

RH Day #1 (5770 = 2009)

Rabbi Robert Harris

Psalm 90, the “Prayer of Moses” is, in many ways, a dark composition, filled with a dismal appreciation of life’s frailties and pain. Out of the gloom and doom with which this particular Psalmist approaches life, he begs that God bless him with constant, daily joy: שְׂבַעֲנוּ בְּבִקְרַח חֶסֶדְךָ, “Satisfy us at daybreak with Your steadfast love that we may be glad and joyful all our days.” Even more plaintive is a line found towards the end of the composition, where the Psalmist adds the following prayer: וַיְהִי אֲנִי וְגַם אֲדַבְּרֵי אֱלֹהֵינוּ עָלֵינוּ וּמַעֲשֵׂה וַיְדַבֵּר אֱלֹהֵינוּ כְּוִנְיָהּ, “May the favor of the LORD, our God, be upon us; let the work of our hands prosper, O prosper the work of our hands!” In this line, the Psalmist, as it were, offers the resolution of his theme: life may be dark and pain filled, but if we frail humans can enjoy the work we do (that is, in the language of the Psalm, if God makes it so that our work is successful), at least that, then our lives will be well-worth the effort it takes to lead them. And while the Psalmist doesn’t define precisely which מַעֲשֵׂה יְדֵינוּ is being referred to, that is fine by me, because it then frees us up to plug in most any value we wish in order to reap the reward of the observation the Psalmist makes.

There is a statement in the Babylonian Talmud (BT Berakhot 8a) that makes a similar point, and even more starkly:

ואמר רבי חייא בר אמי משמיה דעולא: גדול הנהנה מיגיעו יותר מירא שמים, דאילו גבי ירא שמים כתיב אשרי איש ירא את ה' ואילו גבי מיגיעו כתיב יגיע בפיך פי תאכל אשריך וטוב לך. "אשריך" - בעולם הזה, ו"טוב לך" לעולם הבא. ולגבי ירא שמים "וטוב לך" לא כתיב ביה.

R. Hiyya bar Ammi said in the name of Ulla: Greater is the one who enjoys his own labor than one who reveres Heaven. For with regard to one who reveres heaven, it is written: *Happy is the one who reveres God* (Psalms 112:1); whereas with regard to the one who enjoys his own labor it is written: *When you consume the labor of your hands you are happy, and it is well with you* (Psalms 128:2)... *You are happy* — in this world, AND *it is well with you* — in the World to Come. Whereas regarding the one who reveres Heaven, [the words] *and it is well with you* are not written.

It is striking how much the sentiment of this talmudic passage flies in the face of everything we think we know about religion. It is obvious that Judaism (and, I would guess, most religions) would say that it is a good thing to revere God (!) and that one who does so will be “happy” and “blessed” — you know, “the whole nine yards.” But the passage states unequivocally that greater than the one who reveres God is the one who “enjoys his labor.” Thus, to “perform one’s labor joyfully” — however defined — is by the standards of this talmudic passage to be the pinnacle (or at least one of the pinnacles) of human aspiration. Now, it does not matter to me whether we all agree that this is so, or even should be so; I wish to play this out a bit and see where it leads, if for no other reason than to understand the inclinations of the passage’s rabbinic author.

Imagine, then, the thrust of this passage: the greatest thing to hope for in life is that we get to enjoy the work we do! Good hard work — that's what we look forward to! Now... isn't that the opposite of the way that most of us live? What about "TGIF" — that's what we hear, in that or some other variant — and I'm not speaking about those who live all week in anticipation of and in preparation for Shabbat, I'm speaking about the idea of "living for the weekend," a notion so prevalent in our society. And by extension, much of society spends a great deal of effort and thought and consideration planning vacations (whether of the two weeks out of fifty work weeks, or one day of vacation per month of work, or whatever particular arrangement we have)... people do look forward towards their vacations! And in looking forward intensively, sometimes we come to value the two weeks over the fifty — precisely the opposite sentiment of the talmudic passage.

Of course, there is nothing wrong with planning a vacation, and enjoying it, just as there is nothing wrong with looking forward to a restful weekend! As in so many other things, it is only when we lose perspective that we run into trouble. When I was teaching at Camp Ramah in California this past summer, I met an Israeli professor and educator, Dr. Aaron Amit. During one Dvar Torah on Shabbat, Aaron pointed to the "murmuring" and complaining by the Israelites in the wilderness, and he addressed Numbers 14:27: עַד־מָתַי לְעֵדָה עַל־יְשָׂרָאֵל אֲשֶׁר הָמָּה מְלִינִים עָלַי אֶת־תִּלְלוֹת בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל אֲשֶׁר הָמָּה מְלִינִים עָלַי שְׂמַעְתִּי הֲרַעְתָּה הַזֹּאת אֲשֶׁר הָמָּה מְלִינִים עָלַי מִלִּינִים עָלַי שְׂמַעְתִּי, "How long shall this wicked congregation murmur against me? I have heard the murmurings of the people of

Israel, which they murmur against me.” As the Israelites travel through the desert, they fill the air with their constant complaints — in fact, the Book of Numbers might be better entitled “the Book of Kvetching” (!). And remember, whatever the hardships of the trek, the Israelites are being miraculously fed every day with the manna; have “traveling wells” with them so they always have fresh, sweet water in the desert, and are being consistently nurtured by God’s sustaining Presence. In this context, Dr. Amit considered the behavior and attitude of the Israelites to be a parade example of what he termed the “insatiability of infantile desire.” What the Israelites had they couldn’t appreciate; what they received from God — daily and without working for it! — did not in any way satisfy their needs.

To exemplify this tendency within the Israelite collective psyche, Aaron referred to a wonderful article from Harpers Magazine from January, 1996, by David Foster Wallace, “Shipping Out: On the (Nearly Lethal) Comforts of a Luxury Cruise.” I was so delighted by this article that, with your indulgence, I will read a bit of it here today:

All of the Megalines offer the same basic product — not a service or a set of services but more like a feeling: a blend of relaxation and stimulation, stressless indulgence and frantic tourism, that special mix of servility and condescension that’s marketed under configurations of the verb “to pamper.” This verb positively studs the Megalines’ various brochures: “...as you’ve never been pampered before,” “...to pamper yourself in our Jacuzzis and saunas,” “Let us pamper you,” “Pamper yourself in the warm... Bahamas.” The fact that adult Americans tend to associate the word “pamper” with a certain other consumer product is not an accident, I think...

Wallace then captures the essence of the promised fantasy vacation on board his cruise ship: since every one of your “needs” will be “taken care of” (!), you will be able to relax, that is, to do “absolutely nothing”:

How long has it been since you did Absolutely Nothing? I know exactly how long it's been for me. I know how long it's been since I had every need met choicelessly from someplace outside me, without my having to ask. And that time I was floating, too, and the fluid was warm and salty, and if I was in any way conscious I'm sure I was dreadless, and was having a really good time, and would have sent postcards to everyone wishing there were here.

Finally, Wallace reflects on the long-term effects of being indulged, with your every need effortlessly taken care of:

I am suffering here from a delusion, and I know it's a delusion... but still it's painful. It's also representative of a psychological syndrome that I notice has gotten steadily worse as my Luxury Cruise wears on, a mental list of dissatisfactions that started off picayune but has quickly become despair-grade. I know that the syndrome's cause is not simply the contempt bred of a week's [indulgence], and that the source of all the dissatisfactions is that... part of me that craves pampering and passive pleasure: the dissatisfied-infant part of me, the part that always and indiscriminately WANTS. Hence this syndrome by which, for example, just four days ago I experienced such embarrassment over the perceived self-indulgence of ordering even more gratis food from cabin service that I littered the bed with fake evidence of hard work and missed meals, whereas by last night I find myself looking at my watch in real annoyance after fifteen minutes and wondering where... IS that cabin service guy with the tray already!? And by now I notice how the tray's sandwiches are kind of small, and how the wedge of dill pickle always soaks into the starboard crust of the bread, and how the port hallway is too narrow to really let me put the used cabin service tray outside my door at night when I'm done eating, so

that the tray sits in the cabin all night and in the morning adulterates the olfactory sterility of my state room with a smell of rancid horseradish, and how this seems, by the Luxury Cruise's fifth day, deeply dissatisfying.

Five days into a seven-day luxury vacation, Wallace already finds despair. Maybe we wouldn't, we wonder, perhaps this was just his illness, however humorously delivered? As you may know, Wallace suffered from depression, and eventually committed suicide. But if despite this sad end, there is any enduring truth to his essay, the question still remains: where or in what do we find inspiration? Where should we seek joy? The answer that the Talmud gave, remember, is in one's daily work (גדול הנהנה מיגיעו), what the Psalmist termed מעשה ידינו, the "work of our hands." We need to seek meaning in the day-to-day, even in the mundane! After all, that's where we spend most of our lives, and we have to dig for it! Special moments are special, but they are far and few between.

What about the everyday? Cooking a particular dish, and gaining pleasure both in the preparing of and — in particular — in the eating of this dish! By way of sharing an example, David Sandberg makes a dish called... Well, I first have a confession to make... the relevance of this confession will be made clear in just a moment, patience!... there are words that I like, and words that I don't like... I actually make lists of these words (my friends and family all know this, and tolerate in me, to a touching degree!). For example, I have never cared much for the word "terrific" (!). I don't know why I do not like this particular word... I just don't.

Knowing this, my friend, David, decided to rename his version of this dish, “Bob.” Or perhaps it was my idea, I do not remember (!). In any case, David, makes a delicious... “Bob”... it is fish, cooked into a kind of sweet potato pie, with vegetables. I have had it on numerous occasions; in fact, knowing that I love it, David chooses to make it at least once during my frequent trips up to Cambridge, especially on the Yom Tovim. Now, it occurs to me, that I could begin to get tired of these “Bobs,” or even just to compare this trip’s “Bob” with the previous year’s, or even, memory stretching back, to the one of several years’ before. After all, perhaps this year, the crust will not measure up to the flakiness and texture of years past? Or perhaps the fish will just not be as tasty as it had once been? You see, the possibilities abound for complaint. I don’t make the “Bobs” — I don’t even know how. I simply show up on Chestnut street, and my “Bob” is waiting!... Yes, it is, indeed, like manna in the wilderness, those delightful dishes of “Bob”! But truth to tell, I no more complain about eating Bob than does David complain about making it — it is mundane, it is made out of most assuredly every day ingredients, and it remains — each and every time — delightful. I’m looking around the room, and see some of you nodding: you know, as I do, that Bob has long since passed into the realm of community lore... and this, from what is, after all, a... well, let us just call it a “casserole”!

My friends, experiencing joy from accomplishing our work, from the mundane, from the day-to-day — this is, in fact, the stuff of life! Whoever wrote the line into the daily Amidah מוֹדִים

אנחנו לך... על נסיון שבכל יום עמנו, ערב, בוקר וצהריים
“We thank You (O God) for your everyday
miracles, evening, morning and noon” — that person was a genius! Developing a sense of joy
from working hard and coming home at the end of the day... eating our daily bread... or
“Bob”... and experiencing that as a adventure, even as a daily miracle — this will represent
what the Psalmist called **נְעִם אֲדֹנָי**, the “favor of the Lord” and will lead us to an appreciation
that God has, indeed, blessed **מעשה ידינו**, the work of our hands.