

Years ago, my mother got stuck in an elevator with Herb Benson. Herb Benson is better known as Dr. Herbert Benson, the author of the 1975 book, “The Relaxation Response” and the pioneer of studies of meditation as an antidote to stress. In other words, Herb Benson is the best possible person in the world to get stuck in an elevator with! As a student, I read some of Benson's work and even wrote a paper about the relaxation response for a class on Stress and Disease, but for my money, if I had to get stuck with anyone, I'd pick those 33 Chilean miners trapped underground in that gold mine. For almost three weeks, these men have stayed alive, stayed calm, and stayed hopeful in a situation that puts me on the verge of panic just thinking about it. It's as if some Hollywood producer watched the coverage of the BP Deepwater Horizon Oil Rig Disaster and told his scriptwriters to come up with a sequel with more drama and more heroism, “more human interest.” They say, “Let's move the whole scene to a coal mine – no, make it a gold mine – where a bunch of average Joes have to wait for months for rescue. Anxious relatives gather at the top, sending love letters along with emergency supplies through a tiny shaft 6 inches across down 200 stories underground. Instead of murky videos of bubbling undersea oil, for the next few months we'll show murky videos of brave people hanging on for dear life. Now that's good television.”

The reason we're fascinated by the fate of 33 miners while barely moved by the predicament of a million flood victims in Pakistan is not because we value Chilean life over Pakistanis. Rather, there is something about the circumstances of the miners that resonates for us. I am reminded of the Jewish saying, “Kol ha'olam kulo gesher tsar me'od – The entire world is like a narrow bridge.” It can sometimes feel like danger is all around us. We cross a narrow bridge over a deep chasm of peril, where one false step could be the end. Only by moving ahead with great care can we survive. But the Hebrew saying goes on: “Vehalkar lo lefached klal – the key is not to be afraid.” Substitute a slender drill hole for a narrow bridge and we see that the miners are living out our

Jewish teaching. Now that they are assured a supply of air and water and food, and with the drilling of a rescue shaft already underway, their toughest task will be just keeping it together for not days, not weeks, but months. My mother only spent an hour or so in that elevator, and she had Herb Benson with her. How on earth will those miners cope? Easy: just keep doing what they've been doing all their lives. All the world is a narrow bridge – their world is just particularly narrow right now. But everyone of us is long practiced in keeping our fears at bay. We are trapped on a tiny planet with 7 billion other hungry, unruly, sometimes desperate strangers. As we have been forever. The key is not to be afraid. If just one of those 33 miners freaks out and gives in to fear, the lives of all of them could be lost. The highest priority for those guys is for the calmest and most confident among them to stay in control of the rest. Letting those most afraid call the shots is a recipe for doom. Just as it is for us, out here. To hear some people tell it, hotel chambermaids and migrant farmworkers and underpaid groundskeepers are conspiring to destroy us. Ground Zero mosques are training terrorists to kill us. Gay couples who want to tie the knot are a mortal threat. Medical marijuana will be the end of civilization as we know it. OK, maybe. Changes are happening who's to say whether they are changes for the better or changes for the worse? Who's to say? How about the Herb Bensons of the world – the calmest voices, the relaxed presence who can assure us it's going to be alright. What if my mother had to share that tiny elevator not with Dr. Benson, but with one of Dr. Benson's patients? On top of her own fears of a cable breaking or worse, could she deal with some nut screaming his lungs out, pushing all the buttons, pounding on the doors, maybe even threatening her? There's no shortage of those hysterics on TV and Radio and all over the Internet, but it seems to me they are the last people we want to be influenced by. They have given in to their fears, while the rest of us are just trying to cope. It sure would be a lot easier to deal with what we have to deal with if they would just shut up. But it's a free country, and maybe all their shouting

and crying helps them feel better, so we just ought to ignore them. A rickety bridge is no place for a panic attack. Neither is a dark gold mine 2000 feet down. Nor a complex society adapting to new and everchanging circumstances.

If all goes well, in a few month's time, those 33 miners will be raised up out of the ground, one at a time, in an elevator basket just 24 inches across. Somehow I know there won't be a fight over who goes first, or whose turn is ahead of whose. These men have already demonstrated they prefer trust and cooperation over rivalry and suspicion. They have much to teach the rest of us – not about survival, not about threats, but about hanging together no matter what.

Our Torah portion this week offers us numerous blessings and curses – blessings if we conduct ourselves properly, and a very long list of curses if we don't. Why so many more curses than blessings? I think a hint can be found in the specific language of the Parasha. It repeatedly says, “If you do this or if you do that then such and such will happen to you.” Now in English, “you” can be a singular or you can be a plural. That's why Westerners say “Y'all” to indicate we mean more than one. But our Torah portion uses the singular “you” throughout. You and you alone. The message is that when we act alone and for our own private interests, our curses will multiply and our blessings will be few. When we join together and work as a community, all will be well and we will have nothing to fear. Let us pray that those 33 miners can stay united through the ordeal that awaits them. Let us pray that the desperate needs of those millions of Pakastanis can help unite that fractured nation for the benefit of all. And let us pray all Americans will march in peace and unity across the narrow bridge that leads to our shared future, and that our calm, steady presence will soothe the fears of those among us whose shrill panic might be just the opposite of what we all need right now. AMEN.