

## **Reality versus expectation**

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There were people in a dark cave thousands of years ago. They were chained in place with their heads restrained. They could only look straight ahead at the back cave wall. A fire burned some distance behind them casting hazy light through a curtain. The chained people could see the shadows of people, animals, and objects projected on the cave wall. Despite their chains, they looked, discussed, and debated the shadows in front of them. The outline of a donkey, one assumed, was truly a donkey. The shadow of stick was equated with a stick. A shadow of a human being was equivalent to a person in the flesh. This was their reality. It was all that they knew.

Until one day, one person was freed of his chains. He left the cave. As soon as he stepped outside, he squinted because his eyes hurt from the sunlight. He initially couldn't make anything out. Then with half closed eyes, he sees a fire for the very first time. Its flames are so bright that he is initially blinded once again. He retreats. After a few minutes, he tries to look again. The process of adapting is a painful one as his eyesight slowly comes into focus. His perceptions of what is real completely change. That wasn't a fire he saw in the cave. It was merely the shadow of a fire. In time, he is finally able to see the sun.

The ancient philosopher Plato wrote this account in The Republic thousands of years ago to describe the limitations of our perceptions. We only know what we see, what we perceive, what we hear, and what we experience. But what if our reality is something different? We assume our lives are going to be one way but often it doesn't conform to our expectations. Our perceptions of our lives are akin to shadows but at some point we must awaken to a different reality than we ever imagined.

I don't mean to get too philosophical here tonight. I want to delve into the assumptions we carry about our lives and the disappointments we have when they don't come to fruition. I remember this past summer driving my daughter and a group of her friends to the beach. I listened as they joked about their future. One friend said her brother claims she will only have money if she marries someone with it. Another imagined the adventures of college and beyond. They laughed as they tried to imagine where their life journey would take them after high school and into adulthood.

Let's look back over the years. What did you expect your life to be? Did you have dreams or images of what school you would go to, what kind of job you would have, the person you would marry, or how many children you would raise? Did you picture your retirement years? Often we

carry with us expectations or assumptions of how our life will turn out. However, we find that circumstances change, and our lives do not conform to our plans.

There are many examples of this. Some of us assumed we would achieve great things in our careers. Oh, we dreamed of climbing the ladder of success or at least promotions within our fields. We dreamed of where we would live and the travels we would undertake. However, luck or circumstance deprive us of opportunities or we just lose interest along the way.

In our personal lives, there are those of us who dreamed of our wedding and hoped to live happily ever after. However, fights with a spouse, arguments over the kids and finance are so far removed from the ideal of romance we carried in our youth. Regarding our bodies, some of us thought it would be easy to maintain our figure, our level of activity, and do all the things we desire. As the years go by, though, many of us see how changing metabolism, aching joints, and other unpleasant surprises affect how we walk, move, sit, or even sleep.

It is not easy to adjust to the reality of our lives. Many changes take us unaware. Surprises alter our lives in completely different directions than we ever anticipated. It's as though our dreams and assumptions are shadows on the wall and we are blinded by the light of the world as it is. Our ancient people, the Israelites, did the same when they imagined what life would be like after Egypt.

Within months of being freed from Egypt, there's an arresting scene in the book of Numbers. Our people begin to complain that they only have manna to eat. They cry out, "If only we had meat to eat!" They gathered around Moses and charged, "We remember the cucumbers, leeks, and melons we ate in Egypt. Here we only have this lousy manna. We want to go back to Egypt." The Israelites forgot the bitterness of their slavery. They forgot their misery. But what was worse, was their misconception of the challenges facing them in the desert.

It gets worse though. The Torah tells us that just at the beginning of the second year in the wilderness, we were at the border of Israel. Moses sent in scouts and they came back with a mixed report. Even though Joshua and Caleb spoke well of the land, its produce, and their chances for a successful campaign, the rest of the scouts had a very different take. The other ten told of the fortifications of the cities, the number of inhabitants, and their towering height. Our people became fearful and told Moses that they wished once again that they were back in Egypt. It was decreed then and there that our people would wander the desert for a total of forty years until a new generation of Israelites grew up. A new one that didn't make assumptions of how they would come into Israel. One that was ready to be practical about the responsibilities they would shoulder.

The newly freed Israelites were unrealistic of the challenges ahead and instantly crumbled with disappointment. I think a lot can be learned from their experience. Maybe we thought

things would go easier for us and our families. Maybe we assumed that all would go along a certain trajectory. That we would build up our wealth, our health, and easily celebrate the golden years of our lives. I think enough of us know that things don't always conform to our expectations. So the question is what do we do about it?

On the one hand, it is good to have high expectations. There are great achievements because people push back against what can't be done, they persevere, and accomplish things never imagined. One can be an athlete, business man, politician, teacher, and more to surpass expectations. The power to dream should never be underestimated. As I tell my son though, just having the will or desire is not sufficient. It is not enough to say, "I will do and be great at ...". You must work hard, apply yourself even when you don't want to, be dedicated, and disciplined. This is how you will achieve great things.

But this sermon is about times when we've tried hard at work, marriage, and still things still haven't worked out as planned. I heard an intriguing lecture by Rabbi Donniel Hartman, director of the Shalom Hartman Institute, many years ago about the myth of stability. He says, we work hard to 'hold up well' and believe that stability is a given. So much so that for some 'stability' has become a replacement for God. But what do you do in times of tumult, times when the earth has been shaken? Within Soloveitch's theology, a twentieth century philosopher, Hartman teaches are two responses. The first one is the classic response. All is governed by God and we should look at our behavior. If things aren't going the way we hoped, perhaps we erred in some way. Looking at Genesis chapter two, if we are suffering, we must have eaten of some kind of 'forbidden' fruit. However, this model according to Hartman can be cold, depressing, and alienating even as it emphasizes the performance of mitzvot.

On the other hand, a second model is found in the first chapter of Genesis. Here God creates us in the divine image, in essence, replaces the divine self, and then leaves the world to us. We are created but then we are on our own. In this model, Hartman sees suffering as an opportunity for change and transformation. When we hold on to the myth of stability, strive for everything to be fine, we don't grow and we don't achieve greatness. On the other hand, we should constantly explore and never be satisfied with moral mediocrity. The benefit of a crisis, is that it takes us out of the status quo and this can be a catalyst for growth.

This message can be a hard one to swallow but I believe there is truth to it. Change can indeed lead to growth. Where there is life and a will, there is hope for something better. The idea that God created us and then leaves our lives in our hands can be empowering but also scary at times. Especially when we face a significant hardship or disappointment.

I would like to offer seven steps to dealing with substantial change in our lives. The first one is to take some time to mourn. There is a loss of a dream. A loss of our how we thought our marriage would be. A loss when our job takes us in a different direction. I believe that we have

to take time to allow ourselves to feel and acknowledge that we are sad, scared, and angry. One can't skip this stage. Be angry against God. You can admit to yourself that you are angry at your boss, parent, landlord, and etc. It's okay to acknowledge the feelings of betrayal and wrong doing. Just because something terrible has happened, it doesn't mean it is your fault.

I believe the next step is to look realistically at what we have. What are our assets? What are our strengths? What are our blessings? Maybe it is not all doom and gloom. Okay, one can reason, I still have a house over my head, I still love my family, and I have a couple of friends. Then, we can look critically at our weakness. This is not to conform to Hartman's first model of blame but rather to critically assess what we must do to move forward. What can we learn from this situation? Are there aspects of myself or behavior that should be worked on? Should I go back and change the trajectory of my career? My father has taught me our weakness can be a strength. If finances are poor, what resources or assistance are you eligible for? If love has disappointed you, then you can explore how to live fully as an individual. How can you use your weaknesses to your advantage?

Thirdly, we must know what is truly important to us. Maybe that big house by the ocean is not that important in the scheme of things. Maybe we don't need the prestige we thought or the accolades we craved. Maybe we don't have retire by a certain age. What do you truly value? For most of us, it is our personal relationships. It is the people that we love. Also, there are things that we love to do and define who we are. Change can give us an opportunity to explore them. As Hartman teaches, this can be an opportunity for personal growth.

Fourth, we must be able to adapt and be flexible. Okay, we won't be living where we thought. Our kids are further away than anticipated. Health challenges will prevent us from doing things we thought we would. So what can we do? What other interests can we explore? How do we maintain our relationships despite the distance? How can we make the most of our circumstances? We must celebrate what is possible, what is doable. Life is still a gift even when we don't have everything we wish for.

Fifth, get help. Talk to people who care about you. Don't worry about keeping a stiff upper lip. Share what is happening. There is nothing worse than going through hardship alone. You also give people an opportunity to be a good friend, offer an ear to listen, and maybe even have some alternative solutions that you didn't consider. Therapy is also an excellent option. I believe at some point we all would benefit from the guidance of a professional.

Six, work hard towards your new goals. Many times we hold back because of a fear of failure. It can be easy to blame circumstances on a lack of effort. We must resist. Try our best, give it our all. Failure is only an opportunity to learn. It's an opportunity to learn about who we are, what we need, and what we must do to live fulfilling lives. Carve out time and get to work.

And finally, no surprise my number seven is faith. We must have faith that despite the darkness of today, that we can have a better future. This is important in times of loss and when we experience great disappointments. A famous Midrash has our people at the shores of the Sea of Reeds. Its waters are swirling with danger. Pharaoh's chariots are getting closer and closer to the escaped slaves. Our people begin to argue with one another. "I'm not going in first," said one pointing to the waters below. "No, no, you go first." The Israelites are arguing. Pharaoh's chariots are almost there. And a Nachson son of Ammindab of the tribe of Judah steps forward. People barely notice him. He takes a deep breath and then jumps over the bank. Everyone stops talking as they see this man leap through the air. As Nachson's feet hit the water, it begins to recede. The water reverses, forming walls on two sides. Nachson feet are now on damp earth and he begins the trek to freedom.

This leap of faith is critical in so many areas of our lives. We must take leaps of faith in our youth in order to go to school, work, and get married. But we also must be able to do this as we age. We have to be open to new beginnings, to starting over, to living in ways we didn't imagine. One can have faith in God, in one's family and friends, or just in oneself. Faith that even with disappointments, life can be sweet and worthwhile.

It's disorienting to find that there's a different reality than what we thought. But there comes time when we must move out of the cave of our assumptions to face our lives as they are at this moment in time. Stability is a myth. Life is ever changing along with our personal journeys and our bodies. We must gather our strength and perseverance to meet the new challenges ahead. With the support of family and friends, we can take a brave leap of faith into the unknown future. And maybe, maybe, we will experience something more radiant, more brilliant than we ever imagined.