

Serenity Now, Catastrophe Later

Parashat Vayeshev, 5777

Back in the '90s, there was this little show that some of you may have heard of called *Seinfeld*. I loved its dry humor and the way it was at once a show about nothing and, at the same time, a satire of the whole of human experience.

One of my favorite episodes featured a stressed out George, played by Jason Alexander, who discovers a cult of relaxation called "Serenity Now!" The name comes from the practice of saying, or more likely yelling, the phrase "Serenity now!" anytime one is angry, stressed, or ill at ease, and it calms you down. The punchline of the episode, however, is that the practice only calms someone down for a moment; whatever was causing the stress is still there, and by making the overall goal to seek a tranquil environment at all times, the characters find that they are in fact only bottling up the stress, causing it to explode later.

I would be lying if I didn't say that this episode, while admittedly hilarious, brings up a number of my own insecurities. I, like many people, seek to keep my life as calm and orderly as I can, keep the people around me satisfied and happy, and generally try to bring a joyful outlook to everyone I meet. But only a fool can be cheerful all the time. I have had my own struggles with anger and have often thought that if I could simply separate out those darker emotions from my daily life, I would be able to relax and enjoy the world around me.

The wisest among our Sages, however, hone in on the truth of this part of our human nature, that while we long for tranquil stability, the real world we live in rarely allows that for long. Our parashah this week, Vayeshev, begins by saying:

וַיָּשֶׁב יַעֲקֹב בְּאֶרֶץ מְגוּרַי אָבִיו בְּאֶרֶץ כְּנָעַן:

Now Jacob was settled in the land where his father had dwelled, the land of Canaan. (Bereshit 37:1)

It is a very puzzling phrase, which on the surface, seems straightforward: Jacob has left his travels behind, and seeks to settle down in the land of his ancestors. But if that is the case why does the verse use two different words (מְגוּרַי and וַיָּשֶׁב) to describe “living” in the land? *Yashav* (ישב) means “to inhabit, to hold a space,” which is where we get the word *yeshiva* (ישיבה), a place where you reside with your learning, your teachers, and those with whom you study. It is a fixed place. *Lagur* (לגור) in modern Hebrew means “to live” in a place, whether for a month or for 20 years. It is less permanent, more transient.

The lives of Jacob’s ancestors, Avraham and Isaac, were defined by their wandering. They were residents of Canaan, but were not allowed to inherit the land, a promise which God repeats to them but always maintains is not a land for them to possess, but rather will be granted to later generations. Jacob has also led a life of journeying, hardship, and many personal losses, and at this point in his life, wants the simply joy of a serene life in a land he can possess.

We know, however, that a peaceful life is not to be Jacob’s destiny. His favored son will be harassed and sold off by his other children. Most of his remaining years will be spent in despair and mourning, and though he will reunite with Joseph, Jacob will end his life not in Canaan with his ancestors, but in Egypt, a foreign land. A midrash in Bereshit Rabba (84:3) explains the phenomenon of Jacob actively seeking a peaceful life by commenting that those who seek serenity overmuch in this world eventually face calamities that disrupt their peace. Note that this is not necessarily a punishment, but rather a fact: life will deliver

circumstances that are tough to handle. One can only live a life devoid of suffering if you look away from the pain that enters your life. Such an attitude helps neither you nor anyone else in the world, but compounds disaster with ignorance, a word that gets its root in describing those who actively ignore and avoid the truth of the world in which they live.

The lure of keeping things on an even keel, of creating rituals and routines that are designed to create a stable life, can often seem inviting. In many circumstances, like trying to get an adorable but screaming 18-month-old child to sleep, routines are NECESSARY for even the merest semblance of sanity. But relying on these rituals throughout our life, keeping on with the same actions and habits day after day, year after year, merely disregards the ever-changing nature of our complicated, and sometimes painful, world.

Today is Erev Hanukkah, hours before our Festival of Light is to begin. One of the ways we bring light on this holiday is through the mitzvah of *pirsum et hanes* (פירסום את הנס), publicizing the miracles of the Hanukkah story by displaying our *hanukkiyot*, the special lights we kindle during this holiday, in our windows for all to see. Centuries ago, the rabbis of the Talmud asked how long we were supposed to keep the *hanukkiah* display, since people might be afraid to leave them through the night as they slept, lest they accidentally set fire to their homes. Their answer was עד שתכלה הרגל מן השוק, “Until the people walking around the market have left.” (Talmud Bavli, Shabbat 21b)

The Sefat Emet, the 19th Century sage Rabbi Yehudah Leib Alter of Ger, creates a play on words here: not *ad shetichleh HAREGEL* (“until the people walking left the marketplace”), but rather *ad shetichleh HERGEL* (“until the routines, habits, and learned behaviors have left the marketplace”). The Sefat

Emet would have us continue to talk about the miraculous, continue to speak out about what is possible in a world that constantly seeks to limit our options, until people wrench themselves from the habits of their daily lives. Instead of bringing us tranquility, these routines tranquilize us, numb our senses to what is invigorating in our community and in our world.

A relaxing life sounds incredible, and we should cherish the moment in which we are at ease. But to ignore the changes and challenges around us, and within us, by holding onto a fixed frame of reference cannot support us in our lives and will eventually implode just as surely as trying to avoid stress by shouting “Serenity now!”

Dealing with new encounters, new people, new ideas can often unbalance us and seem terrifying. But everything that is old was once new, and all of our habits were once novel experiences, new skills we had to master, new steps we needed to take to move forward on our travels. Our job is to keep bringing light and truth and openness to those around us until our collective habits change, until we can see the world for what it is and strive to make it what it can be.

Shabbat Shalom; I hope you have a Chag Urim Sameach.

Sefat Emet 5631-5632: But the Sefat Emet¹ creates a Midrash of sorts on the words here. He twists the text around and creates something new.

The Hebrew phrase here is:

“Ad sheTicleh HAREGEL min haShuk,”

¹ Sefat Emet 5631 and 5632.

Because there is no Biblical Torah portion that deals with Channuka, many of the Rabbinic texts use the Talmudic sections that address Channuka as their primary source for their drashot – homilies – on the festival.

Until the foot (REGEL) has left the marketplace. The Sefat Emet plays with the vowel sounds and rephrases it as

“Ad sheTichleh HERGEL min Hashuk.”

Not HaRegel – the feet of the passers by – but Hergel, meaning routine, habit, learned behaviours!

Sharon Brous TED Talk Oct 2016:

1. **Wakefulness**
2. Hope
3. Mightiness
4. Inter-connectedness