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“The View From The Brink”

In a recent book by Norman Cousins, In Place of Folly, there appears a most improbable obituary which is purely imaginary-- and frighteningly real. It reads,

RACE, HUMAN. Beloved father of science and technology, adored mother of the arts and culture. Departed this earth, suddenly, but not without warning. Survived by no one.

What makes this obituary so very pertinent is the series of hair-raising events which, during the past month, took humanity to the very brink of annihilation. The Cuba crisis brought not only Americans but all human beings to the sharp edge of universal catastrophe, face to face with the ultimate terror.

The question that we must ask ourselves is, what was or should be our reaction? We who have tottered on the rim of total horror, and we have won a reprieve, we who have stared into the dumbness of the atomic abyss--what view do we now take of life? Have we undergone any inner transformation as a result of this experience? Do we view things any differently now?

For assuredly the brink represents a unique psychological situation. The knowledge of impending disaster, for mankind as well as for individual men or women, evokes a reaction which reveals all our inner qualities: personality, principles and purposes--- or lack of them. The more intensely we are aware of the end of the limitation of life, the more we concentrate our essential character and aspirations into the time left to us.

Our Sidra provides us with a clear contrast between two biblical characters in their reactions to the proximity of the end. They are for us an indication of what Death tells us about Life. Father and son, Isaac and Esau, were both concerned over the finiteness of life. Both based their lives on the fact that it ends. Both acted out of the knowledge that man is mortal and soon must pass on. Yet the same cause resulted in effects which were worlds apart. Listen to Isaac, the old father: “And he said, hinei na zakanti, lo yadati yom moti, Behold now I am old, I know not the day of my death. Now therefore take, I pray thee, thy weapons...and make me savoury food, such as I love, and bring it to me that I may eat, ba-avur tevarekhekha nafshi be'terem amut, that my soul may bless thee before I die” (Gen. 27:2-4). Life is so short, says Isaac, and I am going to die any day now. There is so much left undone. I have taken care of Jacob--he is the sort of person who will always be a credit to me. But what of Esau? Must he always be condemned to play the savage, unwanted and unloved, feared and hated? Must he be eternally estranged from his Heavenly Father? Shall it not be said of him that he did something noble in all his life? And so--because of his impending death--Isaac takes action, and sends Esau off on an errand which he can perform with competence, not for selfish purposes, but rather for a higher goal, that of mitzvat kibbud av. Something for others, something which can result in a berakha. Isaac is in a hurry to teach Esau to do something unselfish for him who was spiritually inferior to his brother.

Esau was motivated by the same consideration of the brevity of life and his eventual death. But look at how different a construction he places on this inevitable fact: Va-yomer Esav, hinei anokhi holekh la-mut, ve'lamah zeh li bekhorah. “And Esau said, Behold I am going to die, what profit shall the birthright be to me?” (Gen. 25:32). Since life is short and must end, who needs and who wants the spiritual mission implied by the bekhorah or birthright?

For Isaac the imminence of death was an incentive to leave a blessing. For Esau it was a reason to feast on lentils. For Isaac death was a signal to reinforce the spiritual worth of a child. For Esau it was an excuse for forfeiting a birthright. This is how death clearly defines the essence of personality, by making a man choose between a Last Blessing and a Last Fling.

All of us are acquainted with such cases of approaching disaster acting as the test to distinguish between the Isaacs and the Esaus. Two young men who seem remarkably alike in personality and background go off to war. One can achieve dignity and spiritual wholesomeness from this same experience which leads the other to immorality and a completely nihilistic outlook on life. One has found G-d in the foxhole--and one has lost Him in the hail of front-line fire. The awareness of death has made one choose a Last Blessing and the other a Last Fling. That is why the last war turned some religious youngsters into cynical adults, and flighty youngsters into serious, dedicated, and pious adults. "Behold I am going to die" has forced upon them the ultimate choice of their lives--how to live in the face of death. It is the most fateful choice a man can make.

Indeed, the Talmud indicated that the same is true of old age in general- for advanced age is, in a manner of speaking, a euphemism for the sharpened awareness of the impending end. As we advance in years, we begin to concentrate on the time left to us, on what we regard as truly significant and enduring, whether good or bad. So the Rabbis taught: talmidei chakhamim kol zeman she'mazkinim, chokhma nitosafet ba-hem, scholars and learned people, the older they grow the wiser they become, but amei ha-aretz kol zeman she'mazkinim tipshut nitosafet ba-hem, with the ignorant, the older they grow, the more does their foolishness increase (Shabbat

152b). This is the Talmud's geriatric test of character. What a man does with his old age is an expression of his whole life's values. If a man dreams of his retirement in the manner of most moderns--fishing, golfing, endless card-playing---then it tells you something about his whole life, from the beginning and on. If his ambition is to retire so he can devote himself to voluntary work for Yeshivot or hospitals or Israel, then it tells you something quite different about the meaning of his life. Most of a man's essential qualities, whether those of chokhmah (wisdom) or tipshut (foolishness) are concentrated in old age.

The Halakhah also reveals this insight. Thus, the Talmud (B. Batra 175a) tells us that under normal circumstances if a man makes a public announcement acknowledging a debt to another, if he does not immediately appoint witnesses and instruct them to record his confession, the announcement is meaningless and the debt is not collectible. The reason is, that he may argue meshateh ani bakh, I was merely joking, I was not serious. However, if a critically ill person makes such an acknowledgement, even in the absence of an appointment of witnesses, the debt is regarded as real and collectible: divrei shekhiv me-ra ki'ketuvin u-ki'mesuring dami, the words of a seriously ill person are regarded as written and transmitted. The reason?--ein adam meshateh be'shaat mitah, a man does not dissemble when death approaches. At a time of this sort, one is deadly serious. Then life itself is placed on the line, and all artificiality and empty conventionalism is discarded.

The Chafetz Chayyim once said that all of his life is like a post-card. When we first begin to write, we use big, broad strokes, and fritter away valuable space on empty, tired cliches: "how are you," "how is the weather," "wish you were here"....But as we approach the end of the card,

and realize that we still have not said anything of importance which we originally intended, we no longer squander our valuable resources of space, but we write sparingly, in small letters, conserving our language, and sticking only to what is truly essential. So it is in life itself. When we suddenly realize we are approaching the end of the card, we begin to abandon the petty and the trivial, and take up only that which we, in accordance with our basic character and in our hearts of hearts, consider as truly significant and abiding.

Perhaps in this manner we can understand an otherwise startling passage in the Talmud. We are told that nistakel David be'yom ha-mitah ve'amar shirah (Berakhot 10a). David contemplated the day of his demise--- and began to sing! How strange. One would think that entertaining this kind of morbid thought would result in sorrow or dejection, not song. Yet the Rabbis have here given us a valuable key to the personality of King David. For he presents us with a historical paradox. Scripture describes him to us as possessing apparently two totally different personalities. Which of these is the real David: the triumphant soldier, or the tender singer? -the man of the sword or the man of the Psalms?- the General of the Army? Or the saint of the Almighty? -the conqueror of Goliath, or the champion of God?- he whose saber penetrated to the heart of the enemy, or he whose sweet singing reached the very heart of heaven? And the answer is: look at David when he realizes that the end is near, that life is so very limited. At that time you will find him revealing his true colors. And what do we find when David contemplates his yom ha-mitah? He does not plan a military campaign, but rather--another song to our Father in Heaven! It is the song, not the sword that symbolizes the real David. The essential, authentic David is the one of the book of Psalms, not the one that appears to us in the Second Book of Samuel.

Like David, we have stared death in the face. We have confronted the awesome possibility of universal apocalyptic cataclysm. The Cuba incident was only a single incident. Our world shall never again be the same. During our lifetime, we shall have to live with that terror constantly. Henceforth all mankind shall have to walk and plod its way through the valley of the shadow of death. Psychologically, the new generation accepts the possibility of no tomorrow, no future, as matter-of-factly as our accepted automobiles and automobile accidents.

Our generation is even more aware of the End than that of 20 centuries ago when the Kingdom of G-d was expected momentarily. The H-Bomb has made the possibility of universal destruction an immediate reality. The end of the world is no longer a matter of theological speculation. It is an overwhelmingly real threat, made possible by science and engineering and hanging on thin threads of diplomacy and politics. "Behold I am going to die" is of immediate importance even to a young man in the prime of health. The diplomats and statesmen are concerned with controlling the possibility of cosmic catastrophe and eliminating it.

The overarching problem for each and everyone of us is, how shall we react to this dread[ful] threat of the End? Shall we dedicate ourselves to that which is important and sacred in life and try for a Last Blessing like Isaac; or shall we conclude that since Death is near, nothing is any longer of importance, and hence sell our birthrights and take a Last Fling at a banquet of self-indulgence in the manner of an Esau? Shall we follow the Rabbis who counselled shuv yom echad lifnei mitatekha, return to God one day before you die, and since you do not know which day that is, then return to Him every day; or that of the cynics quoted by Isaiah; "eat meat and

drink wine, eat and drink, ki machar namut, for tomorrow we die?” Shall we emulate Moses who, before he died, left a ve-zot ha-berakhah; or a Don Quixote who, expressing the sentiment of his age, advised us to “make hay while the sun shines.” Shall we turn to Shakespeare who informed us that “life is full of sound and fury signifying nothing”; or the Baal Shem Tov who, as his disciple the Koretezer Rebbe related, when he realized he had only a short time left to live, turned his eyes to Heaven and said, “Almighty God, I make a gift to Thee of my remaining hours?” Shall we continue our wonted ways--of complaining that our luxuries are too few, of treating friends and family lightly, of pampering ourselves and grasping for more status; or shall we thank God for every new sunset and peaceful sunrise, for every clear horizon unstained by a mushroom cloud, for the security and comfort of familiar faces, for the privilege of striving for true stature rather than mere status? Which view shall we take back from the brink: that of Esau, and try to pack in all the “fun” we can in whatever time remains, or that of Isaac---and leave a blessing in the form of more Torah, more yiddishkeit, more human decency and morality---and thus perhaps avoid the ultimate plunge over the edge of the Brink?

It is a crucial, fateful question. On our answer depends the future of humanity and our very selves. May we opt for blessing, for return to God, for creativity. And from this choice may we emerge with the hope, the faith and the confidence that there will indeed be a tomorrow, and a tomorrow after that. In the words of Malachi in today’s Haftorah, “My covenant was with him for life and for peace and I gave them to him for fear, and he feared Me, and he bowed low before My Name.” If we wish to survive, and not only survive with life, but also attain true peace, then it must be through fear--not the fear of the Bomb, but the fear of G-d. For only when man fears God can he have true confidence in and hope for his own future and his inner self; and

only when man bows low before the Name of the Almighty can he rise to the full stature of his noble humanity.