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By
Rabbi Marc D. Angel

Angel for Shabbat, Parashat Bemidbar

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This Shabbat marks the wedding anniversary of my late parents Victor and Rachel Angel, of blessed memory, who were married on May 23, 1937. They were wonderful parents whose impact on their family continues to be strongly felt after all these many years.

One of their special qualities was their keen gratitude for the blessings they enjoyed. They valued quiet and calm appreciation of the wonders of life; they lived happily, gratefully, and without jealousy or envy.

I often recall advice my mother gave me when I was a young boy. When I complained to her that I was bored, she answered: “That’s great. So use your imagination and get un-bored.” For her, boredom was not a problem but an opportunity. If I had “nothing to do,” it was up to me to think creatively and imaginatively so as to overcome feelings of boredom. I would go to the back yard, look up at the clouds, and think of what images the shapes of the clouds evoked. Or I would watch the robins peck around for worms. Or I would go downstairs in the house to where we had a set of Britannica Junior, and I’d read about dinosaurs, cave men, or whatever other topic I thought might be interesting.

Boredom, after all, was a tremendous boon to imagination. It stimulated the development of an inner life, a quiet and self-reliant way of experiencing the universe. I think that I, and so many others of my generation, were quite fortunate to have periods of boredom, when there was “nothing to do.”

These thoughts came to mind when I read an article recently that reported that American teenagers spend an average of 12 hours a day with electronic devices. Some of these hours are overlapped e.g. they listen to an ipod while playing a computer game simultaneously. It’s not just teenagers who are constantly plugged in. Ads for various companies brag that their system allows you to record 6 (or even 12) television programs simultaneously and you can then watch them “on demand.” Who has the time to watch all these programs? And are there really 6 (or 12) such outstanding programs that air at the same time that you just can’t miss?

Modern plugged-in people rarely have time to be bored. They constantly are barraged with noise and images. They can't walk out of the house without talking on their cell phones or sending text messages. It seems that a lot of people don't have the desire or the time to be bored. When people are deprived of boredom, they lose an important asset in their lives. They can become passive and reactive without even realizing it.

This week's Torah portion reminds us that the formative years of the people of Israel took place in the "midbar," the desert, the wilderness. They spent forty years in the "midbar" and one can hardly think of a more boring setting. They had little to do, since their sustenance was provided by God's miraculous providence. They had no work, no electronic social media, no televisions; they only had an endless and monotonous desert scenery. They must have come to Moses and complained: "We are bored."

Moses would have replied: "That's great. So use your imagination and get un-bored." It was up to the Israelites to ponder, to imagine, to think over the teachings of Moses. It was up to them to educate and entertain their children; to organize activities and events for the grown ups; to care for the needs of the elderly. They had to think about their past and their future; how they would proceed to the Promised Land; how they would confront the many problems along the way. And if they simply had time to let their minds drift, that was a good incubus for new ideas and new insights. The religious genius of the people of Israel developed in the midbar.

Albert Einstein observed: "Imagination is more important than knowledge. Knowledge is limited. Imagination encircles the world." We should be grateful for the luxury of being bored. We should seek opportunities to have "nothing to do." We should find the time to un-plug from our machines and our phones and…just be.

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