

RISING EXPECTATIONS

One of the most popular and beloved prayers of Judaism comes from today's Sidra, where we read: *וַיָּבֹאוּ אֵלָיו אֲנָשִׁים מִכָּל־בְּנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל וַיִּשְׁפְּרוּ עָלָיו וַיִּשְׁמָע ה' וַיִּשְׁמָע וַיִּשְׁמָע וַיִּשְׁמָע וַיִּשְׁמָע* ... "And it came to pass that when the Ark set forward, Moses would say, arise O Lord and let Thy enemies be scattered, let those who hate Thee flee before Thee. And when the Ark rested, Moses would say: return O Lord to the myriads of the thousands of Israel" (Nu. 10:35,36).

In the Torah, these two verses are set off from the rest of the text by two strange orthographical symbols, the *נָּוּן*, the inverted Nuns. This indicates that, somehow, the entire passage is out of place.

Indeed, the Talmud (Shab. 117) declares explicitly that the passage is not in its right place: *אין ב מקומה, ושמע נכתבה פאן דפורענות דפורענות*. This is not the proper place for these two verses. Why, then, were they written here? -- in order to separate between disaster and disaster. The two puranuyot or traumatic misfortunes between which the passage of *וַיָּבֹאוּ אֵלָיו אֲנָשִׁים מִכָּל־בְּנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל* serves as a welcome interruption, are, first, the episode of Israel's complaining and murmuring. *וַיִּשְׁמָע ה' וַיִּשְׁמָע וַיִּשְׁמָע וַיִּשְׁמָע וַיִּשְׁמָע*, "and the people were grumbling and it was evil in the ears of the Lord." The first unhappy crisis was that of the excessive complaining of Israel, their desire for more and more. The second disaster is expressed in the words *וַיִּשְׁמָע ה' וַיִּשְׁמָע וַיִּשְׁמָע וַיִּשְׁמָע וַיִּשְׁמָע*, "and the people traveled from the mountain of the Lord for a journey of three

days." The Talmud (ibid.) interprets this as a spiritual wandering, not a physical one: שָׁנָה יָדוּדָה . So the passage concerning the progress of the Ark interrupts between the story of Israel's grumbling and Israel's wandering away from the mountain of the Lord.

What is the significance of all this? An important insight is offered by the late R. Mordecai Rogov, author of Ateret Mordechai. The portion of the mit'onenim is a common phenomenon in life. It is a rather normal characteristic of people that they grumble and complain. They want more money, more status, more fulfilled ambitions. If this is universally true, it is especially true of our society, which sociologists describe as one of high mobility, with the lower classes aspiring to reach higher rungs on the ladder of social acceptability. Economically, too, our country is characterized by a rising G.N.P., and, even more, by the conviction that this is a good thing, the best thing, the only good thing that can happen to our country. Politically, we are beset by the problem of the rising expectations of the lower and disadvantaged classes who want their fair share of the national pie.

The Rabbis describe this phenomenon rather simply and directly in the words: רַשִׁיטָה אֲבִירָה אֲנִי יֵשֶׁבֶת וְיֵשֶׁבֶת , whoever has a hundred wants two hundred...

Now, this sense of dissatisfaction, of demanding more, of rising expectations, is not bad in itself. Without it people turn smug and complacent and there is no forward movement in society or in the economy. Mit'onenim can become an impetus for progress.

However, if we do not take care, this inclination for rising expectations can become disastrous. It can become a puranut. If these expectations are frustrated, people turn desperate and live their lives in bitterness -- and that is a catastrophe. If they find that their rising expectations are more or less fulfilled or even exceeded, that too is catastrophic. For those who find that they are satiated, that they have more than they can want, there looms the danger of personal arrogance and superciliousness. Such people consider themselves self-made men, thereby generously relieving God of the onus for having made them what they are. But there is even more than the ruination of character that is involved. When expectations rise and rise, only to be fulfilled and exceeded, there must eventually emerge a generation which will react with horror and disgust at this meaningless cycle of quest and satiety <sup>of</sup> ~~for~~ more material goods and more social status.

At the end of his last great work, "Les Deux Sources de la Morale et de la Religion," the famous philosopher Henri Bergson wrote, towards the end of the 1930's, that our society seems to be obsessed with the idea of acquiring more and more luxury, aspiring for more and more social eminence. Almost prophetically, he predicted that there would eventually arise a generation which, having been born into this society of affluence and luxury, will reject all of it as utterly meaningless, pretentious, and false. He pleaded, instead, for what he called "un supplement d'ame," what might best be translated as "a supplementary soul." It is quite possible that Bergson, though an apostate Jew, has here referred to something that he

must have heard and unconsciously absorbed in his childhood in the home of his grandparents, who were Vorker Hasidim, and that is the traditional Jewish idea of the neshamah veterah, the "extra soul" that a Jew acquires on the Sabbath.\* What Bergson was saying was that rising expectations, when fulfilled, ~~by themselves~~, become self-defeating and counterproductive. It is not something to live for. One needs, in addition, a spiritual dimension.

Have we not seen the results in our own generation? Our rising expectations have been disastrous for almost all segments of society. Those who have made it and those who havenot made it, all together, have been disadvantaged by פייסלינג פאן די וויל. The underprivileged groups are bitter, in despair, and threaten to wreck all of society. Many of the Establishment people who have made it are arrogant, smug, complacent, and brutally insensitive. More than anything else, they are bewildered. And their bewilderment is most poignant when they face the third group -- their children who so incomprehensibly reject everything their fathers have accomplished. How pathetic it is to face a man who has spent his life making a fortune and providing for his family, acquiring not only a beautiful car but even a boat, arranging for trips around the world for children who are still not old enough to know what they are doing, giving his wife and family every conceivable type of luxury and some that are inconceivable -- and after all this, discovering th~~at~~ his young man just getting into college rejects everything he has accomplished; reacts with no gratitude, no appreciation, and no respect; recoils from his father's

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\*Suggested by R. Simcha Bunim Urbach in MaTaT, #7 (Iyyar 5730).

successes; and seems to have no common language with the two people who gave birth to him. *אידי דאס סאטאנוויץ*, dissatisfaction and the desire for more, can become the spur to progress, but can become as well the setting for unmitigated *אונגלעק* or disaster.

Moreover, this first disaster of rising expectations leads almost inexorably to a second disaster, the *אונגלעק* of departing from God: *ה' אהר 1801*, and the people wandered from the mountain of the Lord. Fulfillment and frustration both make people wander from the realm of religion. Both extremes, the results of rising expectations, are detrimental to faith.

Our American experience has shown us that American Jews have climbed the ladder of wealth and status, and that this has usually been damaging to Judaism. Were one to describe the American Jewish experience as a kind of collective biography, we would see the American Jew arriving as traditional and Orthodox; as soon as he has made enough money, taking a quantum jump to the next group, deviating from tradition; making more money and taking another quantum jump into Reform; and then, when has really made enough, assimilating altogether and losing his identity as a Jew. All too often we have followed a direct line from *אידי דאס סאטאנוויץ* to *ה' אהר 1801*.

How can we avoid this seemingly inevitable progression from *אונגלעק*, from disaster to disaster?

There is only one way. We must interrupt the procedure with the passage of *אידי דאס סאטאנוויץ*. Torah, both as something which is studied intel-

lectually and as a way of life and a rubric of traditional responses and values, is the only means by which to thwart the ultimate defection from Judaism. That sounds all too simple, like a patent medicine. But there is nothing one can do about it: it is a patent medicine that works, and it is the only one available. Unless we are fortified with a spiritual outlook, with *יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵינוּ*, with the value context of Torah, we cannot survive the pressure of the rising expectations. Without Torah the grumbling and complaining and murmuring endemic to our society must lead to widespread defection from Judaism and the disappearance of the Jewish people. Unless we can sublimate some of these rising expectations from material and social goals to religious and spiritual and intellectual goals, we must conclude with the abandonment forever of the mountain of the Lord. It is *יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵינוּ* which keeps the *אֱמוּנָה* from being *הַרְבֵּי עָוֹן*, and from leading downward to the severance of the people of God from the mountain of the Lord.

Where there has been no *יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵינוּ*, American Jews have left the mountain of the Lord either by completely assimilating, without apology or pretense, or by the attempt to assimilate respectfully, as a group. Those who read Commentary last month and the correspondence in this month's issue, will know what I refer to. A Yonkers Reform rabbi has become the leader of a sizable minority group in the Reform rabbinate which is agitating for the acceptance of intermarriage as a fact of social experience in America and urging that we embrace it and accept it as a function of the liberalism of American Jews. (It is very important to

bear this in mind when we are thinking of the "Who Is A Jew" controversy in Israel, especially with regard to Reform conversions. Of what value can a Reform conversion be, when so many Reform rabbis are willing to officiate at an intermarriage even without the pretense of a Reform conversion?)

This is the result of a rising economic and social class which wants to make religion a function of its economy and social status rather than as something important in its own right. A group that has realized the disaster of *אין אלוהים אין תורה* has, because of the absence or ignorance of Torah, of *אין תורה אין אלוהים*, led directly and tragically to the obliteration of Judaism and the Jewish people altogether.

The Orthodox community has also been effected by rising expectations. We have grown economically and socially. But to the extent that we have joined the journey of the Ark and been involved in *אין אלוהים אין תורה* we have managed *אין תורה אין אלוהים*, to interrupt the progression from rising expectations to wandering from the mountain of the Lord.

That is why our major emphasis is and must remain on education. That is why, though I preach to the converted, I beg of them to preach to their friends and neighbors who may be unconverted, to send their children to Day Schools for this coming year and years, and to support Day Schools liberally and generously. That is why we must make an issue of Day School support with the Federation in this community and in communities throughout the

country. There is nothing less at stake than our continuity and survival as a people. Because without Torah, without joining the journey of the Ark, our affluent community of rising expectations will lead us headlong into the disaster of obsolescence and obscurity, of disappearance, the greatest *חורבן* of all.

So there is nothing wrong with striving for more material goods, and more social attainments, provided that we also aspire for more spiritual achievements. In our shemoneh esreh we pray for barekh aleinu, for material prosperity; but we also pray for hashivah shoftenu and sim shalom, for justice and peace. It is legitimate to pray for refa'enu, for physical health and welfare; but we must also aspire to honen ha-daat and ha-rotzeh bi'teshuvah, for wisdom and spiritual regeneration.

This week many of us will be leaving for our vacations on seashore and in the mountains, in Israel, America and throughout the world, for our rest and our recreation. It is appropriate to remember that one can never take a vacation from Torah and mitzvot and that, on the contrary, the leisure of the summer should afford us greater opportunity to study and read than we have during the rest of the year.

It is appropriate to remember too that our individual *חופות* or travels should be in the nature not of *החלפת ארץ*, of traveling away from the mountain of the Lord, but of *היות אנו עם ה' ונלך אחריו*, of accompanying the Ark of the Lord and having the spirit of the Ark, the Torah, accompany us.

May we go on to a happy and pleasant and healthful summer -- and shuvah



ha-Shem rivevot alfei Yisrael, may we return in the Fall in joy and in health, all of us together, to a world blessed with peace for Israel and for the world instead of the apprehensiveness and fear that now grips us.

Shuvah ha-Shem. May God be with us -- and, even more, may we always be with Him.