

## VAERA 5768

Today is such a great simcha for me and my family and for Shaarei Shamayim. Most of you have known Joshua for more than 18 years. You've seen him grow up into the amazing young man that he is. You've experienced his great intellect as he would speak from this pulpit and teach from time to time at special programs. And you've experienced his marvelous heart and soul as he moves all of us with his special davening. And now we all are privileged to see him move on to this next great stage in his life.

Let me tell you something about Chavi, his bride, in a sort of round about way. I'll admit to you now that the family had been worried about Joshua ever getting married. Yes, he dated a lot. I remember while he was an undergraduate at Colombia University, there was this one girl from a fine family—the father was a prominent doctor in NJ—and she was going to medical school. She was beautiful, smart, well-off, from a good family, but she was not good enough—or should I say, not right—for Joshua. Then there was a daughter of a very close colleague—a very prominent rabbi. She too was beautiful, smart, spiritual and from a great family, but she too was not good enough—no, not right for Joshua.

And so it went year after year, until the Thanksgiving before last when he met Chavi. And I have to admit, as wonderful as all the others were, they just don't compare. Joshua is a man of great faith. He had faith that Hashem would provide the right woman for him at the right time, and so he didn't settle for anything less—and we're all so glad he didn't.

Many of you met Chavi when she came to Atlanta this past year a couple of times. We can all see how stunningly beautiful she is. Looking at her mother, Debbie Wiznitzer, Josh, we can see that you're a lucky guy and that odds are Chavi will be just as beautiful as she is now when she marries off her own children. But even more important, from my perspective—and I suspect from yours as well—she's even more beautiful on the inside. She's the kind of person that considers doing acts of *chessed*, acts of “love and kindness,” “fun” activities. And *chessed* must be the abiding principle in any marriage for it to succeed.

Being loving and kind is a choice just as is waiting for your *bashert*, your soul mate, and not settling for something else is a choice. Life is full of choices and sometimes they are very difficult. For example, we are fortunate in America

**to be able to choose our leaders—as the recent assassination of Benazir Bhutto in Pakistan reminds us. And with all the complaints about our political system and these drawn out primaries, we must never lose sight of the fact that it is a privilege to be a part of it, to be able to choose our leaders freely.**

**In our personal lives, sometimes the choice comes down to being honest or being wealthy...being loyal or playing games...being likeable or being successful...sometimes we can have both, but not often. At the end of life, sometimes a choice has to be made between “death with dignity” and the “sanctity of human life.” Usually in life we can’t have it all, so we have choices to make. And the ability to make those choices is what makes us in the image of Gd. (M. Wohlberg, 1/5/08)**

**That’s why our sages were so taken in our parsha when, after 4 plagues of Pharaoh hardening his heart and refusing to let the Jewish people go, Gd hardens Pharaoh’s heart after the 5<sup>th</sup> plague—boils (Ex. 9:12). How can Pharaoh be punished if Gd hardens his heart?**

**The sages suggest many answers, but I like the Midrash where Reish Lakish taught: “When Gd warns a man once, twice and even a 3<sup>rd</sup> time, and he still does not repent, then Gd closes his heart against repentance.” In other words, Gd hardened Pharaoh’s heart not so that he would be able to punish him. No, Gd hardened his heart because that was the punishment! 4 times Pharaoh had the opportunity to change, to repent and he refused. Hardening his heart was his punishment!**

**And it’s a devastating punishment to live with a hard heart, is it not? Who could be happy and fulfilled living a selfish life? Joshua and Chavi, no matter what happens, no matter how hard life and marriage gets—and they both get very hard at times, because that is built into marriage as an opportunity for our growth—no matter how hard it gets, never, never, never allow your hearts to harden. No matter how hurt you may be, always make the journey to cross over that bridge to enter into each other’s mind and heart to understand each other’s world.**

**Yes, life will get hard and we might get down and depressed from time to time—like Moses in the beginning of today’s parsha. He went before Pharaoh to save the Jewish people and he only made it worse. As soon as he asked Pharaoh to free them, Pharaoh increased their burdens by making them get their own straw for the bricks to build his pyramids and cities—and the Jews**

complained and criticized him. And so in his despair he comes down real hard on himself saying that if the Jews won't listen to me so why should Pharaoh?

The Torah says that Gd responds in the following manner 6:13): *Vay'dabeyr Hashem el Moshe v'el Aharon, vay'tzaveym el b'ney Yisrael v'el Paro melech Mitzrayim, l'hotzi et B'ney Yisrael meyeretz Mitzrayim*, “Gd spoke to Moses and Aaron and commanded them regarding the Children of Israel and regarding Pharaoh, king of Egypt, to take the Children of Israel out of the land of Egypt.”

Now what kind of response is that? What did Gd tell Moses regarding the Children of Israel and Pharaoh that lifted his spirits to get him back on track? The Torah doesn't say? The Sifre comments that Gd commanded Moses how to conduct himself, how to adopt the proper attitude when speaking to the Children of Israel and to Pharaoh. Much of Moses' feelings of helplessness and impotence came because he didn't know how to conduct himself. The Sifre says Gd told him to speak gently to the children of Israel, to lead them patiently and to bear unjustified criticism because the Jewish people were suffering.

People, when they suffer, say and do all sorts of things they neither mean nor intend. It's not them so much that is talking or doing...it's their pain, their wounding. Gd tells Moses to listen to their suffering, not just their words. Moses had to learn how to see the whole person, the whole situation.

And so it is in our relationships. When our spouses, our children, even our close friends say or do things that sting, that hurt, that upset us. It's much easier and much more effective if—before we through darts back at them—we try to understand why they are doing this. What kind of pain inside of them causes them to protect themselves by lashing out at us? The Torah here tells us—as it told Moses—to speak gently to the ones we love, to be patient with them and even to bear unjustified criticism because they too are suffering.

Harry, although a loving husband, is an example of a husband who just doesn't get it. He forgot his wedding anniversary and his wife was really upset. She told him, “Tomorrow morning, I expect to find a gift in the driveway that goes from 0 to 200 in under 6 seconds, AND IT BETTER BE THERE.”

The next morning, Harry got up really early before work. When his wife woke up a couple of hours later, she looked out the window, and sure

enough, there was a small gift wrapped box sitting in the middle of the driveway. Confused, the wife put on her robe, ran out to the driveway, and took the box into the house. She opened it, and found a brand new bathroom scale! Harry is not yet well enough to have visitors.

Harry needs to be more patient and understanding of his wife's pain in feeling unloved because he forgot their anniversary.

Moses was also commanded, according to the Sifre, to speak to the arrogant, stubborn, bull-headed Pharaoh with respect. Even though Pharaoh was 100% wrong, even though he was a merciless tyrant, he was still a human being and occupied a high office and he should be respected. Even when you know that you are 100% right and the other person is 100% wrong, you still must treat him with respect, even though he may be a Pharaoh. Learning how to conduct ourselves with patience, courtesy and respect at all times will allow us to be more successful in what we do and relieve us of feeling helpless.

Moses was clearly overwhelmed by life and seemed to lose his enthusiasm—much like the enslaved Jewish People he was sent to save. After hundreds of years of slavery, oppression and depression, there was no joy in their lives. They felt dead inside and their leader, Moses, was beginning to reflect those feelings. And so when Moses and Aaron were about to appear before Pharaoh, Gd tells them (Ex. 7:9) that Pharaoh will ask them: *T'nu lachem mofeyt*, “Show a wonder for yourselves.” The Torah doesn't say that Pharaoh will ask them to show a wonder for him, but “for yourselves.” Pharaoh will only be impressed if Moses and Aaron are impressed themselves. The only way for Moses to have influence over Pharaoh is for Moses to be impressed by his own words, by his own deeds—to show some enthusiasm.

There's a story of a husband and wife who came for counseling after 15 years of marriage. When asked what the problem was, the wife went into a passionate, painful tirade listing every problem they had ever had in the 15 years they had been married. She went on and on and on: neglect, lack of intimacy, emptiness, loneliness, feeling unloved and unlovable—an entire laundry list of un-met needs she had endured over the course of their marriage.

Finally, after allowing this to go on for a sufficient length of time, the therapist got up and—after asking the wife to stand—embraced and kissed her passionately. The woman shut up and quietly sat down as though in a daze.

The therapist turned to the husband and said, “This is what your wife needs at least 3 times a week. Can you do this?”

The husband thought for a moment and replied, “Well, I can drop her off here on Mondays and Wednesdays, but on Friday’s, I fish!”

There is only one way to have joy and enthusiasm in life and that is to do something joyful—and to do it enthusiastically. If you want to get the awesome feeling of prayer, then you must daven with *kavana*, with feeling. If you want to feel the personal growth of learning, then you must study. If you want to feel the joy of a wedding, then you must dance. If you want a great marriage, then you must bring joy and enthusiasm into your relationship. Life cannot be lived vicariously.

Chavi and Joshua, my heart is bursting with joy as I participate in your great simcha. My *bracha* for you this morning is that now that you have chosen each other, no matter how hard it gets, never, never, never allow your hearts to harden. No matter how hurt you may be, always make the journey to cross over that bridge to enter into each other’s mind and heart—to understand each other’s world.

Always speak gently to each other; be patient and even bear unjustified criticism while trying to understand how your partner is also in pain. Even when you’re sure that you are 100% right and your partner is 100% wrong, treat each other with respect and dignity. Embrace life and everything you do with enthusiasm and joy. And above all, may *chessed*—love and kindness—be the abiding principle in your marriage. *V’cheyn y’hi ratzon*, “May it be Gd’s will.” Amen!

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