

Achare Mos

Vulnerability, Family, Community, and Freedom

Each of us is vulnerable. We all know that the wheel can turn. Those who are on top today can be on the bottom tomorrow. The sun does not always shine. There used to be a phrase which went something like this: *Be kind to the person on his way up so that he will be kind to you on your way down.* Life is filled with all sorts of twists and turns. Every Jew knows this. That's one of the reasons why Jews have always understood that they have to help their fellow Jews no matter where they live or how far they may be from them in language, culture, or religious practice. Those Jews who have it good today may find that in a few years the wheel has turned and they are now persecuted and hounded and need the help of those Jews who they, themselves, helped just a few years earlier. That's why close to a billion dollars was raised in this country to help the 500,000 Jews from Russia and the 30,000 Jews from Ethiopia go to Israel. Jewish history teaches us that there is no such thing as permanent stability for any Jewish community. *Pidyon Shevuyim*, the redeeming of the captives, has been one of the most important of all Jewish commandments. Jews, since the time of Babylon, have known that they have to redeem their fellow Jews from captivity, even if it meant selling the *sefer Torah* in the *shul*. Giving to the UJA today is the modern day fulfillment of this ancient Jewish commandment. There are still 500,000 Jews in Russia who are expected to leave for Israel in the next five years, but more than our vulnerability as a community, we all know that we are vulnerable as individuals.

We all know that we have to risk if we are to achieve anything. We have to risk getting hurt if we want to establish a personal relationship with anyone. We have to risk our capital if we want to make a profit. Life, itself, is a huge risk. We never know as individuals where danger may lurk. Even performing the natural acts which we must do in order to live, like breathing and eating, puts us at risk. We may breathe polluted air and eat food that is not good for us and destroy ourselves. Life is filled with risk and, even after we have established a relationship with a person we love, it could break at

any time, and even if we have made money in a business deal, we know that we can lose it all in the next business deal, and even if we have successfully done all those things which we should do to maintain our health, we can still get sick. Our present condition is no guarantee of what our position will be in the future. How can we know then what are the risks we should take and what are the risks that we shouldn't take?

Judaism has always put a great emphasis on the family because we have always believed that it is only through a family that we can really realize ourselves. One of the reasons for this is that a family reduces risk. A loving extended family will enhance a person's marriage and allow the spouses to relate better to each other because it is a support group that each spouse can go to when they are having difficulties. There are people in the family whom they trust and with whom they can talk over vexing problems which arise in every marriage. Love, after all, is a very difficult thing. Not only is it wonderful, but it also hurts. Jealousy comes to the fore. Feelings of insufficiency and unworthiness come to the fore. Fear of losing the partner you love comes to the fore. All sorts of involuntary emotions beset people who are in love, and even though their head tells them that these fears are groundless, many times these involuntary emotions cannot be stilled unless they can be talked over with someone. So many inlaw problems are caused because one of the spouses thinks that the other spouse's family thinks him or her unworthy and wants to steal back their daughter or son.

Love can make a person very insecure. This insecurity can also come from an overwhelming fear of loneliness. A spouse does not want to be lonely the way he or she felt before he or she was married and, therefore, he or she makes all sorts of demands on the other spouse which almost ensure that he or she will be lonely because the other spouse will run off to either work or chores so as not to be choked. Fear of losing money can actually cause a person to lose all his money. Instead of settling for a small loss, a person will risk more and more to recoup his initial loss and eventually will lose everything. The same applies to physical health. A person may go on a

crash diet without adequate supervision by his doctor and actually incur more severe health problems than if he would not have gone on a diet at all.

We are all vulnerable in life, and we all need to reduce the element of risk so we can live lives on an even keel. One of the reasons why Jews have been successful in every culture in which we have lived is because of the strong family and community ties which we have always had in the past and which are now fraying in America to the point where in another generation or two they may not exist. A strong family allowed a person to risk capital in opening a small business because it knew that if things got really bad, the person could always rely on the family for help. This applied, of course, to advice in interpersonal matters and, also, a member of a family always knew that if he or she got sick, the other members of the family would step in and help.

Pesach is coming. We all know that we all gather together in family units on *Pesach* to celebrate freedom. We proclaim that freedom is the ideal condition of man, but freedom has a down side, too. That down side is that it places an individual in such a risk-filled environment that he or she can be consumed and destroyed by it unless the individual has the support of a family.

The question is many times asked, why is it that we read the *Hagaddah* at night? Why don't we read it during the day? After all, on *Rosh Hashona* we blow the *shofar* during the day. On *Succos* we shake the *lulav* during the day. Why should we conduct the *seder* at night? It could not be because we are reading a text from the *Torah*, because we always read the *Torah* during the day and not at night, with the exception of *Simchas Torah*. The answer is that we must relive slavery in order to appreciate freedom, that unless we realize how bad slavery was, we will not do anything to prevent it from happening again to ourselves or to others. We will not learn how to be the compassionate and kind people we need to be to prevent slavery from recurring. We gather together in family units also to teach us that it would have been impossible for the Jewish people to have survived slavery at all unless they would have had some semblance

of a family. It is true that the Egyptians tried to break up the Jewish family by separating husbands and wives, by killing the boys, but somehow the Jewish family remained intact for the most part. In order to get through those dark times, we needed support groups, the support of our family and our community.

Why, then do we read the *Torah* during the day? The answer is that many times when the sun shines, many people forget that they need support groups. They forget that they need a family and a community. They think that their family and community is a hindrance. They may have to share their spouse's time with the family. They may have to share their children with the family. They also may be called upon to do things for other persons in the family, especially persons who are now on the bottom and not on the top, and they may not want to do it. They forget that the wheel turns, that soon they may need the help of the family and the community. The Jewish psyche knows very well that the wheel turns for the Jewish community as a whole and for each of us as individuals. It is very difficult for us as individuals, no matter how smart or talented or psychologically sound we are, to make it without a support group. They did a study in Israel about those people who live the longest, and they found that the ultra orthodox in Israel live longer than other groups. This group is basically poor, and their diet is not the greatest, but the reason that was given for their living longer was because they each had such a wonderful and extensive support group.

It is interesting to note that on the holiday of *Purim* we read the *Megillah* twice, in the evening and in the morning. Rabbi Yehoshua Ben Levi says that we have to remember our deliverance, both in the night and the day. On *Purim* the Jewish people were saved from the wicked designs of Haman, but we were still subjects of Achaverosh, and Achaverosh was a very unstable person. According to the rabbis, he suffered from paranoia. Haman was able to convince him to kill all the Jews because he told him that the Jews were a subversive element in the population and a threat to his throne. Esther was able to save the Jewish people because the king's suspicions had already been aroused about Haman after he heard Haman say that is the king

wanted to honor somebody, he should put the king's crown on that person's head, ride him on the king's horse, and clothe him in the king's robe. Achaverosh told Haman to do this for Mordechai, but the king understood that Haman first thought that the king was talking about him (Haman). The Jewish people were still in danger even after the plot of Haman was foiled. The king could have another change of heart in the future. This has always been the predicament of the Jew in exile. The king or government could always change its mind. So even when the sun shines, we have to remember that this may only be temporary.

The *Torah* is read only during the day to teach us that we need the *Torah* in order to strengthen our families and in order to minimize our risks as individuals even during good times. Our problems as individuals do not cease when things are good for the community. They may even increase. The *Torah* is meant not just for the sick or the old or the persecuted. It is meant for healthy, vibrant people. It allows us to minimize our risk and lead life with a sense of purpose, meaning, and greater security.

In the *Torah* portion *Achare Mos* we find reference to this when it says, "If a person from the house of Israel slaughters an ox or a lamb or a goat..." the rabbis explain what it means to slaughter an ox or a lamb or a goat, and they say that "*shor*," "ox" in Hebrew, also means the "umbilical cord or love", that "*kesev*," "lamb" in Hebrew, also comes from the same word as "to conquer", and that the word "*oz*," "goat" in Hebrew, also comes from the same word, which means "strength."

In life we all want to love and be loved, to conquer in our professions, to be successful, and to have physical strength, but in each of these areas, we are very vulnerable. In order to obtain these things, we must sacrifice to make sure that we have strong families. *Pesach* especially teaches us that we must strengthen our families and community if we are to lessen our vulnerability as a people and as individuals so that we can live good lives in freedom, so we will be able to take the risks necessary to live the good life, and so that the risks we take will not destroy us but build us up. May this be so. Amen.