

## Faith in the Face of Hardship

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I'm new here, so I don't have much of a reputation. Yet. Here. But among those who know me well, as with all of us, I have certain characteristics that stand out. For example, I have served on more than a few non-profit boards over the years, and in each, I developed a certain reputation. One time, in a committee meeting, I addressed a subject that others were avoiding. The Committee Chair looked up and asked: "Barry, can we assume that, if there's an elephant on the table, you're not going to let us ignore it?"

"Denial," they say, "ain't just a river in Egypt." Despite my reputation for noticing and pointing out minor matters that most people would rather ignore, even I am guilty at times. If we can get on with our lives, and avoid concentrating on issues that might get in the way, most of us will choose to do so.

All too often, though, denial gets us in big trouble, causing us mental anguish, problems in our relationships, and even serious health problems. We have all heard of folks who ignored potentially serious warning signs, permitting a cancer, for example, to be diagnosed at a later and much more dangerous stage of illness.

My first memory of recognizing the detrimental effects of denial is from high school. I was staying at a friend's house, in another city. We came in late, and my friend's younger brother called from the next room, in a normal tone of voice: "Grandpa died." While I offered to find another place to stay,

my friend and his mother insisted that we continue with our normal plans. The family seemed to go about their business as usual. Later, my friend told me that, when a second grandfather later died, he found himself plunged into deep grief, not only for the newly deceased grandfather, but also for the one who had died earlier. Denial, avoiding the mourning process, and pretending that life was continuing as usual, was not a successful strategy in the long term.

Meeting with couples before marriage, I tend to ask some probing questions. Finances seem to me to be an obvious subject. Not infrequently, though, I will learn that the couple has made no plans for merging their financial lives. Will they have a joint checking account? How will she feel about his spending, if he's spending their money, not just his own? All too often, couples haven't even discussed the matter, and don't want to do so. Yes, my raising the question can lead to a disagreement. The couple may even argue. They may try to change the subject, to avoid an argument. I feel like the mechanic in those old Fram oil filter commercials, who said: "You can pay me now, or you can pay me later." A subject that is ignored, in order to prevent a pre-marital argument, can easily become the subject of marital discord.

One question I ask of pre-marital couples is: "What happens when you argue?" The single most common answer is the only response that raises my eyebrows: "We don't argue." As veteran married couples can attest, avoiding disagreement is not the secret to a long and happy marriage. Instead, relationships last when couples grow together through difficult times, make compromises and offer sacrifice, and are committed to one another despite or even because of their differences.

Even divorces are more successful when denial is eschewed. Some folks imagine they can take a wrenching break-up in stride, that it's good for the children, and that an "amicable" divorce can prevent pain. Judaism permits divorce, and has from the days of the Torah itself, because divorce is necessary and positive in many cases. Divorce can, ultimately, be for the good of both partners and even for the children. However, the pain can only be addressed when it is admitted. Problems can only be resolved when we recognize their potential. Divorce is more likely to be civil, and everyone's behavior to be appropriate, if we don't imagine that it's truly "amicable," which, by its very nature, divorce is not.

Hospice professionals, too, tell us that death comes most peacefully with honest acceptance. From the research of Elizabeth Kubler-Ross to our own day, we have learned about stages of grieving, for those who are dying and for their loved ones. Anger and guilt may not be pleasant, but they are real. Individuals who are dying of devastating disease, much younger than they might have hoped, have every reason to be angry. Fighting for life, with passion and vigor, is appropriate. Life can present no greater challenge than confronting the prospect of an untimely death. Eventually, though, most patients come to acknowledge the reality of their fate. Sometimes, the dying person must actually kick the family out of the room, in order to discuss death with the Rabbi or health care professionals, because the family is more deeply mired in denial than the patient. Healing, which we pray comes in the form of a cure, can alternatively be found in a peaceful death. Busting the denial, both of the patient and of the family – and sometimes, even of the physician – is an essential milestone on the path to peace.

In this week's Torah portion, nobody, but nobody, is in denial. Twelve spies go to scout out the land of Israel, and they return with a unanimous report: The land is good, but formidable obstacles stand in the way of Israelite occupation. Nobody says, "It's ripe for the taking; we can just waltz in there, and it's ours."

In fact, ten of the spies insist that there's no way to occupy the land at all. These people have been slaves all their lives. They're not accustomed to things going well.

Two of the scouts, though, offer a different interpretation of what they have all seen. Caleb and Joshua do not claim that the other spies are lying. The people of the land apparently are greater and stronger than the Israelites. While the other scouts surely engage in hyperbole, with a word like "giants," and by claiming that the cities' walls "reach the heavens," Caleb and Joshua don't quibble with the analysis.

Instead, these two heroes of our portion point to a greater force at work. They recall that God has liberated them from Egyptian bondage "with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm." They remind their people of the ten plagues, the likes of which they had never imagined. They emphasize God's help, ultimately demonstrated in the parting of the Red Sea. Caleb and Joshua insist that, no matter what the enemies, the Children of Israel can prevail. With God's help, they shall enter the Promised Land.

So it is with us, as we face the greatest challenges of our own lives. Avoiding denial is the first step; embracing faith is the next. Then, may we live with our eyes wide open and our hearts at peace.

In today's ever-changing economy, we all know folks who have unexpectedly faced unemployment and financial uncertainty. Understandably, people panic when their financial security is suddenly threatened. Denial generally is not their problem; despair is a more likely reaction. Looking around, though, we see individuals who have made changes, who have retooled, who have landed squarely on their feet. These are folks who could see their problems, but who retained their faith, in themselves, in life, in God. Marching forward requires the courage of Caleb, recognizing challenges, but not permitting our problems to paralyze us permanently with fear. We move, in the words of Rabbi Alvin Fine, "from fear to faith."

Let us face the challenges to our relationships, with honesty and with hope. If we have faith in the future, then surely we can confront our challenges, working through them together.

Let us face even the most devastating diagnoses, with the courage that emanates from a life of truth and conviction. We will find the healing that God wills, when we trust our physicians, our families, our faith.

Life's single greatest challenge is one that we all face: the awareness that, one day, we, too, shall die. American society has made an art and a science, not to mention a tremendous industry, out of the denial of death. Corpses are dressed up, complete with hair-do and makeup, to look as though "she's only sleeping," or they are cremated and quickly moved out of the way. Coffins are covered in flowers. While every funeral ought to be a celebration of life and faith, some turn into parties, failing to acknowledge the cruel reality of death.

Let us learn, from Joshua and Caleb, that we must face even this most devastating reality with honesty and with hope. Let us look squarely at that coffin, not forgetting that the shell of our loved one is inside. We place earth on the grave, hearing that terrible thud, busting any pretense of denial. Even as we celebrate the life just ended, let us acknowledge the sadness inherent in its ending. Then, may we embrace the faith that God has taught us, from the Book of Genesis to this very day: The body returns to dust, but the soul returns to God, Who breathed it into us. God, who is our Partner in life, is our Friend in our most difficult moments. Our Creator does not abandon us in death. Whatever happens to us when we die, we live with faith that it cannot be bad.

Let each of us, like Joshua and Caleb, embrace life with realism and with faith. Even with its true difficulties, life is worth living. Acknowledging reality, we yet celebrate life. Honest about our fate, we yet praise our God.

Amen.