

## When Trials and Tribulations Accumulate...

Sermon by Rabbi Haskel Lookstein

*Shabbat Va-yeshev*, December 20, 2008

In the *Al Ha-Nissim* prayer that we will begin reciting tomorrow night, please God, we express gratitude to God, *al ha-nissim* – for the miracles; *v'al ha-purkan* – for the deliverance; *v'al ha-gevurot* – for the heroism; *v'al ha-teshu'ot* – for the salvation; and, finally, *v'al ha-milchamot* – for the wars.

It makes sense to thank God for miracles, deliverance, heroism and salvation, but why would we want to sing God's praises for the wars? One answer, of course, could be that we are thanking God for victory in the wars, or thanking God who is an *ish milchama* – a warrior, as it were. Rav Soloveitchik, however, based on a comment of the *Beit Ha-Levi*, suggests that, perhaps, we are actually supposed to give thanks to God for the wars themselves – for the suffering before the redemption – for the *tzara* before the *Ge'ula*.

But why? What value is there in singing to God to, as it were, thank him for our pain and suffering? Perhaps the answer is that while no one wants to suffer, sometimes, out of suffering, comes new strength, new understanding, and a new nobility.

This certainly happened to the heroes of Chanukah. Their suffering ennobled them and prepared them for a glorious revival of Judaism which followed their struggle.

The same was true in our experience of deliverance from Egypt. The fact that we were slaves in Egypt made us a more compassionate and sensitive nation. “*V'atem y'da'atem et nefesh ha-ger* - We remember what it was like to be strangers in a hostile land.” Therefore, we treat the stranger and the downtrodden differently from the way in which others treat them. The fiery cauldron through which we passed had a refining effect upon the Jewish nation.

Sometimes, this happens in our personal *milchama* – struggle – as well. I recall, some years ago, how a family in our congregation reacted to suffering a dreadful loss of a first born child in the first thirty days of his life. I shall never forget the words of a grieving mother at her son's grave when she spoke, as it were, to her son's soul, and said: “You taught me the meaning of life and you helped me differentiate between what is important and what is not.” I don't think that any of us who were there at that moment will ever forget those words. I can still hear them in my mind: “You taught me the meaning of life and you helped me differentiate between what is important and what is not.” This was *shira al ha-milchamot* – singing in the depth of crisis and, in an incomprehensible way, taking something positive from the crisis.

But one must know *how* to sing in the midst of crises, how to make sure that a crisis ennobles us rather than diminishes our humanness. Today, all Americans and, indeed, the whole world are facing a devastating financial crisis which has turned our lives topsy-turvy. In the Jewish community, we have faced in the last week our own communal crisis which

has had ramifications far and wide, but which has also touched many institutions with which we are connected and many people who are very close to us. How should we sing in the midst of this particular *milchama*? Let me suggest three approaches.

Approach Number One: Remember the words of that young mother. Maintain a sense of proportion. “Differentiate between what is important and what is not.”

Remember that *health* trumps *wealth*. If we have lost some assets (and I am not, God forbid, talking about those who may have lost everything; I cannot find the right words for them), we still have our health, our family, our community. We may have lost part of our savings but we haven’t lost ourselves or our loved ones. That’s what that young mother was saying. There are crises and there are tragedies; let us *differentiate* between them and maintain a sense of proportion.

We are not living in the Chabad house of Mumbai - and even that house is being rebuilt. If we can maintain a sense of proportion, perhaps we can even sing in the midst of a crisis.

Approach Number Two: Let us stop *judging* each other and start *caring* more about each other. There seems to be such a rush to judgment in America today and in our own Jewish community. So many of us have become Monday morning quarterbacks, judging the financial leaders in America and the investors or the supervisors of investments in our own community. I am not talking here about judging those who may have engaged in wrongdoing. They will be judged ultimately in the venues established for such judgment. My concern is with judging communal leaders who have been working honestly and earnestly to protect institutional funds and to enhance them to the extent possible by prudent investments. So many of us are engaging in second guessing them, endowed miraculously with 20/20 hindsight. Where were all these judges two weeks ago? Two months ago? Two years ago? They all know *now* who was wrong and what was wrong. I wonder: Would those who are judging others have acted so differently had they been in charge?

This is not to say that mistakes were not made. They were; and we must learn from our mistakes in order to do better in the future. The world of investment is more complicated and less reliable. By all means, lessons must be gained from this crisis and changes made, but judging people who worked long and hard to do the best they possibly could is quite another matter.

There is actually an *al chet* for that kind of judgment. It reads as follows: *al chet she-chatanu l’fanecha biflilut* – for the sin which we have sinned before Thee in judgment. The Talmud tells us, do not judge another person until you are in their shoes. Since when were we in the shoes of those who are now being judged?

Perhaps we all have to learn a lesson in humility. *Me’od me’od hevai shefal ruach*, we are cautioned by the Talmud. “Maintain a very humble profile”. Perhaps this is meant to guard against an unflattering *hubris*. Certainly the Rambam cautions us to be extremists in

humility in order to avoid the sin of *hubris*, the very sin with which we sometimes charge others.

Instead of judging, let us do something more constructive. Constructive means to be concerned, not critical; compassionate, not condemning. There are people out there who are hurting terribly, who have lost their livelihoods, not their endowments; their apartments, not their capital funds; their jobs, not some of their discretionary income. It is on them that we should be focusing; this should be our holy occupation, rather than a holier than thou judgment of others.

This past Tuesday morning, a young woman from our congregation, who heard about the losses in our capital fund, came into our office and, with tears in her eyes, handed our bookkeeper a check for \$5,000, saying: “My husband and I felt we had to make this contribution to help begin replenishing the capital fund.” Please do not misunderstand me; I am not conducting an appeal here for the capital fund. (I wish I could with such a packed synagogue). We have never appealed for the capital fund. We have simply saved wherever we could and we have applied one-time gifts to the congregation to that fund rather than use them in the budget. And we will rebuild that fund in this manner. But look at the reaction of this *ba’alat chesed* and the feeling that was evident in her gift!

Last Saturday night, a man who was sitting in this shul today, made out a check for \$5,000 to the building fund and brought it in, saying that he felt this was the time that we needed to be giving and to demonstrate our commitment. And on Thursday, a 24 year old young man who was graduated from the Ramaz High School only six years ago and now works in Hollywood, and read about Ramaz’ losses in Variety, called Kenny Rochlin and said: “I am sending in a check for \$1,800 to Ramaz. I have to do something. I owe everything to the place in which I received my education.” These are three responses of concern rather than judgment.

All of us are spending less these days – as we should. But are we also *giving* less? Audrey and I decided, in response to the latest crisis, that we are not going to give Chanukah gifts to our family this year. Instead, we are giving \$500 to Met Council to help the Jewish poor. We are also giving \$500 more to Ramaz because Ramaz is educating four of our grandchildren. In addition, we are going to give \$250 each to the Fuchs Mizrahi School in Cleveland and to Yeshiva Atlanta where our other grandchildren have been educated. We are doing this because others may not only not be spending these days, but they may also have stopped giving. Each of us should think about this. Find a worthy cause and let us use our energy and our means for positive purposes.

And the giving of which I speak doesn’t have to be money. The concern can be manifested as it was by a bankruptcy lawyer from our congregation who gave significant amounts of time to a member of the Ramaz staff who is in danger of losing his home because of indebtedness. There is another young Ramaz mother who is heading up an affinity group that Ramaz is starting which will try to develop human resources from among all of our professionals and business people to help those who are unemployed find positions. You will learn much more about these and other initiatives in a special community-wide program that

we will hold on Sunday evening, January 25<sup>th</sup>, focusing on finding ways to help each other. That's what we should be doing, and that should be our major preoccupation. Instead of condemning, start contributing. Instead of criticizing, express concern. Instead of being consumed by judgment, let us be overwhelmed by compassion and act accordingly.

Approach Number Three: We might begin to rethink some of our priorities. Maybe it is time to take a hard look at our materialistic society and the extent to which we as Jews have been affected by it. Some say that this entire crisis which the world is going through has been visited upon us by God because of greed and materialism. I have no way of guessing about God's manner of judging the world, but it wouldn't hurt for us to draw some lessons from what has obviously created the bubble in which all of us have been living.

Something very interesting happened in our synagogue two days ago, on Thursday morning the 18th. A family in our community had a relatively simple Bar Mitzvah for their seventh grade boy who did not want to have the big bash that his two older brothers had enjoyed for their Bar Mitzvah celebrations. He wanted something simple because that's his nature. He is modest and humble even though he has reasons to be otherwise. Moreover, he didn't want anyone to give him gifts. Instead, he asked the invited guests to make a contribution to SSEJ, the Struggle to Save Ethiopian Jews. It was a remarkable demonstration by a Bar Mitzvah boy of priorities, of goodness, of compassion, and of the finest values that the Jewish people can teach. The entire seventh grade was invited and, of course, missed two periods of school, about which they didn't complain. But they didn't really miss school; they got a lesson in Judaism and in *menschlichkeit* that was worth ten periods in the classroom! Mark Twain once said: "Never let school interfere with your education." Here was a perfect application of that rule.

I don't want to suggest that we all begin having Bar and Bat Mitzvahs on Thursday mornings, but perhaps it is time to begin to consider developing communal standards for *s'machot*. Maybe now is the precisely the time to set forth some guidelines for modesty and restraint. So many families will have difficulty in the coming months and years in making big *smachot*. How much easier it would be for them if a community like ours decided on what is acceptable and what is not, what is desirable and what is not. I can't do this alone; it needs a communal consensus, but maybe now is the time to talk about developing such a consensus.

Maybe it's time, as John Ruskay said at the Wall Street UJA Federation Dinner this week, "to rebalance our portfolios, re-appreciate essential assets and open our hands and our hearts to those in our city and in our country who will need us during these difficult times."

Now that would be singing *al ha-milchamot*! First - singing by maintaining a sense of proportion, differentiating between what is important and what is not; second - singing by caring rather than judging; and, finally, singing by rethinking some of our priorities and recognizing that perhaps less really is more, and enabling others to sing and celebrate that way as well.

Let me close with a note I received Wednesday from Rabbi Aaron Rakeffet in Jerusalem.

Can you believe what a small world it is? My grandson Binyamin Eisen is a front line medic stationed in the Jenin area. He received a Chanukah package from America. Many such packages were distributed to the soldiers in his unit. He opened up his package and there he saw a note which read "*lichvod chayalai Tzahal* - in honor of the soldiers of the IDF; *chag urim sameach*, Happy Chanukah - from the students of the Ramaz Upper School."

That was our children's song. Let us sing ours as well! Amen!