

Torah Thoughts from the YIGC Community

Leo the Late Bloomer

David S. Farkas

Bamidbar 8:24 states that the Levites would begin their service at the age of 25. Clearly, the age of 25 is seen as a kind of cutoff point, probably that at which youth ends and adulthood begins. It is interesting to note that great writers have expressed similar thoughts throughout the centuries. Samuel Johnson, for example, quoted in Boswell's *Life of Johnson* (a magnificent book everyone should read), asserted that 15-25 were the prime years of development in the human lifespan. Another great Englishman, Sir Winston Churchill, would remark a few centuries later, "20 to 25. These are the years! Don't be satisfied with things the way they are!" Similarly, in 16th century France, Montaigne wrote in his *Essays* (another great book everyone should read) that the law held "a man is not capable of managing his own estate till he be five and twenty years old."

Not everyone agrees with this definition, however. Montaigne himself believed that human understanding already reached full maturity at twenty, and wrote that "a mind that did not by that time give evident earnest of its force never after gave proof of it." The historian Gibbon wrote in his *Memoirs* (yes - read that one too) that the years from 16 - 21 were the formative, "elastic period of youth."

It seems to me these different opinions can be seen reflected in the viewpoints of Chazal as well. For example, the Gemara in Kiddushin (30a) records a dispute between R. Yehuda and R. Nechemia about the famous verse in Proverbs, "חנוך לגער על פי דרכו - educate the child according to his way": One says the verse refers to the ages 16-22, while the other holds it refers to the ages of 18-24. The opinions are not specifically attributed, but in a remarkable book called *Shem Olam* (dedicated precisely to identifying the sages behind the opinions in such un-ascribed cases), the Polish-Israeli scholar R. Reuven Margolios proves that it was R. Nechemia who held the later age. He bases this identification on a passage in Midrash Mishlei (chapter 1), where the *Tanna* R. Meir held that one is called a "child" until the age of

25. Since R. Meir was also known as R. Nechemia (see *Eruvin* 13b), we may assume that the beginning of 25 is the end of 24, and hence we can identify the respective two opinions.

The cutoff period is significant, because at some point one must advance in the pathway of life. In fact, Rashi himself, noting an apparent contradiction between the above verse and an earlier mention of age 30 (4:3), states that *training* would begin at 25, but if one still did not show signs of aptitude at 30 - then it was time to move on. So the cutoff age carries great significance.

And the idea of a cutoff age also carries grave potential for harm. For in modern times, we sometimes see interventions suggested - sometimes even pushed - for unruly or underperforming children. No doubt, there is a time and a place for all of these. But how often are they truly advisable?

In this brief essay I have already mentioned a number of classics from literature. One of the greatest books I ever read, though, was one that I first read at the age of seven, although it would be many years before I truly understood it. The book is called *Leo the Late Bloomer*, by Robert Kraus. It tells the story of a young lion named Leo who could not run or play as well as his animal peers. His father is impatient for the cub to develop, but the mother lioness wisely counsels patience, saying he just hadn't bloomed yet. (When Dad then peeks behind bushes and trees to watch for signs of blooming, Mom gently reminds him "a watched bloomer doesn't bloom.") And of course, one spring day, when no one was expecting it, Leo bloomed. He could run, he could play, he could eat, he could draw. He just needed time.

It seems to me we can all use a reminder, from time to time, of Mother Lion's advice. The solution to many perceived *chinuch* problems is one that lies just under our nose - the child just needs time to mature. As we have seen, youth extends a long time - all the way out until the mid-twenties. We would do well to remember this refrain when anxiously watching our own little lions for signs of progress: **Patience - He. Just. Needs. Time.**

From Tammuz to Tishrei

Alan Goldman

The month of Tammuz begins a portion of the year which, though we don't always think of them as connected, leads into the season of *teshuva* and the *Yamim Noraim*.

To frame the discussion, I want to cite a thought from Rav Eyal Vered, a popular Torah teacher whose *shiurim* can be heard at Machon Meir's Website (meirtv.com). He notes that, while it requires effort to violate a *mitzvah* or commit an *aveirah* in the realm of *bein adam la-Makom*, behaving wrongly toward another human being is extremely easy and therefore common. He adds

that we are generally very careful about avoiding the first kind of *aveirah* but are much less concerned with the second type. Perhaps, he concludes, if we seek to improve our level of observance, we should be more *machmir* in our interactions with others.

Rav Vered's insight makes sense: we are engaged with people all the time, while only a part of our day is spent on ritual behaviors. Perhaps that is why we are less careful: day-to-day connections with family, co-workers, et al. do not seem particularly 'Jewish' -

they are simply an element of being human in society. Nonetheless, the Torah mandates particular actions, and the avoidance of other ones, in the give-and-take of daily life no less than it expects them with regard to kashrut and Shabbat. Yet, we are all familiar with examples of ostensibly observant Jews whose interpersonal conduct – whether psychologically, physically, or financially – calls into question their commitment to Torah in its fullest sense.

The issue goes beyond ‘merely’ treating other individuals poorly. If not addressed, neglecting the needs of others can become a norm. Growing dissonance between meticulous ritual practice and the absence of social justice may then lead to communal failure. Yeshayahu confronts this very problem. In the final *haftarah* of the Three Weeks, he blasts the Jewish people in one of Tanach’s most extraordinary passages:

“What need have I of all your sacrifices?” says the LORD. “I am sated with burnt offerings of rams, and suet of fatlings, and blood of bulls; and I have no delight in lambs and he-goats. When you come to appear before Me – who asked you to trample My courts?

No longer bring false meal-offering; [your] incense is offensive to Me. New moon and Sabbath, proclaiming of solemnities – [such] assemblies of iniquity, I cannot abide. Your new moons and fixed seasons fill Me with loathing; they are become a burden to Me, I cannot endure them. And when you lift up your hands, I will turn My eyes away from you; Though you pray at length, I will not listen. Your hands are filled with blood.

Wash yourselves clean; put your evil doings away from My sight. Cease to do evil; learn to do good. Devote yourselves to justice; aid the wronged. Uphold the rights of the orphan; defend the cause of the widow.”

(1:11-17; English translation adapted from sefaria.org)

The Navi’s message could not be clearer: those who obey ritual *halachot* – represented by *korbanot* and *chagim* – while ignoring the need for proper social relations have forfeited the right to be considered a Torah society. Hashem wants nothing to do with people who behave so hypocritically.

Reading this *haftarah* just before Tisha B’av reinforces how the corruption of society led to the destruction of the first Beit Hamikdash. Similarly, we have all been told how *sin’at chinam* (hatred for no reason) was the underlying reason we lost the second Beit Hamikdash (Yoma 9b) – and, by extension, the reason we have not yet merited to see it rebuilt.

Following Tisha B’av, after time spent thinking about the failures of the past, we are only a few weeks away from Chodesh Elul and its more intensive introspection about the present. The messages of Tammuz and Av can, and should, jumpstart our personal growth during Elul.

How do we order our social relations so they are true to the Torah’s demands? We must attend to the individual, communal, and societal levels.

As individuals, we need to exemplify *middot* such as patience, gratitude, humility, and refraining from uninformed (and usually critical) judgments. These traits are essential at home, on the road, at work, and everywhere else.

As a community, we need to translate those *middot* into concrete action. We do so locally through the work of organizations such as Bikur Cholim, Matan B’sayser, and our shuls and schools – but the responsibility does not end there. We need to be proactive in identifying what is *not* yet covered: what needs are ignored, minimized, or simply forgotten.

Finally, there is society at large. We cannot be so nearsighted as to assume that if something doesn’t affect the *daled amot* in which we live our lives, it doesn’t matter. Rather, the issues of the day, as they impact Jews and non-Jews, need to concern us too. Is there hunger and poverty in the City of Cleveland? Was there a natural disaster somewhere across the world? Jews have frequently acted as leaders in confronting all kinds of problems in the general community. At the same time, we have often tended to draw inward and close the doors behind us: “not in my backyard, not my issue.” We cannot solve all the world’s issues, but, per Pirkei Avot, we are not free to desist from engaging in the work.

On Yom Kippur, when I read the *Al Chet* section, I am surprised each year by items that I never thought about when considering how to improve. That is likely because I was focused on specific actions rather than the underlying attitudes which led to those actions. It is these attitudes that form the content of the *Al Chet* lists; for example, “*chozek yad*” (violence) and “*tzarut ayin*” (stinginess). In order to better prepare for a meaningful *teshuva* season, I suggest starting with reflecting on core traits, and how they affect our behavior toward, and sensitivity to, others. This process, done honestly, can inspire us to think and act differently, and move our society closer to Yeshayahu’s vision (1:27): “*Tzion* will be redeemed through justice, and her penitents through charity.”

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