

Nitzavim-Vayelech

Cooperation, Emotion, Morality, and School

Life is not like school. Many people confuse life with school. Many good students especially confuse success in school with success in life. The skills that are needed to succeed in life are not necessarily the same skills that are needed to excel in school. Because of this, many people who have done very well in school cannot make it in life because they conceive of life as school. Success in school depends primarily upon individual achievement. Each student works alone and takes tests alone, even if he is surrounded by a classroom of students. A student learns the rules of the game, psyches out the teacher, learns the material the teacher wants him or her to learn, scores well on his tests, and then proceeds to get a good grade. The courses in school, too, are generally graded on the curve, which means that you can get good grades even if you do not do especially well, as long as the rest of the class does much worse. A student also is graded on class participation. A student, therefore, knows that it is important to be recognized, always to have his hand up, always to be ready to give a sharp answer. Success in school does not depend upon cooperation. It does not depend upon sharing knowledge. It does not depend upon developing social skills. It does not depend upon being sensitive to your fellow students. All it depends upon is digesting material, learning how to analyze it, and learning how to give it back to a teacher in the way the teacher wants it with perhaps a few new insights. Good grades depend almost entirely upon the hard work of a student working alone. If a student is sensitive to his teacher and knows what his teacher wants and can give it back to him or her in writing or orally, he will get a good grade. Personality may enter into it a little bit, for example, if a teacher does not like a particular student, but if that student still does his work and his grades are high enough so that there are no border line situations, he will get a good grade.

Life, though, is not that way. In life our own efforts do not always determine how well we are going to do. We can do everything right and still fail. Farmers especially know this. They know that they can work real hard, plow at the correct time, plant the seed the way they are supposed to, fertilize, and then the rains do not come or too much rain comes. Locusts

invade or rival armies march across the land. These farmers have done everything right, but they still have failed. No crop comes in. In life we all need G-d's help. Without G-d's help we cannot succeed. G-d is our silent partner in everything we do. If we would have started a business in Houston in 1979, we could not have helped but make a fortune, even if we were a poor businessman. On the other hand, if we would have started a business in 1986 right before the price of oil collapsed, we could have been the best business man in the world but we still would have failed. Each of us has a silent partner in everything we do, and that is G-d. G-d, though, does not demand that we give Him 50% of our wages or profits. He only asks that we give 10%, not to Him, but to the poor and needy. But more than that, G-d has told us that He wants us to bond together so that we can mitigate the hardships of life. If we will work together cooperatively, we can lessen the dangers that face us all. This, of course, is the reason why we create communities and the underlying reason for insurance. We are all to share the risks of life.

In life it is not true that if we do poorly but everybody else does much worse that we will succeed. If we are salesmen and we do poorly and all the other salesmen do even worse, our company will go bankrupt. We will not get an "A." We cannot succeed in life by putting other people down. The only way to keep people down is to stay down in the mud with them.

In life, if we are to succeed, we have to raise everyone up together. In school we learn about the importance of individual achievement, but we do not learn about the importance of teamwork. We also learn only about how to satisfy the needs of our head but not the needs of our heart. Every human being is born not only feeling inadequate, but he or she is born inadequate. A baby cannot take care of himself. Without the constant care of a mother and a father or other adults, a baby could never survive the first year. We are all born with a great number of needs. We all know that we are born incomplete, and every religion tries to teach us how we can complete ourselves, what it is that we need in order to feel whole and adequate. Some religions say that the most important thing is to receive love, not to give love but to open up our hearts to receive the love of some deity, that in this way we will be perfected. Judaism does not believe this. Babies cannot survive without receiving love. We are adults, though. We

must do deeds of loving kindness. Judaism believes that we are perfected by assuming responsibility for others.

That why marriage is such an important event in the Jewish religion. That's why it is celebrated with such great joy in front of so many people. The rabbis have taught that Adam was originally hermaphrodite, androgynous, both man and woman, that Eve was not created from Adam's rib, but that Adam was divided in two, and that since then man has needed a woman and a woman has needed a man in order to be complete. It is the assumption of responsibility for others, especially a spouse, that makes a person whole. It is the opportunity to do deeds of loving kindness, *Chesed*, for each other every day which completes a person. It is not the receiving of love which redeems. It is the doing of deeds of loving kindness. In Judaism it is the assumption of responsibility which redeems and sanctifies. It is not the receiving of anything, even knowledge, which redeems. There is a modern Jewish heresy which believes that just the acquiring of knowledge redeems, that a person becomes redeemed just by learning anything. Attending courses, obtaining more and more degrees in itself is redemptive. In other words, the world can be redeemed by acquiring culture. Get "A's" in all your courses, know all about the artists and writers and composers of the world, appreciate their work, and you will be complete. Unfortunately, this is not true. Nazi Germany proved that knowledge and culture alone are not redemptive. In fact, they can be just the opposite because they give man more power to do evil. An overwhelming majority of the greatest German writers and philosophers and composers and artists in the 1930's supported Hitler and Nazi Germany. Getting an "A" in school does not mean that you are a good person or that you are going to be a good person.

Judaism stresses learning, but learning in order that you should be able to do *mitzvahs*. Learning should make you a morally responsible human being. Jewish learning is meant to teach us how to live moral lives, how to improve our character. It is not meant primarily to teach us skills. I remember how my grandfather, who received a *Cheder* education in Poland, could never understand how a lawyer or a doctor or an accountant could commit a crime. "After all," he would say, "they are educated people. How could educated people do such a thing?" He confused Jewish educa-

tion with secular education. Knowledge alone will never complete man. Studying in order to learn how to do G-d's will, how to do *mitzvahs* will refine a person and will make him a better person. It will cause him to want to be better. It will cause him to want to shun all evil things. Traditionally, grades were not given in *yeshivas*. People did not study alone either. They always studied with a partner and, in class, the objective was not to study in order that you should be able to get a good grade but in order that you should learn how to behave toward your fellow man and toward G-d.

On *Rosh Hashona* and *Yom Kippur* we review these teachings. In the *Kedushas Havom*, the special prayer which we insert in every *Amidah* during *Rosh Hashona* and *Yom Kippur*, we ask for three things that we need in order for us to live fulfilling lives, in order for us to help G-d perfect the world. First of all, we ask that G-d should put His awe upon all whom He has created so that we will all bind together into one brotherhood so that we can do His will with a perfect heart." All of us should not just be concerned about individual achievement. We have to realize that we have to learn cooperative skills. We have to learn how to be sensitive to each other. We have to learn that unless the smallest among us also rise, we will all be pulled down. We also ask that "praise be given to those who fear G-d and hope and free speech be given to those who yearn for Him, joy to Thy land, happiness to Thy city." We have to fill more than our intellectual and material needs. We also have to fill our emotional needs and, for that, we need to learn how to deepen our relationships and never feel that by being unattached, that by roaming free, we can achieve happiness.

In this prayer, too, we also ask that "the righteous will see and be happy and the upright exult and the pious thrill with delight because iniquity has shut its mouth that the rule of tyranny has been abolished "from the land." We ask that righteousness and uprightness be stressed, not just the acquiring of skills. Life is not an athletic contest in which only the skills of the performers count. Life also requires us to be upright and moral. Happiness cannot be found in the development of skills alone. Happiness is composed of three strands, all of which must be intertwined. Happiness comes when we not only achieve self-set goals, but also when we know

that we can bring joy to others and when we know that we are accepted for ourselves.

On *Rosh Hashona*, too, we say that *Teshuva*, *Tefila*, and *Tzedakah*, repentance, prayer, and charity remove the evil degree. We all need prayer to remind us that we need G-d's help and the help of others to achieve our goals. Life is not school. We cannot make it just by our own efforts alone. We also need *Teshuva*, which means to turn. We have to learn how to turn to others, to turn back from being insensitive to others. We have to learn how to change our ways so that we are not just thinking only about ourselves. We have to realize, as the Prophet Samuel did, that our strength comes from turning toward our home, and we must be concerned about "*Tzedakah*," which in Hebrew does not just mean "charity," but also "righteousness." We must be concerned that our actions be just and that our society be based upon righteousness.

On *Rosh Hashona*, too, we blow three notes from the *shofar*. The *Tekiah* is a strong note, a note of achievement but it is not a note of lasting achievement. It is not a *Tekiah Gedola*. The *Tekiah Gedola* can only come after we have passed through the *Shvorim Teruah*, the *Shvorim*, and the *Teruah*. The *Tekiah Gedola* stands for the complete man, for the man who does not feel alienated from this world, for the man who does not feel incomplete. This can only happen if we learn how to assume responsibility for ourselves, for our spouses, for our families, for our community, and for the world. In school we may have learned about the first *Tekiah*, about how to develop our abilities, but that is not enough. *Rosh Hashona* teaches us that we must assume responsibility for others if we are to be happy. This, of course, does not mean that we have to assume so much responsibility that we suffer a breakdown. It means that we must assume the normal responsibilities that come our way. If we want to be worthy of a *Shana Tova*, a good year, we must be concerned about doing deeds of loving kindness. We must not only hear the call of our own ambition, the *Tekiah*, but we must also hear the *Shvorim Teruah*, the broken note of people who need our help, of people who need our sympathy and empathy, especially the broken notes of the members of our own family. We also must hear the *Shvorim*. We also must hear the cry of our own soul. Our soul needs more than material success. Our soul needs relationships. Our soul needs the

opportunity to do *Chesed*, especially for our family and friends. We also need to hear the *Teruah*, the cry of those who have been treated unjustly. We must be aware of the fact that it is not just knowledge which is going to turn our society into a good and great society, but it is the teaching and implementing of moral values. We must hear those who have been spoiled by the violence, the crime, the greed, and the rapaciousness of much of our society. We must always remember that without a firm moral base, no knowledge, no matter how new or inclusive, will ever bring us or our society happiness. Let us all remember that in order for us to have a good year, we must learn to work with everyone, develop our hearts as well as our minds, and make sure that all our dealings with others are based upon the moral teachings of our faith. May we, by so doing, merit a *Shana Tova*.

On behalf of myself, my wife, and my family, I wish you all a New Year based on empathy for others, on the fulfillment of your emotional as well as intellectual needs, and on the values of our faith. *L'Shana Tova Tikotaivu*.