Dearest Members and Friends,

One of the most remarkable of all Roman Emperors was the philosopher-king Marcus Aurelius. His full name was Marcus Aurelius Antoninus Augustus, which led the polymath nineteenth-century Talmud scholar Rabbi Shlomo Yehuda Leib Rapoport to identify Marcus Aurelius as the Roman “Antoninus”, whose close friendship with the editor of the Mishnah, Rabbi Yehuda Hanassi, is cited in various fascinating episodes and encounters recorded across the Talmud.

Marcus Aurelius is principally remembered for his refreshingly candid philosophical composition, known to us as Meditations, a compilation of personal recollections written to help him with his own moral improvement, and based on his deep commitment to Stoicism. The stoics based their lives on the worldview propagated by a school of philosophy founded by the Greek philosopher Zeno of Citium in the early third century. Their belief system proposed that humans have no control over and therefore cannot rely on external events, which means that we only ever have ourselves and our responses as the route to happiness and contentment. Most famously, true stoics teach themselves to become immune to misfortune and submit themselves to life’s most challenging moments without complaint.

The late Professor Moshe Aberbach and his son Professor David Aberbach, in their jointly-authored essay on the close ties between Judaism and Stoicism, Hebrew and Stoicism, correctly pointed out that there are many parallels between our Jewish faith and the Stoic belief system, "not least because Stoicism deals with moral questions which are central to Judaism and is, therefore, closer to Judaism than any other philosophy in the ancient world", while they added that “many fundamental teachings of Stoicism appear in some form in the Bible.”

In 1910, after the unexpected death of Rabbi Eliezer Gordon of Telz, Lithuania, he was succeeded as head of Telz Yeshiva by his son-in-law, Rabbi Yosef Yehuda Leib Bloch. An original thinker and gifted teacher, Rabbi Bloch founded a new branch of Jewish ethics that he named Shirei Da’at, presented as lectures to the students which were later published in four volumes. In Parshat Shemot he offers an observation that seems well aligned with the idea of Stoicism being an elevated objective of Judaism.

The Midrash tells us that Moses admitted to a transgression with the word “az” when he protested to God (Ex. 5:23): "לְמַעַן אִיֶּהוּ אֲלֵיך֒ אֲלַת בָּאָרָה הַיָּמִים וְאַזְאֵזֵה הָעָם לְפָרָעָה לְרֹאשׁ הַיָּמִים. "— "ever since I came to Pharaoh to speak in Your name, he has dealt worse with this people." The Midrash continues by telling us that Moses later corrected his sin by using the exact same word when he led an enthusiastic song of praise to God after the nation was saved at the Red Sea — “az yashir Moshe”. In an attempt to explain this peculiar Midrash Rabbi Bloch quotes a different Midrash which teaches that despite numerous miracles God had performed before Exodus, no one had ever sung a song of praise until the splitting of the Red Sea. Not Abraham, not Isaac, not Jacob, nor any of Jacob’s children — all of whom experienced miraculous and wondrous events during the course of their lives. However, says Rabbi Bloch, rather than this being the result of some failing on their part, it was actually a demonstration of their immutable faith. True faith in God means that one accepts whatever comes your way as the will of God, whether it be good or bad. Why complain, or indeed sing a song of faith, when one believes that whatever happens has a purpose, whether or not we understand that purpose?

But Moses refused to equanimously accept the suffering of his brethren. He probed and questioned God, because he could not see how God’s glory was served by increasing their pain and prolonging their servitude. And it was precisely as a result of his capacity to be stimulated by their distress that he also had the ability to be moved and therefore rejoice in song when he witnesses their miraculous salvation at the Red Sea. These were two sides of the same coin, which, to be sure, was a distinctly unstoical coin.

Rabbi Bloch stunningly suggests that religious Stoicism is preferred, a view he supports by citing a passage from the Talmud in Berachot (3b) which we studied last week in Daf Yomi. The passage paints a vivid picture of King David being woken in the middle of the night by the wind whistling through the strings of a lyre suspended above his bed. Unlike the song of Moses, which was prompted by a change from the “az” of slavery to the “az” of redemption, King David’s lyre played music even as he slept, a constant song of faith that had nothing to do with prevailing conditions. It is for this reason that King David became the foundation figure for Messianic redemption.

But while this thesis is both neat and inspirational, it fails to take into consideration that Moses is considered the greatest leader the Jewish nation ever had — the man who led us out of slavery and into the metaphorical arms of God at Mount Sinai, where we received the Torah. And it didn’t end there. Moses went on to lead the nation for 40 years, through good times and bad, ensuring the survival of this fractious and often rebellious group, and ultimately delivering them to their destiny at the border of the Promised Land. Notably, Maimonides includes belief in the prophecy of Moses as one of his thirteen articles of faith, but makes no mention of Stoicism as a measure of faith.

Not allowing bumps in the road to affect one’s equilibrium may be a demonstration of faith, but such religious passion at moments of great triumph, as was the case for the great men and women of faith who preceded Moses, none of whom ever composed any songs of faith despite experiencing great miracles. Ultimately, human nature is human nature, and we are not robots on autopilot. And while Stoicism sounds wonderful, it fails to take into account our need to react to events as they happen, and the importance of ensuring that all of our positive enthusiasm is directed towards faith in God, so that our relationship with him is not a monotonous flatline of acceptance and acquiescence. Or, to quote the early twentieth century Supreme Court Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes, “it’s faith in something, and enthusiasm for something, that makes a life worth looking at.”

Wishing you Shabbat Shalom, and a great week ahead,

Rabbi Pini Dunner
Our next Shiur & Schmooze
On Wednesday January 29, at 9am
Rosh Chodesh Shevat
Shiur with Rabbi Dunner
Followed by breakfast
Purim is coming!
Get ready to order our Annual Mishloach Manot!
This year we will donate some of the money raised towards the security of the shul.

Shabbat Shalom,
Cecile & Ruthie
Sisterhood Co-Presidents

Join Rabbi Dunner for his Gemara shiur on Shabbat mornings 45 minutes before Shacharit.

A message from Harry Finkel
Thank you to those who were kind enough to express their condolences on the loss of my brother and who contributed towards the deli platter.

Weekly Parsha Shiur
Join Rabbi Dunner each Wednesday morning at 9am for the weekly ladies Parsha Shiur as he explores the weekly Torah portion through the eyes of the classic commentators.
The next class will meet on Wednesday, January 22nd 2019 at 9:00am

A Message from the Fialkov Family
Thank you to Rabbi Dunner, Rebbetzin Dunner, Chazan Nati Baram and the members of the community who showed tremendous thoughtfulness, friendship and compassion to us during the shiva of my late father, Yosef Zalman ben Chaim A'H
My family feels extremely blessed to have been comforted by such a wonderful group of people and so grateful to all of those who supported us during this very difficult time
Howie, Shirin, Ethan and Tyler Fialkov

Happy Anniversary
Paul & Emma Almond
Michael & Sharon Weiner
Join our YINBH community in celebrating Purim with another fabulous Sisterhood Mishloach Manot Basket

Let us come together to preform the joyous Mitzvah of Mishloach Manot & contribute to the Sisterhood’s biggest fundraiser of the year!

We are accepting orders from now until February 28th

Cost to participate is $275 per household

To order E-mail Madeline: Office@YINBH.org or call the office at 310-276-7650

This year we will donate some of the money raised towards the security of the shul.
Thank you from the Sisterhood Purim Committee
BEVERLY HILLS SYNAGOGUE
YOUNG ISRAEL OF NORTH BEVERLY HILLS

EVENTS, ANECDOTES & PEOPLE
THE HIGHWAYS & BYWAYS OF JEWISH HISTORY
with
Rabbi Pini Dunner

The Vilna Gaon & The Battle Against Hasidism
February 3rd | 7:30pm

The Rise & Fall of Volozhin Yeshiva
February 24th | 7:30pm

Rabbi Shlomo Goren and the Langer Controversy
May 26th | 7:30pm

Rogues, Rascals & Rapscallions:
More Case Files from the Margins of Jewish History
June 1st | 7:30pm

Sponsor a class for $500. Contact the office for details.
9261 ALDEN DRIVE BEVERLY HILLS 90210 | 310-276-7650 | OFFICE@YINBH.ORG