

Would You Really Like to Know The Future?

Shabbat Shalom - after Pesach we like to say that things are 'back to normal' - clearly this year they are not, and don't look like getting 'back to normal' any time soon.

I've been thinking about whether or not, when really difficult times come, we wish we had known in advance. Perhaps we could have prepared better, perhaps we would have enjoyed at the time, what we took for granted, and now we don't have anymore. On the other hand - would we ever enjoy life, knowing what was around the corner?

These thoughts crystallised for me over the last days of Yom Tov as I happened to finish one book and start a new one. In "The Weight of Ink" by Rachel Kadish, one of the characters, a post grad History student, comes to the realization that studying history allows himself to feel morally superior. "He'd always pitied those ensnared in the time periods he studies - people captured in resin, their fates sealed by their inability to see what was coming."

On the other hand, in Erik Larson's 'The Splendid and the Vile', Winston Churchill's eulogy for Neville Chamberlain is quoted - "It is not given to human beings - happily for them, for otherwise life would be intolerable - to foresee or to predict to any large extent the unfolding course of events."

In this week's Parsha, we read of the tragic - and ultimately inexplicable - death of two of the sons of Aaron, Nadav and Avihu. And the rabbis pick up this theme - of portent, intimation of coming catastrophe in the brief exchange of words between Moshe and Aaron - the very next verse after the death occurs.

וַיֹּאמֶר אֶכְבֹּד כָּל־הָעָם וְעַל־פְּנֵי אֶקְדָּשׁ בְּקִרְבִּי אִמְרֵל ה' אֲשֶׁר־דִּבֶּר הוּא אֶל־אַהֲרֹן מֹשֶׁה וַיֹּאמֶר אַהֲרֹן:

Then Moses said to Aaron, "This is what the LORD meant when He said: Through those near to Me I show Myself holy, And gain glory before all the people." And Aaron was silent. (Vayikra 10.3)

Rashi quotes a medrash that illuminates this opaque statement

תקרי אל, (ט"כ שמות) בכבדי ונקדש ישראל לבני שמה ונעדת? דבר היכן. 'וגו דבר אשר הוא במידעיו הבית שיתקדש הייתי יודע, אחי אהרן, לאהרן המש לו אמר; במכבדי אלא בכבדי (ספרא) וממך ממני גדולים שהם אני רואה עכשיו, כך או בי או סבור והייתי, מקום של THIS IS WHAT THE LORD SPOKE, etc. — Where had He spoken this? In the statement (Exodus 29:43), "And there I will be met by the children of Israel and it (the Tabernacle) shall be sanctified by My glory" (בכבודי). Read not here בכבודי, "by My Glory" but במכבדי, "through My honoured ones" (Zevachim 115b). Moses here said to Aaron: "My brother, Aaron! I knew

that this House was to be sanctified by those who are beloved of the Omnipresent God and I thought it would be either through me or through thee; now I see that these (thy sons who have died) are greater than me and than thee!" (Leviticus Rabbah 12 2).

Moses said to Aaron - I had a premonition. This enterprise of building the sanctuary for G-d was always going to be marred by disaster. I knew that someone, the holiest amongst us, would die. My only question was which one of us - you or me ? But now I see that your sons must have been even holier, for they were the 'Holy ones' that Hashem took.

Leaving aside the precise theology and the way that Moses was trying to comfort Aaron, in light of our current situation, I am fascinated by Moshe's awareness, his sense that something terrible was going to happen.

The Torah, in Sefer Devarim, tell us "Tamim Tihey Im Hashem Elokechem" - we are commanded to be 'wholehearted' - Tam, as in the 'simple son' of Seder night - straightforward. This is taken to be an injunction against trying to divine or tell the future. Judaism opposes astrology fortune telling and any other method of trying to learn, in advance, what awaits us in the future. Rather, whether we take active steps to try and uncover that which is hidden or not - what we are really commanded to do is to live our lives, with confidence and trust in Hashem. The great Chazon Ish was asked the definition of 'Bitachon' - trust in G-d. He answered 'Bitachon does not mean that nothing bad will ever happen - of course it will - it means that everything Hashem does, He does for a reason.'

Why are we not supposed to dwell on trying to tell the future? I think perhaps one of the reasons is that, like Moshe, our thoughts too often take us to what bad things will happen. Human beings have a tendency to 'catastrophize' - to dwell on the worst that may happen, not the best.

And of course, while we all have discovered how swiftly and without warning, catastrophe can descend upon us, even in difficult times like these, we have to accept - we have to bravely affirm - that there will be good times ahead as well.

It was always the case that life was going to contain hardship as well as blessings. We would be, as Churchill so correctly pointed out, be overcome if we knew what hardship awaited us. But Judaism believes that 'the arc of history' bends towards blessings. Judaism was the religion that taught humanity to Hope. That ultimately, out of hardship, comes redemption. That is the message of the prophets - that whatever difficulties await us, Hashem's Good will ultimately vastly dwarf what we perceive as the bad.

For me, one of the most difficult things of the present day is knowing that - for the first time in my life - I cannot board a plane to Israel anytime I choose. But nothing - nothing - will shake my emunah that we will all, and soon. And once again we will see the currently deserted streets of Jerusalem full of life -

ימים מרב בידו משענתו ואיש ירושלם ברחבות זקנות זקנים ישובו עד 'ה אמר כה

ברחבתייה: משחקים וילדות ילדים ימלאו העיר ורחבות

Thus says the LORD of hosts, 'Old men and old women will again sit in the streets of Jerusalem,
each man with his staff in his hand because of age.

And the streets of the city will be filled with boys and girls playing in its streets

Zechariah 8.4-5

Amen, and Shabbat Shalom!!