


Shmos

Optimism, Reality, and Suffering

One of the hardest things in life is to determine what is reality. It is so easy to believe that reality is what we want it to be rather than what it is. It is so easy to delude ourselves. We see this so often around us. An abused person will tell us, "Oh, that person who is abusing me really loves me. That's just the way he shows his affection." Or a person who is being taken advantage of will tell us, "My boss really appreciates me and, although I am underpaid now, wait until business really gets good. Then he is going to give me a big raise and a promotion." Or people with a weight or smoking problem will say, "Yes, I could lose weight anytime I want to or give up smoking anytime I want to. It is just that now is not the right time."

We all crave to believe what we want to believe and, in a certain sense, our religion is biased in favor of us always being optimistic. One of our favorite expressions is, "*Yeeyeh Tov* - it will be good." We believe that eventually the world is going to be redeemed. We believe that eventually brotherhood, love, compassion, mercy will reign supreme throughout the world. We want so much to believe that our enemies will eventually love us that sometimes we feel that the *Mashiach* has already come and that they love us now, that things are already the way we want them to be. Sometimes, though, this can be very dangerous. Our enemies do not love us now and things are not usually the way we want them to be. A young man who was suffering from very severe pains came to my office recently but, instead of going to the doctor, he had convinced himself that these pains were nothing more than his nervous reaction to his upcoming SATs. He, though, was very sick and they had to rush him to the hospital. Another couple came to me convinced that their child's coughing and wheezing was nothing more than a cold when, in reality, the child had an advanced case of asthma and, if they would not have taken him to the hospital immediately, he would have died.

The truth is sometimes very hard to face, especially the truth about ourselves. We do not like to be told that we are cruel and vicious. We do not like to be told that we many times verbally abuse others because we are angry inside. We do not like to be told that a loved one is very sick and

needs medical attention. A young woman came into my office recently so proud of the fact that she had lost so much weight. She had convinced herself that she looked beautiful now. In reality, she was very sick and it turned out that she had lost so much weight because she had cancer. Her color was terrible. Yet, everybody around her had been praising her on her weight loss instead of trying to get her to see a doctor. She eventually went but, if she would have gone earlier, she might have been able to prevent herself from having to undergo many months of chemotherapy. It is wonderful to be optimistic, and we should be. It is wonderful to think that our enemies are eventually going to love us, but it is suicidal to believe that our enemies love us now when they have shown no indication that they do. Even if they mouth the words, we must look at their actions and not at their words. It is foolish for a battered spouse to pay attention to the so-called words of love that spill from the mouth of her batterer if he is still hitting her.

In this country we are suffering from an epidemic of violence because we want to believe so much that people have changed when they have not. We grant paroles to child molesters, rapists, and murderers, even though we have no indication at all that they have changed. We want to believe so much that people have changed either (1) because we are idealistic or (2) because we think it will save us money. It costs a lot of money to build prisons and keep people there, and it costs a lot of money to go to a doctor. It also costs a lot of money to maintain our defenses against our enemies. By and large, too, people do not respect weakness. They misconstrue acts of forgiveness without any basis in fact as signs of weakness. Juveniles who get away with serious crimes lose all respect for society, and they interpret society's lenient treatment of them as weakness and even as semi-approval. Because of this, they go on to commit even greater acts of violence. We all have to learn when to take people seriously and when not to. If things are too good to be true, they usually are. So many young people and senior citizens, when they receive notices in the mail that they have won huge prizes, get very excited and send in the required deposit only to learn later that they have lost all their money. It is important that we accurately assess reality. It is important that we gauge correctly the probable results of our acts. It is completely irresponsible for us to act on

what we would like the situation to be rather than on the way the situation really is. So many people want to be liked so much that they do things that they should not do, hoping against hope that this will win them the affection of the person or group whose love they want. Usually, this does not work. Usually, as long as you are useful, you are treated well but the minute you are not useful, you are told to go or you are completely ignored or you are harmed.

The Jewish people in Egypt found this out the hard way. They had thought that because Joseph was such a faithful servant of Pharaoh who had increased Pharaoh's power tremendously and who had restored order to Egypt and who had instituted a very fair tax system (only 20% of the people's income went to the king) that their position in Egypt was secure. They never recognized the danger signals. Joseph, during the famine, had moved the population about. He had bought up all the land. True, he had given the people a better life, but they resented the fact that they no longer owned property, that everything was owned by the king. It is true that their taxes were lower, but they did not feel that Joseph had their interests at heart. They felt that he had only the interests of Pharaoh at heart. Great benefit accrued to Egypt because of Joseph's handling of the affairs of state but, after Joseph died, Pharaoh did not need Jewish advisors any more. Joseph had done too good a job. As the *Torah* says, "A new king arose in Egypt who did not know Joseph." Some rabbis explain that a new king did not come to power in Egypt. It was the same king but he chose to forget everything Joseph and Joseph's people had done for Egypt. No matter what the agreements that were made between Pharaoh and the Jewish people and Pharaoh and Joseph's immediate family, they were disregarded. They were not kept. It was no longer in Pharaoh's interests to keep these agreements, and there was no one who could force Pharaoh to keep them. The Jewish people at that time had misconstrued reality. They thought that because they had an agreement with Pharaoh to live in the land of Goshen that everything would be all right. They were wrong. Agreements are worth nothing unless they are self-enforcing, but who was going to force Pharaoh to live up to his word?

In the current discussions between Israel and the PLO, Israel would be well advised to remember this basic lesson of Jewish history, that agree-

ments are only kept with the Jewish people as long as they are beneficial to the Pharaohs of every age. If the agreements we have made are not self-enforcing, they will be broken immediately when they are no longer construed to be in the interests of the nation or people with whom we have made them. Who is going to force the PLO to keep their word, and what can Israel do if they do break it?

The *Medrash* tells us that the Jewish people in the time of Egypt completely misconstrued the reality of their situation. If Pharaoh talked bad about them (because they were so successful), they thought that it was just to placate the masses but that really Pharaoh loved them and needed them. The rabbis tell us that the way Pharaoh tricked the Jewish people into slavery was by appealing to their patriotism. He said that Egypt was threatened by a foreign enemy and that fortifications had to be built, and he urged all Egyptians, especially the Jews, to come forward and help build these fortifications. The Jews eagerly responded. They worked hard making a huge amount of bricks every day. After Pharaoh saw how many bricks they could make each day, he then decreed that from then on the Jewish people would have to make that number of bricks every day, and their slavery began.

In our day, too, we saw how the Jews of Germany did not believe Hitler. They thought that he was just trying to take advantage of the economic plight of the masses so that he could get elected, but he really was not going to do what he said he was going to do in his book *Mein Kampf*. In spite of all the anti-Jewish decrees passed by Hitler's regime, many Jews still deluded themselves, even in 1939 just before World War II broke out, that things were going to get better. The enemies of the Jewish people have always tried to capitalize on Jewish hope. Even in the ghettos which the Nazis set up in Europe during World War II, they always spread false rumors to give the Jewish people hope that things were going to get better so that they could get more work out of them or get them to cooperate with them. The trains headed to Auschwitz were really going to wonderful farm cooperatives in the Ukraine, etc. The Nazis were just following Pharaoh's example when he said, "*Hovo Nischakmo Lo* - let us treat them cunningly." Pharaoh knew that the Jewish people were always optimistic, that they always wanted to believe that love and brotherhood were at hand. All those

who have oppressed our people have followed in Pharaoh's footsteps. They have always tried to use our optimistic nature in order to trick us into believing that things are going to be all right when, in reality, they were planning our destruction. Eventually, all their plots were thwarted, but it took a lot of Jewish suffering before our enemies were defeated.

Let us all hope and pray that we Jewish people today will always retain our optimism, that we will always yearn and hope that peace, love, and brotherhood will come soon, but that we will always realistically assess our current situation, that we will not fall for the tricks of the modern Pharaohs and allow them to enslave us or destroy us. We have confidence that no matter what our enemies do, they eventually will be defeated, but let us hope and pray that we will not fall for their tricks so that we will not have to suffer as the Jews of Egypt did. Let us always look reality in the eye and not cloud it with our optimistic hopes for the future so that our people will be secure and suffer no more, and so that truly peace, harmony, and brotherhood will become a reality.