prophets were railing against. There were many people in ancient Israel who thought that you bring a sacrifice to G-d and this makes up for your unjust behavior toward the poor and the innocent. This is paganism. This is not Judaism. There have always been two distinct heresies in Judaism. The first heresy is that I do not have to be moral. All I have to do is perform ritual acts and everything will be all right. In fact, the prophets even railed against prayer as a ritual act. People who think that they can cheat the poor, harm people,



bribe judges and then with the money they earned unjustly, they can make donations to religious institutions and that money will be considered holy money are totally wrong. That money is immoral money, not holy money, and it is a travesty. The same thing applies to people who feel that they can cheat people and then pray to G-d and G-d is going to forgive them. G-d will not forgive them unless they first desist from the immoral practices of cheating people and harming people.

The second heresy, of course, is that all Judaism is morality. That, of course, is not true. After we are moral, that is just the first step. Then we have to try to get close to G-d. Unless we want to get close to G-d, life will be hollow for us, but first we have to be moral.

In this week's Torah portion, one of the underlying themes also is who was going to succeed Abraham. At first Abraham thought that Lot, his nephew, was going to succeed him. Lot was a man who looked exactly like Abraham. He also was a man who upheld many Jewish religious principles. He was extremely hospitable. He upheld Pesach and many of the Jewish laws and rituals, but he was a thief. He was a person who was only interested in money. He was a sharp businessman who would do anything for money. He was willing to go to a place like Sodom and Gomorrah, which he knew would be bad for his children, because there he could make money. He did not care if his children got a Jewish education so, therefore, Lot was not fit to be the successor to Abraham. Then Abraham thought that his successor would be Eliezer, his servant, but Eliezer could not be his successor either because Eliezer only knew how to follow orders, and we know how devastating that is in the religious and moral sphere. That was Eichmann's plea, "I was only following orders." In Judaism you are supposed to question. You are supposed to question even G-d. That is what Abraham did when G-d told him He was going to destroy the evil cities of Sodom and Gomorrah. Abraham pleaded for the righteous people there. "Will the Judge of all

the world not do justice?" We are called upon to argue with G-d. We are supposed to question everything. We are not supposed to just have a religion that has us obey orders. We are supposed to look at things carefully and to question whether they are moral and just and right. Ultimately, of course, G-d can only ask us to do things that are ultimately just and right. G-d cannot ask us to do immoral things. We believe that G-d is bound by His own morality. Anybody who has ever gone to a yeshiva and has had a Jewish education knows that the most important thing is not the answers. The most important thing is the questions. As long as the Jewish people ask the same questions, then the Jewish people will survive. And the questions are not, how can I get a bigger home, or how can I get a nicer swimming pool, but the questions are what is G-d demanding of me? How can I make this a better world? How can I help G-d perfect and redeem this world? As long as we are asking these questions, then Judaism will be a viable force in the world. In the yeshiva, the good student, the outstanding student is one who knows how to ask questions, not the one who necessarily can answer the questions. Eliezer could not succeed Abraham because he was just a servant, just an obeyer of orders.

Then Abraham thought that Ishmael would succeed him, but Ishmael was a wild man. He did not do like Lot. He did not rationalize and pretend that wrong is right and try to do everything just to make money. Ishmael knew what was right and wrong, but he was a wild man and his hand was against everyone and everyone's hand was against him. All he was interested in was doing what he felt like doing. Whatever he felt like doing, that is what he wanted to do. This is similar to what many feel today in America, that "I should have the freedom to do whatever I want to do. Whatever makes me feel good, that is what I should be able to do, no matter who it hurts." That, of course, is not a moral and decent person. There are so many people who abandon their families and their children because they want to do what they want to do. They do not want to assume their responsibilities. They do not

want to act morally. They do not want to act justly, so these people could not succeed Abraham.

The one who could succeed Abraham was Yitzchak. Yitzchak in Hebrew also means laughter. Yitzchak had a sense of humor. In order to act morally, many times you have to forget about tit for tat. You have to look at the big picture. You do not have to look at whether you will be an instant success. You have to be able to laugh at yourself and worry only about being a blessing. That is what you have to worry about, and that, of course, is what Abraham was told to be in the very beginning of this Torah portion when he was told to leave the land of his fathers. It says, "And you will be a blessing." It is more important to be a blessing than even to be a success.

Abraham came to the land of Canaan, the rabbis say, to spread the ideals of Judaism. They compare him to a spicebox whose smell and aroma can only be felt if they are moved about. But when Abraham came to the land of Canaan, the people there probably thought of him as an evil omen, not as a bearer of wonderful news, because when he came to Canaan, a famine immediately struck. Abraham had many setbacks. Because of the famine he had to go to Egypt. When he went to Egypt, they took his wife, and later on when he came back to the land of Canaan, he had problems with Lot and Avimelich, all sorts of problems. He understood that it is more important to be a blessing than it is to be a success. Ultimately, if you are a blessing you will be a success, too, maybe not in monetary terms but in other terms. Therefore, the most important thing in life is to be a blessing. We can only be a blessing if we act morally and decently and caringly and are concerned for the people around us. We will not be a blessing if we take moral shortcuts to be a success. Yes, sometimes moral success may elude us then because we have decided to be a blessing and not take the moral shortcuts like Lot took. We also must not just obey orders, like Eliezer did, or try to indulge our every fantasy and whim, as Ishmael did. In

order to be truly a successor to Abraham, we first must be moral before we can be anything else. Unless we are moral, we cannot even approach G-d.

I am reminded of the story they tell about a man who came home and was met at the door by his wife who looked at him and said, "I have good news and bad news. What do you want to hear first?" "Tell me the good news first." His wife said, "The air bag works." In a certain sense, G-d is our airbag. He saves us from many different types of catastrophes, but He does not assure us success just because we try to be a blessing. All He assures us is that He will give us the strength to overcome our problems, but He never said we will not have problems. It is our job to try to be a blessing and not to take any type of shortcuts to success. If we will truly be a blessing, then we will truly fulfill the mandate of our father Abraham and be able to get close to G-d and truly help bring the Mashiach. Amen.

Families, Judaism and Blessing

In the Torah portion Lech Lecha, we learn how G-d appeared to Abraham and told him to leave his land and his birthplace and the house of his father and to go to a land which G-d would show him. G-d promised he would become a great nation and that "all those that bless you, I will bless, and all those that curse you, I will curse." An alternative interpretation is "I will bless all those who will bless you, and I will enlighten all those who curse you." G-d then said that through Abraham all the families of the earth will be blessed. We do not learn that G-d said that through Abraham all the individuals in the world will be blessed or all the nations of the world will be blessed. It said that all the families of the world will be blessed.

The main blessing that the Jewish people are to give to the world is the

blessing of how to have successful families because it is only by having successful families that we can balance all the competing forces and drives within us and lead decent, upstanding lives. It is true that G-d also said that He will make our name big, He will make us a great nation, that He will bless us, and it is true that we Jews, who are probably less than one tenth of the world population, have made a tremendous impact on the world. If one would just read the newspapers, he would think that Jews constitute one of the most populous groups in the world. We always read about Jewish scientists, Jews in the arts, the movies, politics. Of course, Israel is center stage in the world today. We Jews have always been in the cockpit of history. Julius Caesar, Cicero, and Augustus Caesar all talked about the Jews. Even today, when anything of importance happens we Jews are right there. Even today in countries when there are almost no Jews, Jews are talked about and written about. In Japan where there are almost no Jews, Jews are written about and talked about as if they controlled everything, especially the world financial markets. It reminds me of the story of Jew in Nazi Germany before World War II who used to always read the Nazi newspapers. His wife asked, "Why are you doing that?" He answered, "Because when I see how we are persecuted and hounded, and have been turned out of our jobs, etc., I become depressed, but when I read this paper, I find out how powerful I am. It makes me feel good to know that I am powerful." His wife looked at him and said, "We hardly have food to eat and you are powerful?" G-d has promised, though, that the families of the earth will be blessed through Abraham.

Most of the Bible teaches us about G-d's failings as a teacher. G-d created man with free will and then He attempted to teach us how to act. He failed with Adam and with the generation of Noah and then with the generation after Noah, and He decided that the only way He could teach man to be good is through a family. Abraham was to teach the world how to live by creating a family. Abraham, though, too, failed. It took three generations before we Jews were able to learn how to raise families.

Abraham first thought that he was going to raise a family with his nephew, Lot, but Lot was a finagler, a sharp businessman who operated always on the edge of the law. He preferred making money over his children's education. He put them in a bad moral environment because he could make more money there. In order to have a family, you need to have trust and uprightness.

Abraham then thought he could create a family with his servant Eliezer, but that, too, failed because a family cannot be based on subordination. Each member in the family must have the opportunity to express their opinion and show their initiative. A family is not a military organization with a chain of command.

Abraham then thought he could create a family with Ishmael, but Ishmael was a wild man who was interested in doing what he wanted to do. He was not interested in sharing responsibilities and being there for others. In America, today we have bought the first two concepts of what is necessary for a family. We have realized that families must be based on trust and integrity and that there must be equality in a family and not subordination. A husband and wife must feel they have the opportunity to talk with each other openly, but in the area of shared responsibility families have disintegrated in America. Except for inheritance, the family has no standing in America. Parents do not have to take care of children after a certain age, and children have no responsibility to take care of their parents. Most certainly, uncles and aunts have no responsibility to take care of their nieces and nephews. One of the worst experiences I had in the rabbinate was when I called up someone in this community whose niece and her children were in the Star of Hope Mission, and I said to please help them. He told me that was not my responsibility. Legally, of course, he was right, but that is not the Jewish way. The reason Jewish immigrants could make it in America was when they first came to America their second and third and fourth and fifth cousins took them in and gave them food and

lodging. There was a sense of shared responsibility. Today, fathers do not even want to support their children after a divorce.

In order to have a successful family, we must have integrity and trust, we must have freedom of expression, and we must have shared responsibilities. When Abraham was confronted with trying to form a family and his children did not act properly, he rejected them. He sent them away with a gift. Abraham had eight children but only one of them remained Jewish; Yitzchak had two children and one of them remained Jewish; Yaacov had thirteen children and they all remained Jewish. He did not do like his grandfather, Abraham, and send away family members who did not act properly. He also did not do like his father, Yitzchak, who could not see any wrong in his children. That's also one of the failings of American Jews. Whatever my child wants to do is good. He should just enjoy himself. This type of attitude has destroyed and continues to destroy Jewish families in America. Yaacov did not say that everything his children did was good. He reproved them when they did not act correctly, but he did not reject them. He understood that you had to teach them. In order to have a successful family, we must have trust and integrity, freedom of expression, and shared responsibilities.

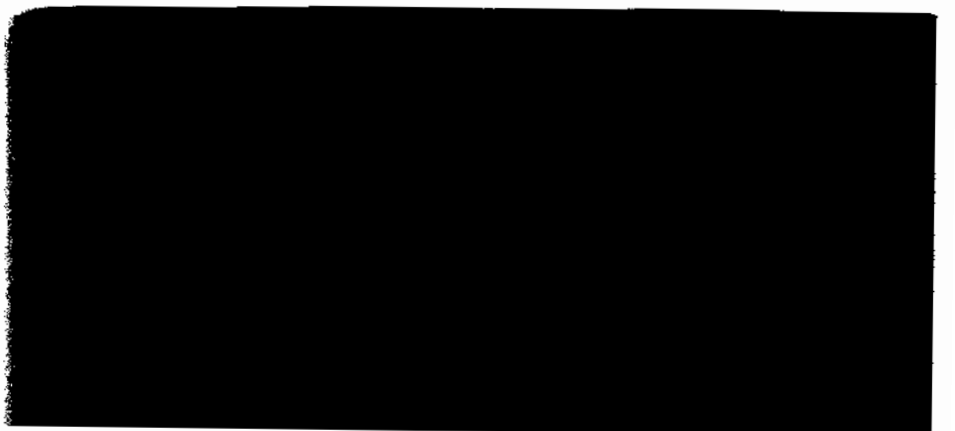
I am reminded of the story they tell about an English teacher who went before the class and picked out a student and said, "Johnny, give me a sentence with an object in it." Johnny said, "You are wearing a beautiful dress." The teacher asked, "What is the object?" and Johnny said, "To get an A in this class." G-d has told us that the object of the Jewish people is to teach the world how to have good families. Let us all hope that we will all have good families so that the Mashiach will come quickly in our day. Amen.

VAYERA

Hope, Setbacks, and Religion

What is the essential ingredient that a person must have if he is to be a religious Jew? The rabbis teach us that ingredient is hope, optimism. If a person cannot be optimistic and hopeful, then a person cannot be a truly religious Jew. All the stories especially of our patriarchs and matriarchs in the first book of the Bible, Bereishees, speak about the terrible setbacks they had to endure to achieve their dreams. They never gave up hope. True, they did not fulfill all their dreams, but they left a legacy of hope and optimism that allowed their children to continue to pursue their dreams. All their dreams will eventually come true. The Mashiach will come if we will never give up hope and always act to fulfill these hopes. No setbacks are permanent. We can overcome everything, if not as individuals, then as a people, as a member of a religious tradition.

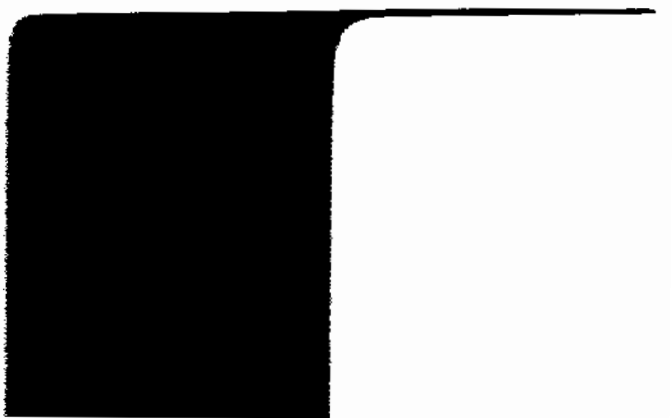
In the Torah portion Vayera, we learn how Sarah gave birth to Yitzchak when she was 90 years old. She had an impossible dream to have a child, and eventually it was realized. Even after her dream was realized, she was beset by all sorts of scoffers who claimed that this was not her child or Abraham's child, but Yitzchak looked the spitting image of his father and nobody could deny after seeing Yitzchak that he was the son of Abraham and Sarah. We learn that Abraham circumcised his son on the eighth day as G-d had commanded him. To this very day, all Jewish males are circumcised on the eighth day unless, of course, they are ill. Numbers in Hebrew have spiritual significance. The rabbis teach us that we all live in six dimensions: north, east, south, west, up, and down, but we also live in a seventh dimension, the spiritual dimension. That's why the Sabbath is the seventh day, and that's why the seventh year is the Sabbatical Year, and that's why so many Jewish holidays occur in the seventh month: Rosh Hashonna, Yom Kippur, Succor, Shmini Atzeres, Simchat Torah. After the seven times seventh year,



we have the Jubilee Year. Seven is a number of spirituality, the spirituality which we create. Unless we make a Shabbat, there is not going to be a Shabbat. Every Shabbat exists potentially for everyone, but unless we make Shabbat we will not feel its spirituality.

There is, though, an eighth dimension. This is a gift from G-d. We cannot force it, but it denotes G-d's gift to us. Therefore, the bris, the circumcision, is on the eighth day. When the Tabernacle was dedicated in the wilderness, it was dedicated for eight days and on the eighth day G-d's presence descended upon it. The eighth day of Succot, Shmini Atzeres, is a special holiday in which there are no real ceremonies. We just linger a day after Succot in G-d's presence and, so to speak, bask in His glory. The gift which the eighth day represents is the gift of hope. Every time we have a bris on the eighth day, we remember the birth of Yitzchak. We remember how the Jewish people were almost stillborn. It looked like Abraham and Sarah would have no heirs, but against all predictions, Sarah did have a baby and hope was reborn. The whole story of Abraham and Sarah is the story of never giving up hope.

Abraham was first told to "go to the land which G-d will show him". He went to the land of Israel, and almost immediately a famine struck and he was forced to go down to Egypt. It seemed that just when he was about to realize his dream it was snatched away from him and he was forced to leave. What's more, he had to employ a ruse to protect his life. He had to ask Sarah to say that she was his sister. In the ancient Middle East, only brothers and sisters married among the nobility, and maybe this ruse was used to convince Pharaoh that he was also of Pharaoh's rank and Pharaoh should leave him alone. He came back to Israel and then suffered the great disappointment of learning that his nephew, Lot, his faithful follower, was a very sharp businessman and engaged in dishonest business practices. He had to separate from him. He thought his son by Hagar, Ishmael, would be a fit heir for his spiritual



message, but he turned out to be a disappointment. He never gave up hope, though.

In the Torah portion Vayera, when Sarah heard that she was to have a child she laughed. The rabbis question why she laughed. Some say she laughed in disbelief. Others say she laughed not because she disbelieved but because she felt that because of her and her husband's current physical condition, the world would not believe that she had a son and they would mock her, but she did not care. She did not care that the world would mock her. It was and is not important what the world thinks. It is important only that a person have hope. One of the things that stifles hope is the fear of ridicule. Obviously, our hope must be based on some reality. According to the rabbis, Sarah's period had returned mysteriously that previous month. She thought it was an isolated event, but she knew something was stirring. One of the reasons there have been so many Jews who have gone into medicine and science is because of the basic Jewish belief that G-d has created the cure before the disease. If we are beset by troubles and disease, rest assured there is a corrective, a cure for all of them. G-d has provided them. We just have to look for them. Maybe we will not find them in this generation, but we will find them in future generations. We should all feel, as Alexander Pope has said, "Hope springs eternal."

In the Torah portion Ki Savo where we learn about all the curses that will come upon the Jewish people because of our failure to keep the Torah, we learn how these curses will come upon us because "we did not serve G-d with joy". What does this mean? Can we still keep the Torah and do mitzvahs and still have curses come upon us because we are not joyful? What does this mean? Do we have to do every mitzvah joyfully? No, the rabbis explain. It means that we have to serve G-d optimistically, hopefully. We must always feel that yeeya tov, that things are going to get better. We should never feel pessimistic or defeated or depressed. As the rabbis teach us, G-d only exists where there is joy,

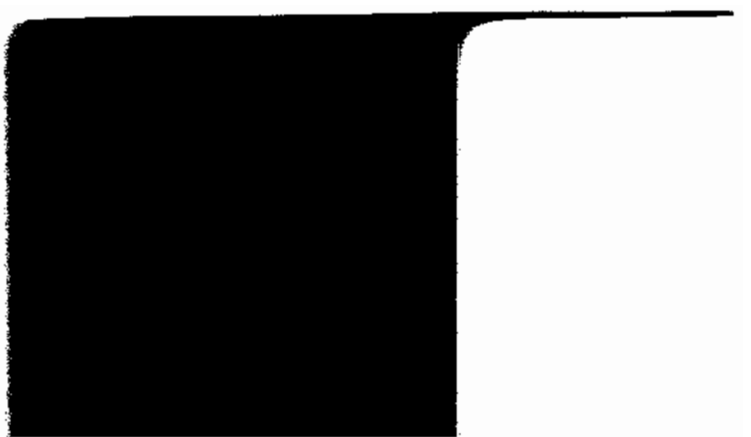
which means where there is optimism. Elie Wiesel tells about the oldest synagogue in Brezlov, Poland which has a sign over its entrance that says, "Gevalt", do not give up. In other words, do not feel defeated. Be optimistic. We are a religion which believes that nobody need be defeated permanently. We all suffer setbacks and momentary defeats, but we all can come back. We all can always maintain our dignity. We all can always lift up our heads. Eventually all of us die and eventually all of us lose the battle to some disease or another, but none of us need be defeated. We can, until our last breath, live dignified and caring lives, and most certainly we should never give up on ourselves or anyone else because we or they have morally strayed. Abraham never gave up on anybody.

In the Torah portion Vayera we also learn how Abraham prayed for the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah, even though they were immersed in terrible wickedness, having no regard for the poor or helpless or stranger. He did not give up on Avimelech, the king of the Philistines, who lived in modern day Gaza. He made treaties with him even though Avimelech and his people broke them, but Abraham continued to hope that Avimelech would eventually keep them, that peace would eventually reign between them. Even as they were making a treaty, Abraham had to reprove Avimelech because of the wells that the servants of Avimelech had just stolen. We Jews are an optimistic people, and we must maintain our optimism. We must hope against hope that eventually the Arabs will make true peace. There will be setbacks and we have to stay very strong and make sure that our security is not threatened because the Palestinians and Arabs will take advantage of any weakness that we display, but, at the same time, we must continue to hope and continue to work for peace. Even when Abraham was told to offer up his son, he never gave up hope. He misinterpreted G-d's command. G-d did not want Abraham to sacrifice his son but to elevate his son. This soon became clear when an angel of G-d told him to stay his hand. Abraham was beset by problems from his neighbors, problems from within his

family, and now it would even seem, problems with his religion but he never gave up hope. With the angel's appearances his religious problem got solved, too. We must never give up hope. As the Kotzka rebbe said, the greatest sin is to give up hope.

I am reminded of the story told by Rabbi Maurice Lamm in his book, *The Power of Hope*, about a man in his middle seventies who was left all alone in a shtetel in Poland before the Second World War. All his children had immigrated to America. He had a hard time earning a living, just securing shelter and feeding himself. Every morning after shul he would go and pick up sticks and put them in a burlap bag over his shoulder, and just before sunset he would take this bag to the wood merchant who would buy it for a kopek or two and sell it to the villagers. One hot July day, he trudged along all day picking up sticks. Finally, right before dark as he was putting the last stick in his bag, his bag broke and all the sticks fell on the ground. He looked up to heaven, tired and frustrated and disgusted, and said, "G-d, what do I need this for? Send me the Malach HaMoves, the Angel of Death." Suddenly, in an instant, the Angel of Death appeared at his side. He looked at the man and asked, "Did you call?" and the man said, "Yes." The Angel of Death asked, "What can I do for you?" The man looked at the Angel of Death and said, "Help me pick up these sticks."

Hope is a great gift from G-d. None of us should ever reject it. G-d has told us that if we will work to try to fulfill our tradition's positive life enhancing hopes. He will help us. Let us all hope and pray that none of us will ever give up hope, but that we will all always work to fulfill our tradition's positive, caring, loving dreams so the Mashiach will come quickly in our day. Amen.



CHAYE SARAH

The Death Wish, The Life Wish, and Confrontation

Life. Death. Is death but an extension of life? In life, does one exist or live? Death–voluntary, painlessly induced to achieve dignity? Can death be achieved with dignity? Is it meant to be a dignified experience? Of course, these concepts and questions have faced Man since he could form an idea. Yet, are we any closer to realizing answers? Not according to what we read and see and hear today. Truly, life and death are with us today. Thematically, the Torah portion Chaye Sarah is life and death, specifically the death wish and the life wish each of us has. Naturally, these elements have filled philosophical discussions to the extent they have gone beyond the cottage industry stage.

The Greeks and Jews who have exchanged footprints through each other's historical paths, have also created and developed and implemented philosophical discourses on death and life. The Greeks have a word for it, or for them. The Greek word for thantos means death; the Greek word for eros is the word for love, the love of life. Chaye Sarah deals so pointedly with life and death, so much so that they assume a singularity. When does one end and the other begin?

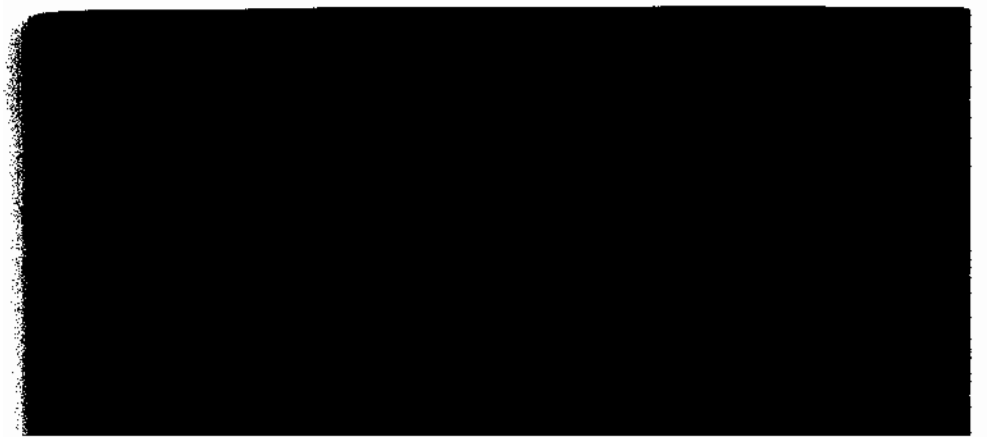
The Torah details how exactingly Abraham negotiates with Efron for a field and the Cave of Machpela in which to bury Sara. Obviously grief-stricken, Abraham nevertheless proceeds with the discussions with a quiet sensitivity, yet a matter-of-factness. One must leave the reading aware that this incident promulgated the life goes on concept. We learn also what life has to offer when Abraham sends his faithful servant, Eliezer, to Mesopotamia to find a wife for Yitzchak. In fact, the longest chapter of the whole Torah is when Eliezer recounts his experiences in getting the wife: how Eliezer approaches the well; how Rifka comes out and fulfills the test he devised for her; how he convinces her family to let him take her back to Mesopotamia.

The question is asked, why does the Torah, which is usually so laconic, spend so much time on telling us this story? It could have said it in a very few words. We learn, accordingly, how circumlocution is used between patriarchs and servants–how they speak in a very polite, delicate way. The rabbis comment that the conversation of the servants of the patriarchs is more detailed even than many halachas. In fact, all the halachas of Shabbos are really dangled from a posed, from a thread, the rabbis say. The reason for this is that we all know that life is difficult, life is hard. So, we have not only a life wish, but we also have a death wish. There are some people who really want to fail in life. In fact, they are experts in seizing defeat from the jaws of victory. We know people like that, people who are like the proverbial cow who gives a lot of milk but, at the last moment, kicks over the pail. We know people who actually find life so unbearable that they would like to end it. They cannot end it as a suicide because that would bring discredit among themselves and dishonor to their family. They look to do it in honorable ways. In fact, we know that many war heroes actually turn out to be very great misfits in civilian life. The reason for that is that they really did not want to be war heroes; they really intended to die in battle, if not consciously, then subconsciously. Because of circumstances and luck and their own valor, they were able to do great feats, and survived. They did not mean to survive but they survived, and when they have to come back to life, they just cannot handle it. We know that today among teenagers and young adults, suicide is the second leading cause of death after automobile accidents. Life can sometimes become very, very unbearable, and we have to make sure that we strengthen our eros, our love of life, and not our death wish. Many people actually seek confrontation because they really want to fail. They really, for some reason, feel that they are no good or they have a hormone imbalance; or they have been abused as a youngster and really do not feel that they are worthy. They really do not want to succeed in life, and do everything possible to strengthen their death wish rather than their life wish. Our job, as Jews, is to strengthen our life wish. We need to follow Abraham's

handling of grief with a positive approach to life: life goes on. That is why the toast that we Jews have, which is unique among all toasts, is L'Chayim, to life. We want everyone to see the joy and happiness of life even when things are not going well. That is why the Baal Shem Tov said that only a happy man can serve G-d.

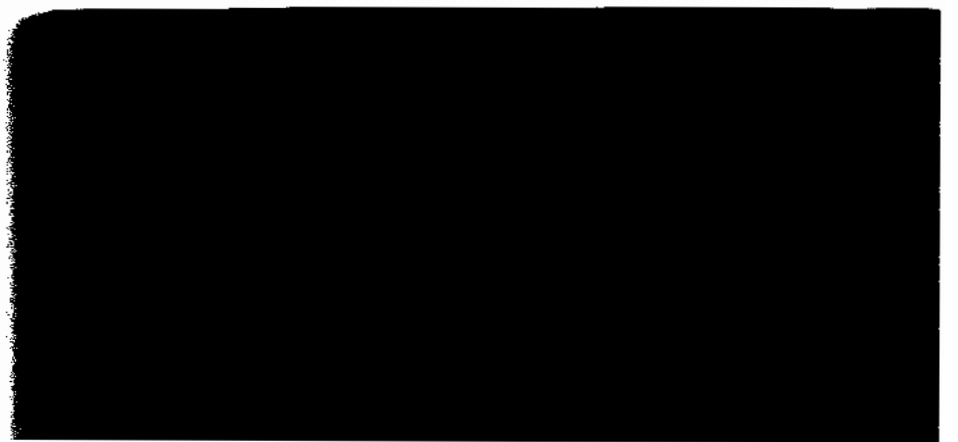
We learned that a person ritually impure could not enter the Temple. One of the many examples of becoming ritually impure is when one comes in contact with death. The experience depresses one and, therefore, he cannot serve G-d with joy. One of the ways that we can enhance our eros, our love of life and our capacity to love generally, is if we do not seek confrontations. Confrontations destroy us. Of course, sometimes we have no choice, but most confrontations can be avoided, and that is exactly what we learn here in this week's Torah portion. When Abraham negotiated with the sons of Chais for Sara's burial plot, he negotiated in an indirect way; despite the endlessly frustrating process. If the negotiations failed, they could save face. They could say that they were not even really negotiating. The sons of Chais were talking about giving him the land, and he was talking about a stranger, an alien, among them. Things worked out without anybody losing face, without there being an argument, without there being confrontation with its terrible, searing pain. Any time one has a confrontation, there is a winner and a loser and even the winner feels the pain of the conflict.

We also know the same thing happened with Eliezer. He speaks in many circumlocutions. He puts the case for many different points of view to get what he came for, which is the consent of Rifka and her parents to bring her back as a wife to Yitzchak. Therefore, he did not look for confrontations. We all know that we should not look for confrontations in life. In fact, once when standing in line at an airport, I noted a person ahead of me blow his top. Why did he blow his top? He blew his top because he had a reservation with some other airline and they did not realize he had reservations and did not honor his



reservation. Instead of trying to talk to the ticket taker and explain how an emergency demanded he be at his destinations, he let out with the worst cursing and screaming at this ticket taker. Of course, this ticket taker was not going to help him at all. The only person who could really help him, he tried to destroy with his anger. The person did not respond to this; no one does when attacked. We find that happens many times among spouses when one spouse is helping another, and the spouse who is sick is, of course, sick and depressed and mad and takes out his/her anger on the spouse helping him/her. Many times then, the spouse who is helping does not want to help anymore, or helps with a heavy heart. We know many times that people seek confrontation for no real reason, and this pursuit just destroys everything. We should be careful not to destroy. Even when Abraham dealt with death, he did it in a life-affirming fashion. When we deal with life, we should do likewise. We should try to strengthen as much as possible our life wish and not our death wish, because life is painful enough. Of course, we know so many marriages that have been broken, so many people that have been broken because they are always seeking confrontation. They are not seeking to learn how to affirm their eros. Instead, what they are doing is strengthening their thantos, and they are destroying themselves. Life can be bearable when we are strong; we become strong by following a regimen of positive exercises, much like an athlete. We need to make each second, each minute, each hour, and each day an opportunity to strengthen ourselves. We are told each of us has a specific number of years and a specific mission–all unique to each of us. We are taught we are to serve Hashem, to do mitzvahs, to stay busy, to make our allotted time count. In *Ethics of the Fathers*, we are admonished to repent one day before our death; since we do not know when that will be, each day must count.

The Jew doesn't have all the answers, certainly not any dealing with the issues at hand. They are just too complex. Perhaps Man at his current stage of development is not supposed to have the wisdom to deal with



them. Indeed, his frustration leads him to accept concepts that crop up, promising instant fulfillment but proving ultimately these concepts are nothing but fads. Recently, we read how Man came into being. Yet, he still does not understand the secret or process of Creation. Human comprehension is exceeded by the enormous wealth of knowledge. Certain verities, however, have evolved and the Jew is exhorted and enjoined to learn them. Through this constant process of searching and learning can the life wish be achieved.

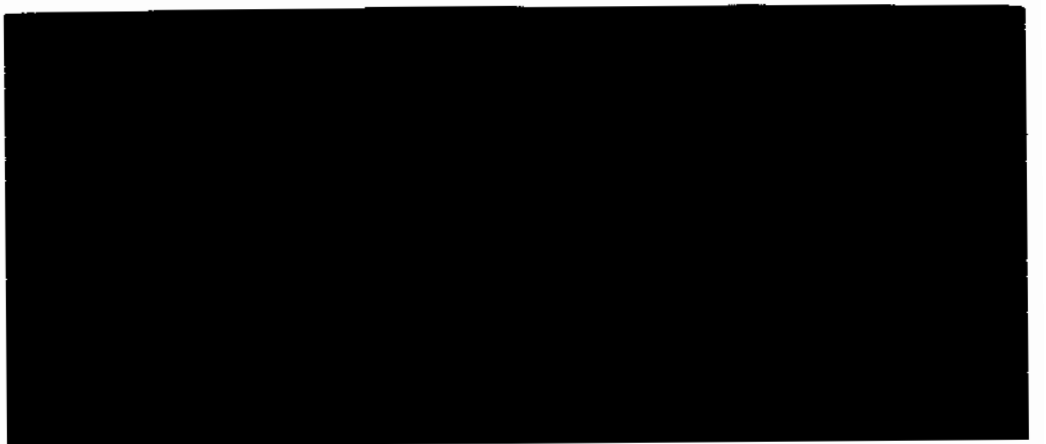
May it be the will of Hashem that we search and learn; that each of us has the insight to recognize our unique mission; to accept we are not meant to know all the answers; and to realize only through service and mitzvahs can life have significance.

TOLDOS

Normal, Imperfection, Perfection, and Joy

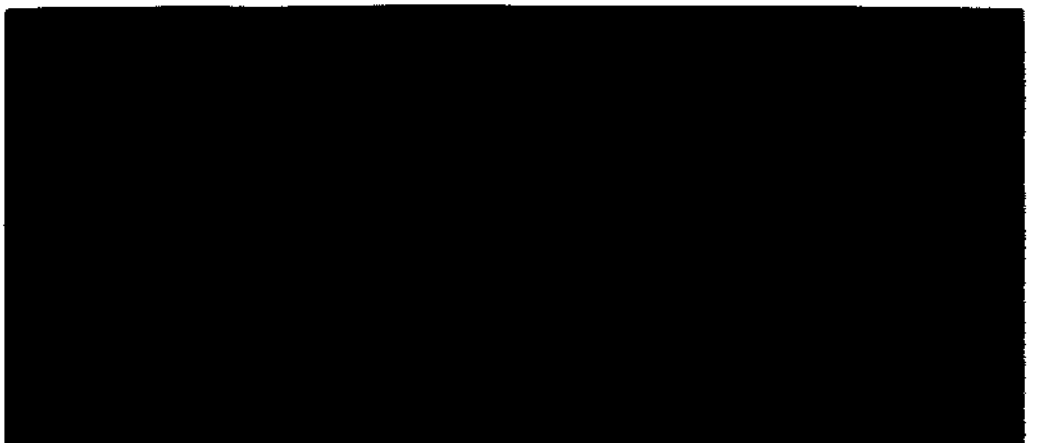
One of the major problems we all face in our modern era is that so many people believe normal is perfect. They do not realize normal is not perfect, that it almost never happens that things go perfectly. People today are very disappointed when things do not go perfectly. They cast off relationships when they are not perfect. They quit jobs when they are not perfect. They excoriate institutions when they are not perfect.

That is one of the meanings of the holiday of Succot. For us to have a kosher succah, we have to have more shade than light, because life is that way. In life, there are more problems, more aggravations than there are bright spots. We all know that, but today we prefer to ignore it. In the olden days, people relished the moments of happiness and joy they could achieve in life. They did not expect to have joy and happiness all the time. After all, 15-20 percent of women died in childbirth. A woman had to have ten children to have five survive. People were ravaged by all sorts of illnesses, which today are easily shrugged off. People had no air conditioning or central heating. There was no telephone to keep in contact with distant relatives. Indoor plumbing was a fantasy; mail was irregular. Yet people accepted these hardships. They did not expect perfection in relationships. They did not expect perfection in jobs. Most of them were just happy to have a job. Earning a living was a difficult thing. Many times a husband and a wife did not see each other for weeks because the husband had to peddle goods in the country to make a living, or the husband travelled overseas to get enough money to bring their wife and children over. Sometimes these separations lasted years. Nobody expected that marriage would solve all their problems. Nobody felt they had to feel good about everything all the time. Everybody knew there was more shadow than light in life. They also knew that with G-d's help they could overcome their problems. They



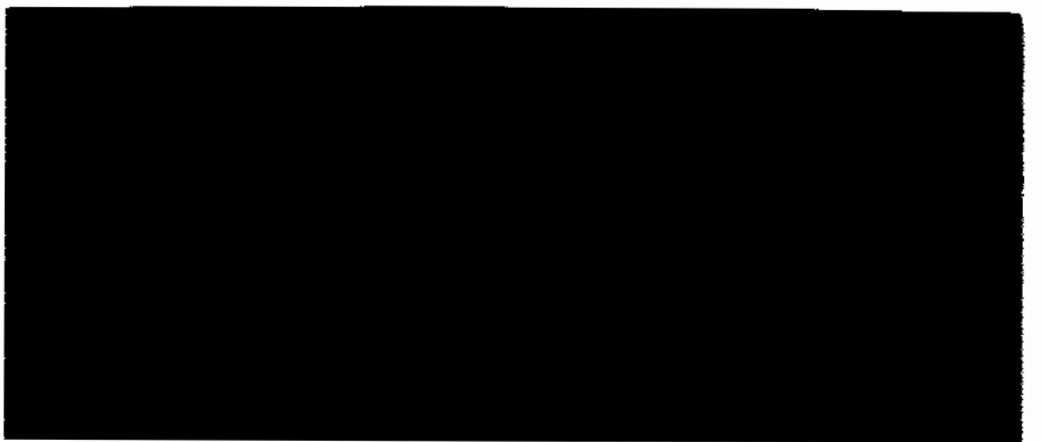
knew that if they could maintain their dignity, if they could appreciate what they had, if they could maintain their sense of rachmones and relate to people at least superficially, they had enough strengths to maintain a joyful attitude in life.

That is actually what the lulav stands for, dignity; the willow stands for the ability to express oneself; the myrtle, the ability to appreciate others and the world in which we live; the esrog, the ability to relate and empathize with each other. Today, for some reason, people do not stress the happy moments they have. They only stress the frustrations they experience. Something can be 99 percent perfect, but people only concentrate on the 1percent. They will make themselves miserable because they do not realize that normal is not perfect. In the Torah portion Toldos, we learn many of these things. We learn how Rivkah and Yitzchak have a good marriage, but not a perfect marriage. After all, they have trouble communicating with one another. As Rabbi Naftali Berlin states, the key to their relationship can be found when Rivkah first lays eyes on Yitzchak: she takes a veil and covers herself. Throughout her life, she felt insecure in her husband's presence. After all, her husband was a tzadek and the son of a tzadek. She was a daughter and sister of charlatans and cheats. She did not have the confidence to confront her husband when she thought he was wrong. After all, she was raised in a house of idolatry, and although she possessed great qualities of loving kindness, chesed, she came from a home which did not. The rabbis say that she never told her husband about the prophecy she received when she was pregnant with Yaacov and Esau, about how the older would serve the younger. Why did she need to have Yaacov employ a ruse to get the blessing? She should have just confronted Yitzchak and told him he was making a mistake in favoring Esau over Yaacov, but she could not. Yitzchak and Rivkah had a wonderful marriage, but not a perfect marriage. They raised two boys. They were fraternal twins and had the same education and love. One turned out good and one turned out bad. It is true later Esau did teshuva, but there



is no such thing as a perfect family. There are always going to be problems with children. Some are major and some are minor problems. Even with Yaacov there was a problem. He, too, should have told his mother he could not go through with the ruse against his father, but he did not. The rabbis say the Jewish people were punished for every tear that Esau shed when he found out he was not given the blessing. The tragedy of the situation was Yitzchak never intended to give the blessing of Abraham to Esau. He, too, was at fault. He should have explained to his wife and boys that the blessing that he was intending to give to Esau was a materialistic blessing, not a spiritual blessing. He had hopes that if Esau would be materially well off, he would turn to spiritual things. The blessing he gave to Yaacov when he left to go to Paddan Aram, to the family of his mother in Mesopotamia, was the blessing of Abraham. Somehow, Yitzchak and Rivkah failed to communicate to Esau that they did not want him to marry the Canaanite woman because after Esau saw that his parents sent Yaacov to Paddan Aram to take a wife from their family, he married the daughter of Ishmael, Abraham's son. Somehow, the educational system had been defective because once Esau realized how much his marrying a Canaanite woman had hurt his parents, he married a granddaughter of Abraham.

The rabbis teach us that the deeds of our forefathers are signs for their children. We have to realize that life is filled with problems, and we have to solve them. One of the main reasons why we must take pasoles, which means the leftovers from the granaries and wine vat and put them as covering for our succah–why only cut vegetation is allowed to cover our succah–is because we must take our problems and examine them through the prism of the stars, which signify G-d's presence. We have to realize that we are always going to have problems. We have to be able to examine our problems objectively. Therefore, if we are uncomfortable in a succah, we cannot be objective. For example, if it is raining or there are too many bugs, we leave the succah, but we have to examine our problems, and we have to realize that we are always



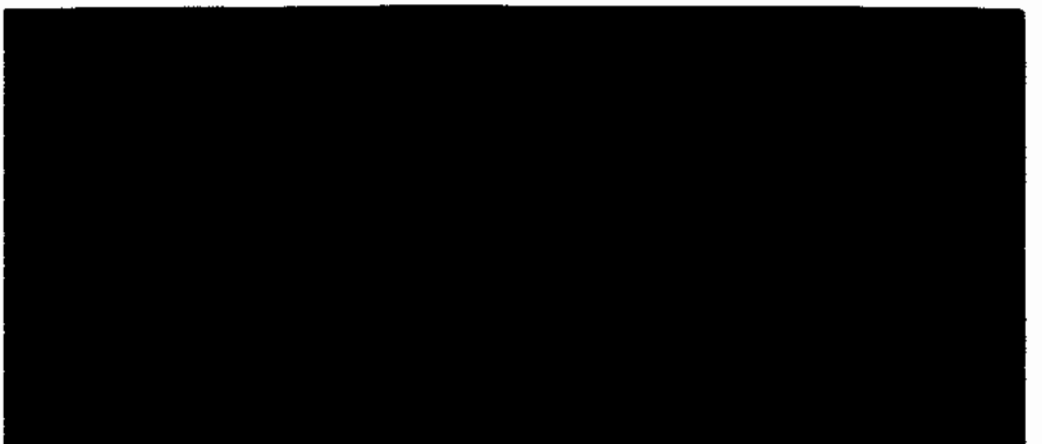
going to have problems. Judaism teaches us that we should strive for perfection, but we should not be surprised when we do not attain it. Life is filled with more shadow than light. Normal is not perfect. If we are always going to expect perfection, we are always going to be miserable. On the other hand, if we know that we are going to have problems, if we know things are not going to be perfect, then we can still attack our problems with gusto and joy.

That is what Succot teaches us and our forefathers teach us. In spite of everything, Yitzchak and Rivkah and all our forefathers faced life with joy and happiness because they knew that in spite of life's imperfections, there was joy in life. So, in spite of the many problems we have, we can, with G-d's help, overcome them and live happy and decent lives. Let us all hope and pray that we will all do so, so the Mashiach will come quickly in our day and bring the perfection for which we yearn, and the ability to recognize that we, by confronting the imperfection of our life today with joy, help bring about this perfection.

VAYAETZAE

Rocks, Reality, Dreams, Family, and Morality

The Torah portion Vayaetze really opens with the statement, "Yaacov, welcome to the world of problems." Up to this time, Yaacov thought that he was exempt from the problems of the world. After all, he was a scholar, an objective observer of the problems of the world, but now he found that he, the person who dwelled in tents, the completely whole person, the simple person, the scholar who deceived his father, tricked his brother by taking the blessing from him, and caused his brother to hate him so that he had to flee for his life, never to see his mother for many, many years. This was the man who understood life, he thought, at least theoretically, but as the Rabbi Yochanan said, commenting on this statement, "And Yaacov woke up from his sleep," he interprets it as Yaacov woke up from his learning. It was at this point that Yaacov had the famous dream of the ladder standing on the earth with its head reaching up to heaven. In other words, Jacob had to realize that he was just like everybody else, that he had to base himself on the earth, and then reach up to heaven, that he was subject to all the forces of nature just as everyone else was, that if he cut his finger, he would bleed, that if he got himself into certain interpersonal situations, he. himself, would be hurt, and what was worse, he would hurt others. In other words, you cannot have a spiritual life in this world unless you first go through the physical. This, of course, is a great Jewish concept. We know this from music. After all, what could be more beautiful than a violin concerto or more spiritual? When we play a violin, we have a wooden box on which we have some horsehair and we glide over it some catgut. It results in such a beautiful, spiritual experience. In life. we have to do things physically to reach a spiritual level of greatness. We have to realize that we, too, have physical characteristics, and that we can be swayed by lust and greed and ambition unless we are very careful. This is, of course, the beauty of the Shabbat. Shabbat is a physical thing: we eat good food; drink wine; eat meat; we are friendly with our wives. We achieve a spiritual



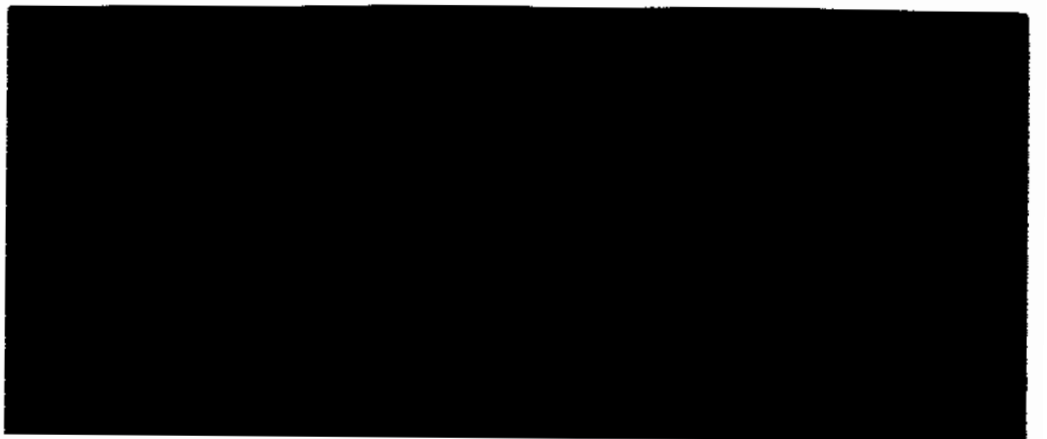
experience by going through the physical. Of course, we also pray and study Torah, but that is not enough unless we ground it in physical things.

In fact, if we look at this Torah portion carefully, we will see that the symbol of the rock predominates. The rock is mentioned four times. Jacob, at this time, had a terrible problem. He was foundering on a rock, on the rock of realizing that if he was to amount to anything, to have a spiritual life, it had to be based upon reality. He realized that he, too, was a physical being. Of course, if we only think that we are physical beings, we are prone to drugs and alcohol and all sorts of other things. Jacob had to have a dream. If a person has a dream, then he will not get into trouble. If teenagers have a dream, they will not be involved with drugs and alcohol and alternative cultures. We learn about the rock in the very beginning of this Torah portion when it says that Jacob took from the rock of the place and put it under his head. Jacob was suffering. It says he could not understand what was happening to him. How could he suffer from these types of problems? He had a terrible problem, and he had to put the rock under his head. He had a guilty conscience. What did he do to his brother and his father? How could he have gotten himself into this fix? At the very end we learn how after he fled from Laban, that once again he and Laban set up a rock, ostensibly as a sign that Jacob would not harm Laban's daughters or grandchildren. The second time we learn about the rock is after Jacob woke up from his dream of the angels ascending and descending. There, too, he set up a rock in which he said that if G-d would be good to him and cause him to come back in peace, he would give ten percent of all of his earnings to G-d. This, of course, stated the obvious, that a person can have dreams, and it is important to have dreams after a person realizes that he is rooted in reality, but a person has to work at it. You cannot realize things with your mind. You have to work at it day in and day out. Jacob took oil and put it on top of the rock as a symbol that he was working at it. He was going to make sure that he would give all the effort

necessary because oil in Hebrew stands also for thought and learning and action. He had to, through his whole being, try to fulfill his dreams.

We have a third rock that is mentioned where Jacob encountered another problem. The problem now was not how to implement his dreams, not how to root his dreams in reality, but that he had to have a family to overcome life's problems. He came to the well, and there was a huge rock on the well, and the shepherds were sitting by saying they could not move the rock, that they needed more shepherds to come. When he saw Rachel, he was able to move the rock all by himself. A well is also a symbol of continuity in Judaism. A king of Israel had to be anointed by flowing water because the same water in a river this moment is not the same water from before, but the river stays. The same is true of Jewish history. If we want to make sure that our families continue, we have to have children, children who are raised in the correct way. So this problem that Jacob had was the problem of forming a family, because only with a family can you overcome life's problems, can you find the strength to implement your dreams, dreams that are rooted in reality.

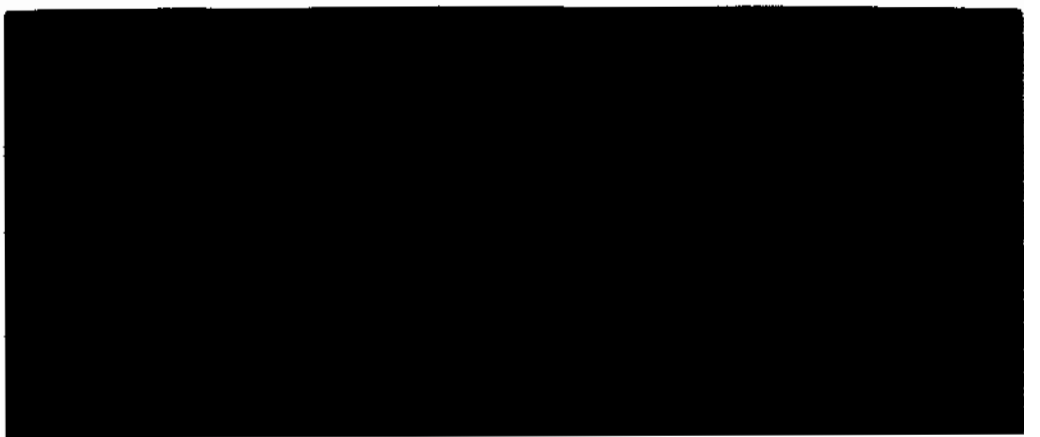
Finally, we have the last rock. What does that rock symbolize? That rock symbolizes the fact that Jacob had to make sure that he did not succumb to Laban's suggestion that all religions are the same, that everything is the same, and that Jacob should swear by his idols, too. There is only one Ten Commandments. There is only one morality. People say today, "Who says your morality is better than our morality?" We have to remember that in Laban's time, they really sacrificed children and this was not just a metaphor. In all the archaeological digs in Jordan and Lebanon and Tunisia and Libya, in every home you will find the bones of little children who were encased in a wall when a new house was built. There is only one morality. Judaism has much yet to teach the world. For example, reaching spirituality by going through the physical, not suppressing the physical.



In this Torah portion, too, we learn how Jacob almost lost his capacity to be a Jew three times. The first time was after he married Leah and Rachel when Leah had children and Rachel could not have children. Rachel came to him and said, "Give me children or else I will die." Instead of talking nicely to his wife, he said to her, "What do you think I am? In place of G-d?" In other words, he told her, "Lady, what are you complaining to me about? I already have children by Leah. It's not my fault. It's your fault." The rabbis say because he lacked compassion, he almost lost being a Jew, because a Jew has to be compassionate. As Hitler said, we are a sentimental people. He said it mockingly, but we say it proudly. We have to have compassion. If you are not compassionate, then you are not a Jew.

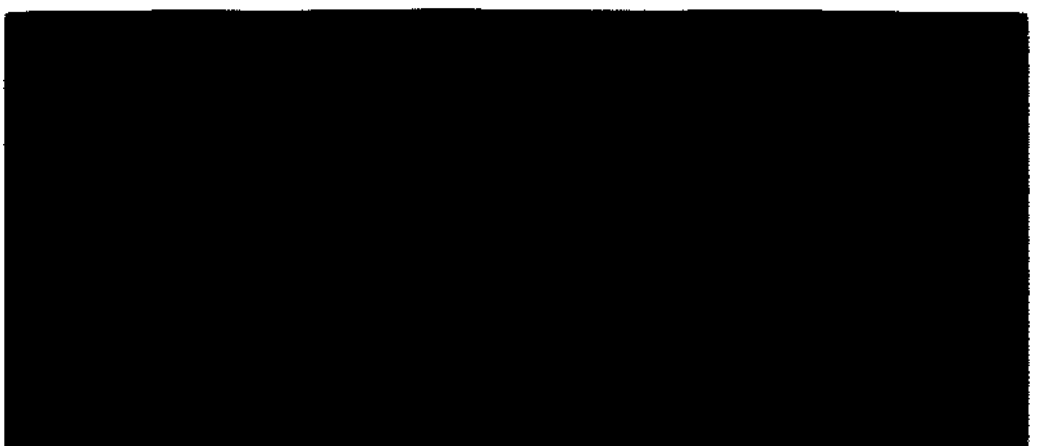
The second time he almost lost being a Jew was when he had a dream after he had been in Laban's house for 20 years. All he dreamed about was one sheep mounting another. He did not dream of angels ascending to heaven anymore. All he dreamed about was money, because the more sheep he dreamed about mounting each other, the more lambs he would have. All he thought about was money, and when all Jews think about is money, they cannot be Jews anymore.

The third time, of course, was when he succumbed to Laban's blandishments and said all religions were the same. If everything is the same, why should we Jews have to take the harder road? There is only one Ten Commandments, and we have to observe them. This is why this Torah portion teaches us about confronting life's problems. We have to, first of all, realize that we are human, and we have to base ourselves on reality, but we still must have ambitions and dreams, dreams of helping G-d perfect this world by perfecting ourselves, too. We must realize that we have to work at these dreams. We cannot just have dreams alone. We have to realize that we have to have a family. Only with a strong family can we accomplish these dreams. The Torah, itself, says so. Before G-d would give us a Torah, He had to make sure



the Jewish people had families, because a Torah without families is impossible to implement. We have to realize that we have to be just and moral and upright. If we are not, even if we have good dreams, even if we have the ability and desire to work to achieve our dreams and we have a family, we will accomplish nothing. These are the major rocks that we all have in our lives, and we have to make sure we implement them in the correct way. This is what Jacob is teaching us here. We must have dreams, but we must make sure we are rooted in reality. We must work hard to achieve our dreams, and we must have a family to help us achieve these dreams. We must, though, always try to achieve these dreams through moral and just means, and what we do must be based upon the Ten Commandments.

I am reminded of the story they tell about a woman who came in to wake her son. She said, "It's already 8:00. You have to go to school." He said, "I don't want to go to school." She said, "You have to go to school." "Why," he said? "I'll give you three reasons," his mother said. "One, I pay taxes. Two, the teachers are expecting you. Three, you are the principal." We all have to realize that we are going to have problems in life. Everyone is going to have problems. How do we overcome our problems? By having goals, by having dreams, dreams that are based on reality, and by working hard to achieve these dreams, and by having a family that will help us work hard to achieve these dreams, and to always be moral and just. If we will do these things, then we will be able to overcome our problems. We will still have problems in life, but we will be able to overcome our problems because G-d has promised us that He will give us the strength to overcome our problems if we will act justly and morally and always realize that we need a family and community to help us. Let us all hope that we will all realize this so the Mashiach will come quickly in our day. Amen.



VAYISHLACH

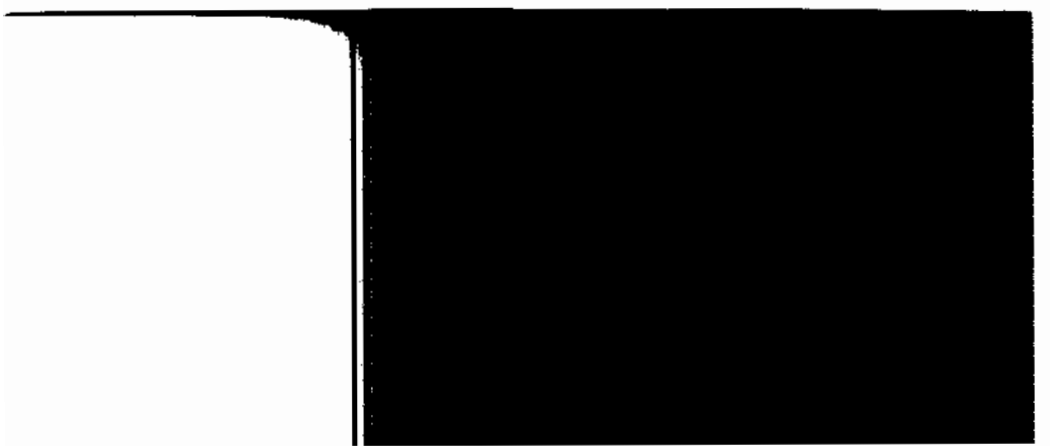
Relevance, Conflicts, and Communication

One of the underlying themes of the Torah portion Vayishlach is conflict resolution. How do we resolve conflicts? Throughout this Torah portion, we learn about different conflicts and how they were resolved. We learn about the conflict between Yaacov and Esau. We learn also about the conflict between Yaacov and his father, Yitzchak. We learn about the conflict between the brothers of Jacob, especially Levi and Shimon, and the city of Schem, whose heir apparent had raped Dena and brought her as a captive to the city of Schem. We also learn about the conflict between Reuven and Yaacov and how these conflicts had to be resolved. If we look at the conflict between Yaacov and Esau, it is hard to understand how this conflict was resolved. After all, Esau was coming with 400 men toward Yaacov. It looked like there was going to be a pitched battle, but at the last moment he came forward and embraced his brother and kissed his brother. Some rabbis say that it was not with a full heart that Esau kissed Yaacov, but others say, no, it was with a full heart, but the fact is he did it. He did not destroy Yaacov. What made him change his mind? For 22 years, he had nursed his hatred and all of a sudden, with a great magnanimous gesture, embraced his brother. What caused this conflict to be resolved?

It seems to me that what causes most conflicts to be resolved is that they become irrelevant. The conflict, itself, is not solved, but the whole reason for the conflict becomes irrelevant. Today, countries no longer fight over colonies because colonies are a burden, not a help. In the olden days, a colony could make a country rich. They would pump all sorts of natural resources into the country and ship them all sorts of gold and other precious metals, but today it costs more money for troops to maintain a colony than it is worth, and today, with modern technology, it is much easier for the countries, themselves, to ship the raw materials to another country to turn them into great wealth. In fact, it is not the

countries in the world today who have great natural resources who are the richest countries. After all, Hong Kong, Singapore, and Japan are very poor in natural resources, but they are very, very rich countries. On the other hand, the Soviet Union has immense wealth in natural resources but is actually a very poor country. Even the United States, with all its rich resources, would not be the rich country it is except for education. According to every study, it was the education of its people that produced the country's great economic progress. In fact, it was only because of the GI Bill of Rights, many economists say, that the United States forged forward after World War Two. It is education that is the greatest natural resource that we have. This has even been proved in Israel where everyone thought that this year's Russian immigration, over 700,000 Jews, would be a terrible drain on the Israeli economy, but, on the contrary, it has been a great boon because they come with great amounts of education and expertise, and they have transformed the Israeli economy and made it a booming, modern economy which is at the forefront of all sorts of technology. Computer imaging and things of that nature are loaded up with Israeli inventions.

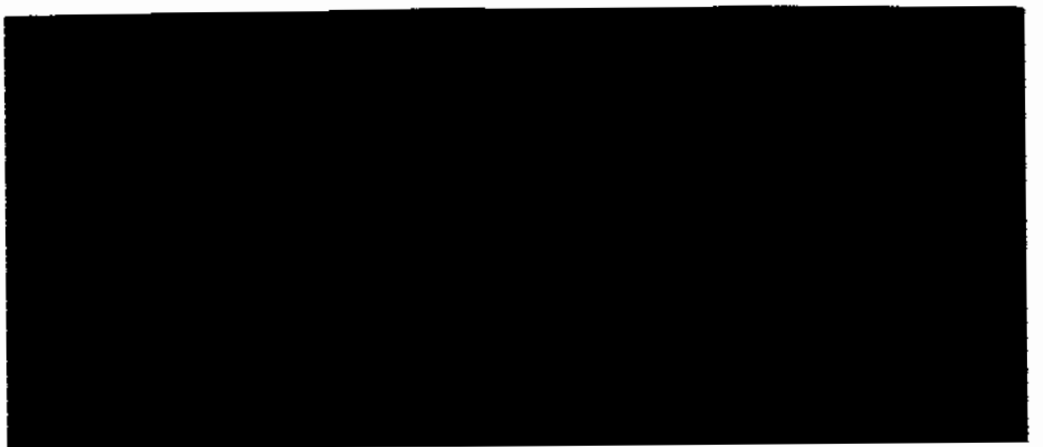
So we see that conflicts usually do not become resolved but become irrelevant. The same thing is true with the Jewish fights between Chasidim and Misnagim. They are not really going to know except maybe some places in Williamsburg or Boro Park or Bnai Brak in Israel. Conflicts do not usually become resolved but become irrelevant. This is what happened with Esau. He looked at his brother, who was limping and who had a family, and Esau saw he was much richer than his brother, even though his brother gave him a rich present. He said, "What am I fighting for? Do I really want the spiritual blessing? Do I want to have to live like Jacob? Do I want to have to live with all these Jewish restrictions?" He saw that what he was fighting for was ridiculous. It was irrelevant. He did not want that spiritual blessing. In fact, it says something very interesting in the text. It says, "Esau went to Sayer." Sayer means goat and is another name for Yom Kippur because on



Yom Kippur we have the two goats, one which is sacrificed and one which is sent out into the wilderness, the keynote of the holiday. Esau said all he was interested in Judaism was Yom Kippur. It says, "Yaacov went to Succos." Yaacov was interested in the minutiae. He was interested in observing his religion to the fullest. Esau looked at Yaacov and said, "What do I need it for? As long as Yaacov will accept me and treat me with dignity and respect, that is all I want."

That is similar today where we have many conflicts, and the conflicts come about because people misunderstand what their argument is about. In fact, a religious man is usually one who has the most passion, and usually what all the others want is to be accepted. They want a place to come to shul on Rosh Hashonna and Yom Kippur. In fact, at the RCA convention it was talked about how many orthodox shuls are becoming exclusive clubs. Unless a person observes one hundred percent, they are not welcome. This is contrary to all Jewish philosophy, and contrary to what Yaacov did with Esau. Every Jew should be made to feel comfortable in a synagogue. That was one of the points that was made at the convention. So, when it came to the resolution of the conflict between Yaacov and Esau, there was no force necessary. There was not even negotiation because the whole issue was irrelevant. Esau really was not interested anymore in spiritual leadership. He did not want to tie himself down to this type of life style.

Later, too, we learn about the conflict between the sons of Jacob and the city of Schem because of the rape of Dena. We see, too, that force was used but this was a terrible way to resolve the conflict. And Jacob knew it because he said, "You have made us stink in the eyes of the inhabitants of Canaan," and, what's more, he knew that this violence would not stop with violence for a noble cause but would be used any time there was a dispute. Later on, he was proven right because it was Shimon and Levi who held a cabal to kill Joseph, who was later sold to Egypt at Judah's insistence. We see that violence has no end, and that



is why I have talked about this many times before, that the great danger of a Rabbi Meir Kahane philosophy is not so much what it will do outside the Jewish camp, but what it will do inside the Jewish camp. It will lead to all sorts of terrible hatreds and violence. That is not the way that the conflict with Schem should have been resolved. It was resolved because G-d intervened and protected the Jewish people. It was resolved successfully, but it was not the model to be followed, as Jacob said in his own deathbed blessing to Shimon and Levi.

We also learn about how the conflict between Yaacov and Yitzchak was resolved. After all, Yaacov did not come directly home to see Yitzchak. He went to Shechem, but he realized later on that his father had much to teach him, his father, who was so passive. He realized that he needed some of the spiritual qualities of his father. Therefore, he was reconciled to him. This inner emotional conflict could be resolved because he saw that his own children had gone too far in the other direction. Then we have the conflict between Reuven and Jacob. When Reuven touched his father's bed and tried to arrange different sleeping partners for his father, this was a terrible insult to Jacob, but Jacob did not throw his son out but reprimanded him. Many conflicts can never be resolved by expelling a party. You must discuss and communicate so that the family can stay whole. It is interesting to note that the most important thing in all these conflict resolutions was that when the parties understood what the issues were, they immediately became irrelevant and there was nothing then to fight about. In other instances, many conflicts can be resolved readily if there is communication and understanding.

I am reminded of the story they tell about a man who was walking along a road and a robber accosted him and demanded his money. They fought and fought for over half an hour. Finally the robber was able to grab his wallet. He looked in the wallet and saw there was only one dollar in it. He looked at the man and said, "You fought for a whole

half hour for just a dollar?" The man looked at him and said, "No, I didn't know that's what you wanted. I thought you wanted the $100 in my shoe." Many times we find we fight senselessly. Let's all hope and pray that we will all learn how to resolve our conflicts peacefully so the Mashiach will come quickly in our day. Amen.