

Young and Old: Thoughts on Parashat Bo

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By

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Angel for Shabbat, Parashat Bo

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When Moses demanded that Pharaoh release the Israelites so that they could go and worship God, he insisted: “We will go with our young and with our old, with our sons and with our daughters...” (Bereishith 10:9).

A Hassidic interpretation of Moses’ words plays on the Hebrew: “binareinu uvizkeineinu nelekh.” Instead of translating “binareinu” as “with our young,” it is translated as “with our youth.” The meaning is: even as we advance in years, we carry our own youth within us i.e. we retain the enthusiasm and idealism of our younger days. We may appear to be old physically, but mentally and emotionally we are still energized by our own inner child.

In his book, “Late Bloomers,” Brendan Gill cites numerous examples of people who launched new and productive careers in their older years. Oscar Hammerstein was 64 when he wrote the lyrics to The Sound of Music. Michelangelo was 72 when he designed the dome of St. Peter’s Basilica in Rome. Frank Lloyd Wright was 91 when he completed work on the Guggenheim Museum. A great many lesser known individuals have made remarkable achievements while elderly. What is their secret? They carry their youthfulness within! They are filled with wonder, with creativity; they want to keep learning and keep growing and keep testing their ideas.

Rabbi Dr. Abraham Twerski, in his book “Happiness and the Human Spirit,” advises readers: “The key is to think of self-fulfillment in terms of effort rather than outcome. All we can do is make the best effort possible” (p. 91). It is all too easy to avoid undertaking new challenges due to fear of anticipated failure. People think: I’m too old, I will never finish this task, I don’t have it within me to succeed any further. But this type of thinking is self-destructive. It saps life of meaning and happiness. Rather, one should rally the inner child to take a chance, to try to undertake something grand and challenging. Dr. Twerski wisely reminds us that our responsibility is to exert our best effort and not to be overly daunted

by the possible outcome.

The Hassidic interpretation focused on “binareinu;” but we should also pay attention to “uvizkeineinu.” Although normally translated as “with our old,” we might also understand this as a charge to each person, regardless of age, to imagine his/her older years yet to come. How would I deal with this problem if I were much older than I am now? What wisdom or experience could I bring to this new situation? If I were to look at my present life as though I were nearing life’s end, how would I judge myself? What would I do differently?

It has often been said that no one, on his or her deathbed, looks back on life and says: I wish I had spent more time in my office! If we imagine ourselves to be looking back on our lives, we can often gain important perspective on how to live our present lives more meaningfully.

When we seek freedom and the fulfillment of our spiritual natures, we need to draw on our inner youthfulness and on our anticipated elderly mature vision. Seeing our own lives through the prism of our past and our future helps us to live righteously and happily in our present.

“We will go with our young and with our old,” said Moses to Pharaoh. Good advice, even today!

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