

Dvar Torah for Parshat VaYetze

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Based on Rabbi Nachman's Wisdom #92

The Midrash (Kohelet Rabbah 9:11) teaches: Yesterday, "[Yaakov] rolled the stone off the well" (Genesis 29:10). Today, "[his] sons carried Yaakov to Egypt" (ibid. 46:5).

Rebbe Nachman once commented that an average human lifespan, seventy to eighty years, consists of three periods: growth, stability ("the prime of life") and decline.

Rebbe Nachman—who died in his 39th year after suffering from tuberculosis for three years—is giving us a heads-up: Don't expect to stay the same throughout your life. We all know that's true, but we aren't practiced in the downside of it. We're used to growth, not decay. For the first two-thirds or so of life we're growing stronger and more capable, and then enjoying those strengths. It's only in the last third that we ask people to repeat what they said (A LITTLE LOUDER PLEASE) or to bring us our cane.

But decay and decline—and death—are parts of life. To spare ourselves grief and despair so that our Jewishness can get stronger even as the body gets weaker, we must have a strategy, a Torah, in place for dealing with the decline, before it arrives. We need to assume a positive perspective. We need to focus not on what the decline/decay is taking away, but what is it GIVING? (Not a far-fetched notion. Just as earlier maturation in the womb and childhood prepared us for later stages and events in life, so does later-stage maturation.)

This perspective helps in dealing with a physical loss. For

example, the loss of mobility (no more driving/jogging/walking) is (or can be) a loss of independence. But it prepares us for the future, for life in the very cramped space of the grave (Rabbi Nachman's Wisdom #51). If one had to immediately adjust to it from a far-ranging, (near) unlimited mobility, it would be extremely difficult. Being slowly slowed-down makes the transition easier. In addition, being slowed-down gives us time to focus so that we can make amends and arrangements, as necessary.

But it ain't necessarily so that the infirmities are the most problematic problem. Often (but not always), there are ways to compensate, or assistance to be had. Loss of identity is often a bigger problem; if I can't do/have X, I'm no longer me. As in Rebbe Nachman's parable about the farmer who found and then lost a diamond, the "diamond" that one loses was never really his since it was taken away. Knowing that a particular power or possession eventually fades inhibits one from basing his identity on it to begin with, saving one much existential anguish.

agutn Shabbos!
Shabbat Shalom!

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