

NDSO

JUNE 1981
Rabbi Joseph Radinsky

One of the great errors of our day is that we do not teach our children how to fail. Everyone in life ultimately fails. There will always be somebody who will run faster than we can, be smarter than we are, and be more successful than we are. Our very physical bodies will weaken and eventually fail. No doctor in the long run ever saves a patient. He may restore a patient's health for a few years but eventually the patient's body will cease to function. In our success-oriented society we have, by our undue stress on fleeting worldly success, maimed ourselves and our children. We have taught them that they can not be happy unless they always succeed. This is completely false.

Judaism does not measure the worth of a man's life based on the criteria of worldly success. Whether you are a successful doctor or lawyer or accountant or businessman is irrelevant. Whether you became a millionaire or big politician does not really count. What counts is whether you have tried your best and were able to expand the realm of the good and raise a family who, too, is interested in expanding the realm of the good in this world. If a person tries his best, raises good children, and does good ✓deeds, then, by Judaism's standards he is a very, very successful individual. That's why the greatest tribute that can be paid to a person after he is gone is for his children to light a yahrzeit lamp, come to the Synagogue, and conduct the service. This symbolizes that a person left behind children who are also interested in expanding the realm of the good in this world. Of course, if a person's children are complete bums and no-good-niks, saying Kaddish does not help. To raise a child who will follow in the path of the good and right is the greatest things that a person can do in Judaism.

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We believe in the conservation of morality. Just as there is a scientific law of the conservation of matter and energy which means that no matter or energy can ever be destroyed. (Since Einstein, we learned how to change matter into energy and not destroy it.) So, too, we believe that there is a law of the conservation of morality. No good deed that a person ~~ever~~ does in this life is ever lost. It continues and, based on it, the world can become better and better. A person who always tries his best and does ^{all} the good deeds ~~that come to his hand~~ ^{he can} and raises children who also recognize the importance of doing good deeds is, according to Judaism, a very successful person even though he may have failed at business, may never have gotten a college degree or any acclaim or money. By all the standards of today he might be a failure but, according to Judaism, he is a huge success.

Many of these thoughts are emphasized on the holiday of Shavuot. The Rabbis have arranged that almost always we will read the Torah portion Bamidbar before the holiday of Shavuot. Only exceptionally, like this year, do we read the next Torah portion, Naso. Both of these Torah portions have to do with ^{the} counting ^{of} the Jewish people. Bamidbar begins the count. In the Torah portion Naso we conclude the count. Over and over again we are told that the Jewish people were to be counted "by their families according to the house of their fathers". The expression "by their families according to the house of their fathers" recurs constantly. This repetition of the phrase "by their families according to the house of their fathers" was meant to teach us that the Jewish people could not receive the Torah until they demonstrated ^{that} they ^{had} ^{viable} ~~have valuable~~ families. Families are the basis of everything in our religion. Without families, the Torah cannot be implemented. Where are we to learn compassion, self-sacrifice, and the importance of the spiritual over the material except in a family? Where are ~~they~~ ^{we} to learn that relationships are more important than things? Only in a family.

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A family, in order to be effective, must have a father and a mother and children. That's why the expression "by their families according to the house of the fathers" is used over and over again.

In the Jewish tradition, we are taught that in many ways women are considered superior to men. It was the women who would not worship the golden calf. It was the women who paid no heed to the evil report of the spies who came back with a bad report of the land of Canaan. It was because of the moral strength of the women that the slavery in Egypt came to an end. The Rabbis teach that what was created later in the description of creation was on a higher level. Woman was created after man. They, also, say that when a woman thanks G-d for being created according to His will only she can make that blessing because she is closer to G-d's will than is man. A man has many more violent aggressive impulses than does a woman. The Rabbis, also, teach us that when G-d came to give the Torah to the Jewish people He said "thus shall you say to the house of Jacob and tell the Children of Israel". The House of Jacob refers to the women. - The Children of Israel to the men. The women were given the Torah first because G-d knew that if they would not accept it, the Torah would not endure in Judaism. A woman's unique moral courage is the necessary component to insure that the Torah will continue and be implemented.

Men do not have ~~to~~^{to} risk their lives to bring forth life. Men do not have to face death ~~in order~~^{to} to produce children and, because of this, men know that women are innately more courageous than men. Perhaps, this explains why men throughout the centuries have sought violence and war to demonstrate their own bravery. The bravery of men, though, in these circumstances does not produce life but the horrors of war. This is why the expression "the House of the Fathers" is used over and over again in discussing

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families. We might think that the raising of children should be left exclusively to women. This is not so. The self-sacrifice and willingness on the part of the man to share what he has and work for his wife ^{and} children is an essential component in ~~the~~ teaching ~~of~~ compassion and the importance of relationships over things, ~~to the next generation~~. Households that are headed only by mothers, unfortunately, are not as effective in bringing up children as households of two parent families. It is very, very difficult to ~~raise~~ a child in a one parent family and to inculcate into him or her the correct values. The self-denying example of ~~the~~ ^{the} father ~~as well as~~ ^{and} the moral courage of ~~the~~ ^{the} mother ^{are} ~~is~~ required.

In nature almost always the father has ~~almost~~ nothing to do with raising children. His job just takes a few seconds and he is gone. In many animal species if the male has not ~~left~~ ^{left} already the female pushes the father away after children are born and attacks him if he comes near. When a child is born it is part of the mother and only very remotely of the father. The father does not have the same ties to it that the mother usually has. In the animal world this is very pronounced. We, though, are not animals. A father, by the very fact of his staying on and providing for his family, teaches his children through example the importance of self-sacrifice and self-abnegation. The father does not just pick up and spend the money all on himself. He does not leave the mother. If he does, then the children are scared and it is very hard to teach them the values of the Torah. However, when a father is devoted and a child sees the unselfishness of both his parents then he learns how to be compassionate and concerned for relationships rather than things. Immediate self-gratification is not stressed in a family. The good of the total family is stressed. One family member is willing to sacrifice for another. The spiritual, the unseen, the family bond is stressed, not things. This is what is required before

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we could receive the Torah, a sense of the importance of relationships, of the spiritual over the material.

The Rabbis teach us that on Shavuos we received the Ten Commandments because of the merit of Jacob. It does not mention the other patriarchs. This is because only Jacob succeeded in raising a family who all stayed together, who in the end helped and supported each other. We received the Ten Commandments on stone. The word for stone in Hebrew is "Even", which is a combination of the word Av and Ben, father and son. Only when father, son, mother, and daughter are together will the Ten Commandments endure. The family is the foundation stone upon which the Torah is based. Relationships are important, not things. Things may fail but relationships endure.

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In the Torah portion, Noso, we have recounted the gifts of all the princes of Israel. Each prince brings the identical gift. It seems very strange that the Torah which is so careful with its words should spend so many sentences recounting the same gift over and over again. It could have just been said the twelve princes each gave this gift and let it go at that. Right before we learn about the gift of each of the heads of the tribes of Israel we learn about the priestly blessing, that beautiful blessing which is used throughout the world and which begins with the words "may the Lord bless you and keep you", etc. The priests before they say this blessing must lift up their hands and they repeat it word by word with the Cantor. This blessing is not their blessing. It is G-d's blessing. They are just the conduit through whom the blessing comes. Before they give the blessing they say a special Brocha which is different than any other Brocha that we say. We all know the blessing over bread, "Blessed O Lord, etc., who brings forth bread from the ground" or the blessing on wine "Who creates the fruit of the vine" or on the candles "Who has commanded us to light the Shabbos candles". The blessing that the priest should say here is "Who commanded us to bless his people Israel" but the blessing does not end there. The blessing ends "Who commanded us to bless His people Israel with love". It is the only blessing which ends with the words "with love". Why should this be so? What's more, since this blessing is not the priest's blessing but G-d's blessing, why do we need the blessing at all? In Judaism we do not need mediators between G-d and man. A Synagogue does not need a Rabbi, but do not tell the Board of Directors that, though. Almost every function in Judaism could be performed without a Rabbi, so why did G-d need the priests to bless the people? He should just do it Himself. The answer, I believe, is in this last word "with love". The priests were to bless the people with love which means that they were to bless the people even though they were not perfect, even though they had defects. The people were to look to the priests who had defects and were not perfect. In Judaism a priest is supposed to bless the people even if he does not fulfill completely all the commandments. The priests were to recognize that the people were worthy of blessing even if they had faults. G-d is telling us we have to learn how to accept each other and work with each other in spite of our faults if we want His blessing. In life all of us fail but this does not mean that

we should be thrown out or not loved. One of the things modern Jewish parents fail to teach their children is how to fail and each of us fails in life. No doctor ever saved a patient more than 120 years. Doctors can prolong life a little bit and this is important, but eventually they lose them. You can train very hard for a race and still lose. Failing does not mean that you forfeit love. Judaism is not an elite religion which says that only if you are a phi beta kappa or lawyer or accountant that you are a success in life. That's why I believe all the gifts of the princes are counted. Obviously, not all these princes made equal contributions to the Jewish people. How can you compare the contributions of Nachshon Ben Aminodav, the head of the tribe of Judah who jumped into the Red Sea up to his neck thereby assuring that it would split and many other accomplishments, to the much lesser accomplishments of the other princes, but in G-d's eyes they were all the same because they tried their best. Many times a retarded child learning to dress and feed himself is more worthy of recognition than a person getting a Ph.D. since it required more effort. G-d requires that we try not that we succeed. Three tribes led the Jewish people in their march; the tribe of Judah, the tribe of Yisachar, and the tribe of Zebulun. The tribe of Judah had a blue flag with a lion on it. Judah was a symbol of courage. He had courage because he was willing to admit his mistakes but he kept coming back. It was he who had the idea to sell his brother into Egypt. It was he who sinned with Tamar. He had the courage to come back from his failures. Yisachar's flag was a black flag with the moon and stars on it. He always had hope. He maintained an optimistic attitude. Zebulun's flag was a white flag with a ship of commerce. White is a symbol of honesty. How does a person do well? When does a person succeed? When he has courage, hope, and honesty. Then he does well. He may not succeed. He may be a failure in the world's terms but in Judaism's terms he is a great success. All the princes gave the same gift to demonstrate that each of their contributions were valuable even though, of course, they were different and on different levels. The story about the three people who met down below. Each of them found out they arrived there because of an automobile. The American said, "I was driving 100 miles an hour when I had a blowout". The Frenchman said, "I was in the car on the riverbank with my girlfriend when the brake gave away". The Russian said, "I saved for

ten years to buy a car and then I died of starvation". We each get to the same place not by what we do necessarily, but whether we have acted with courage, hope, and honesty. If we have then we have done well and our gifts are as good as anybody else's.

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How Can We Feel LIFE'S HIGH

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Many times people will come to me and say, "Rabbi, I just can't go on. I just do not have the strength to continue. Where can I get the strength to overcome my problems? Why am I in this situation? I have a good job, a good family, but I just cannot seem to cope." To these people, every little problem is a mountain. Life to them is difficult. They cannot seem to make it. They are crying out for help and they do not know where to turn to get it.

These people either have expectations of themselves which are unrealistic or they have been brainwashed to feel that they should feel something special in life immediately and they aren't feeling it. They are looking for some sort of high or some sort of mystical experience of some sort of sudden surge of energy which will make them feel really alive. Many of them are very disappointed when they do not feel this. This is the reason that many people now are turning to drugs. They want an instant mind-expanding spiritual experience. They want to feel that they are in control and can handle life and overcome it.

Many of these people are like Aaron's sons, Nadab and Avihu, who brought strange fire to G-d on the very day that the Tabernacle was dedicated and Aaron, their father, was installed as High Priest. They could not wait for the fire to come down from heaven and consume the sacrifices. They wanted a shortcut to feel life's happinesses and spiritual glow. Some Rabbis say that they got drunk so that they could feel this. Others say that they really were looking for a genuine spiritual experience, but they did not want to put in any effort to obtain it. They did not want to commit themselves to anything. They just wanted to be able to tap into spiritual experiences without any real effort. They did not want to do what our religion demands in order to receive life's blessings and feel life's happinesses. They did not want to work at it day in and day out. They did not want to get married. They did not want to have a family. They did not want to establish relationships with G-d and man that were lasting and which required day in and day out commitment. This our religion teaches us is the only way we can gain the strength to overcome our problems and, also, to feel life's satisfactions.

In the Torah portion, Noso, we have many of these ideas spelled out. We have enumerated the offerings of the Head of each of the twelve tribes of Israel who brought them on the days the Tabernacle was dedicated. There is something very strange about these offerings. What is strange about them is that they are all identical. The Torah, which is usually so terse in its language, repeats twelve times the same offering of silver dishes and gold pans and sacrifices. Why couldn't the Torah have just said that the twelve princes each brought the same offering on twelve different days and this was their offering. Instead, it enumerated everyone's offering. Even its placing of this description of these prince's offerings right after we have the priestly blessing of "May the Lord bless thee and keep thee, may the Lord make His face to shine upon thee and be gracious to thee and may the Lord lift up His countenance to thee and give thee peace" seems strange.

We, in life, all want the same basic thing; to accomplish self-set goals, to be loved and accepted and to cause other people joy and happiness. We all, though, do not start from the same place. We each are born with different talents and different strengths and different weaknesses. Each of us wants these same basic things but in order to achieve these same basic things we must know ourselves. To achieve goals, to be accepted and to cause other people joy do not require the same approach from each of us. So many people in life are unhappy today because they concentrate on what they are not, not on what they are. Each of us can contribute so much to the world, but instead of looking at who we really are and what we really are, so many people think that in order to feel life's high they have to be a movie queen or a millionaire or a lawyer or a doctor, etc. They feel that they have to concentrate on what they are, not, instead of what they are. They do not realize that in being what they are, by doing their daily tasks, by loving their family and by being loved by them they will feel what life is all about. It is a slow tedious process but it will yield the desired results.

All the princes were not equal in their talents, but they were all able to achieve the same desired results because they knew what their talents were and what was really important

in life. The princes offered their gifts not in chronological order but in the order they marched. Judah was first. Judah had a blue flag with a lion on it. His flag stood for courage. He was worthy for leadership because he knew how to admit when he was wrong, he had courage. He made mistakes but he did not blame them on others. The next flag was that of Isachar. His flag was a black flag which had the moon and stars on it. His flag stood for hope. On the darkest night, the moon and the stars are always there. The third flag was that of Zevulun. It was a white flag with a ship on it. The ship stood for commerce and the white background stood for honesty. Honesty in business was his contribution. All the other princes, too, offered their gifts. All these gifts were equal even though their individual talents were not. Their gifts symbolized the fact that they each had felt life's natural high, they each had had a spiritual experience by achieving the goals in life that were right for them and by knowing that they were accepted and loved by G-d and others, and that they could bring others and G-d joy and happiness. This is the way we merit the priestly blessing. That is how we merit to feel G-d's countenance shining upon us. This is the way we get life's high. Our religion does not promise us that we will have no problems, no setbacks or tragedies. All it promises us is that if we live by its teachings sincerely, day in and day out, we will be given the strength to overcome our problems.

Right immediately before the priestly blessing, we learn about the Nazarite, the man who took upon himself special obligations not to cut his hair, not to drink wine, in order to have a spiritual experience. After he completed his Nazariteship, which was a minimum of thirty days, the Torah tells us he had to bring a sin offering. The Rabbis ask, why did he have to bring a sin offering? They say that he had to bring a sin offering because he tried to have a spiritual experience by denying part of life. This is not the way that we Jews look or aspire for spiritual experiences. Spiritual experiences come from the inside out, from doing Mitzvahs day by day and from being true to family and friends. In the Haphtorah, we learn about the most famous Nazarite of them all, Samson. In the end he was a complete failure. Gimmicks, trying to live a spiritual life through some outside

strength helped him not at all. He ended up blind and a captive, unfortunately the same way that those who rely on drugs and fads to feel life's meaning, also, do today. In the end, this type of strange fire destroys them as it destroyed Aaron's son^s; Nadav and Avihu.

The holiday of Shavuos, also, proclaims this same message. Shavuos is a holiday without any real pageantry. There are no special rituals. You might think that there should be. After all, this was the greatest day in Jewish history, the day when we got the Torah. The way we celebrate Shavuos is by counting the ⁴⁹ days before it, by preparing ourselves every day to receive the Torah. Only if a person prepares himself for ^{forty-nine} ~~fifty~~ days before Shavuos, can he appreciate Shavuos. The Torah and life cannot be appreciated by one-shot gimmicky-type of activities. It can only be appreciated by day-in and day-out quiet labor, by living an honest, decent life day-in and day-out, by doing as many Mitzvahs as we can, and by loving and being loved by our family and friends. In this way, we are assured not that we will have no problems, but that we will have the strength to overcome them and that we will always know that life is worth living.

