

A Year of Encompassing Torah



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Parashat Beha'alotekha

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This is how we shall accrue our mitzvah points:

**Barukh atah Adonai,
Eloheinu Melekh ha-Olam,
Asher kidishanu b'mitzvotav
v'tzivanu la'asok b'divrei torah...**

**Praised are You Adonai, our God,
The Sovereign of all worlds,
Who has made us holy with your mitzvot,
And commanded us to engage ourselves
with words of torah.**

***To be fully engaged with Torah
Is to wrestle with Torah –
To challenge our tradition while loving it,
To question it while celebrating it.***

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An Added Blessing For Spiritual Direction

*"Yihyu l'ratzon imrey fi v'higion libi
lifaneycha Hashem Tzuri v'Go'ali*

May the expressions of my mouth
and **the thoughts of my heart**
find favor before You, G-d,
my Rock and my Redeemer."

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Parashat Behaalotecha 5768

A Message to Courtney on her Bat Mitzvah

The Times They Are A Changin'

Courtney, in your d'var torah you spoke about one of the most difficult things for you to overcome is your fear of change. I want you to be reassured that you are not alone in your fear. Many of us have a similar anxiety whenever we are forced out of our routines. There is a certain comfort level that we develop when we do various things in a ritualistic manner. Perhaps this is why the sages tell us that we ought to establish a routine for our ritual behavior along with the habits we have established for other aspects of our daily life.

In thinking about my remarks to you this morning, Courtney, you have challenged me to consider the things that I do on a daily and weekly basis and how they protect me in some way from becoming overwhelmed by the world in which we live. What I have noticed about my own behavior is that when I am confronted with "changing," I, too, confront what is expected of me with the tendency to take hold of what I have and not let it go, like the security blanket that you spoke of. One problem, though. It is not easy to take hold of something new when your hands are already full – filled with "tasks, problems, plans, relationships, and possessions that seem impossible to put down."

Part of the reason why our hands are so full is because we are accumulators. We like to save things, whether they be souvenirs and mementos of our experiences and places we've been, or they are things that we acquire to fill in a hobby. Humans are unique in that way. If animals collect something it usually is related to their survival. Perhaps our collecting things is the result of our deep-seated fear that we can't do without these things. So, we place an unrealistic value on them. By holding on to them so tightly,

we reduce the fear in our lives that their loss might create. However, in gripping onto something that strongly, results in an even greater difficulty of our relating to the flow of life.

Courtney, I ask you to consider with me, as an example, how difficult it is to clean out that one drawer in your bedroom where you keep all the things that are of infinite value to you. Imagine how much energy it takes to make a decision, "Do I need this anymore? Is my life satisfying without that post card signed by Sandy Koufax or the baseball card that says, "To Rabbi Steven, Best of luck, Dave Leonard!"

My continuing to collect is directly related to the thought that something is missing in my life. So, I identify myself with the things that I collect, not only the baseball cards that I bought on E-bay, but also the actions that I do automatically each day that prevent me from thinking about the things that I truly desire – to make changes in myself so that I can grow and learn how to be a better person. Being able to appreciate new insights about ourselves and our inner beings requires a certain strength of character that knows when to let go and to let things be, by emptying our hands. In other words, Courtney, the lesson that we need to learn and to apply ourselves to is the one in which we learn to open the hands and to give something away rather than clinging to a blanket for security.

Maybe Darwin was right when he concluded from his scientific observations that change represents survival for the fittest. If he is right, then what can we as humans expect to accomplish from the changes we make in our lives? If change is the basis to all life, and is not to be fought, but to be embraced and welcomed, what new insights will it offer us?

I ask you, Courtney, to consider your answer to the following questions:

What can I lose by changing, and still be me?
What kind of image of myself do I hold onto when I resist changing?
What happens to me if that image goes away?
Do I become less or more of myself, and what does that image look like in the mirror, or more importantly in the eyes of others?
In other words, who am I?

Courtney, these are difficult questions for any of us to answer, especially on the spur of the

moment. I hope that you did not believe that I was expecting an immediate response! What I do hope, however, Courtney, is that when this day is done, and you have had an opportunity to reflect upon what changes you had to make in order to be up here on this bima in front of your Jewish community, you will take pride in what you have accomplished.

On this day, Courtney, you indeed opened your hands, letting go of the past, so that you could embrace the future as an adult in the Jewish community. What you have discovered about these open hands is that they become quite pliable and flexible when they are not busy holding onto something else of lesser value. Your hands can touch others and offer them comfort, they can give help as well as receive when necessary, and they can be used to do what is needed when the moment presents itself. What you will discover, as I have in my experiences as a chaplain, is that you have the power to heal and bless when you use this energy that pulsates from your hands in a positive way – to facilitate change.

When you open your hands in this way, you also open your heart and your mind to change. Perhaps a better word to utilize is *growth*. You develop a new soul, which is the title song to Yael Naim's album, an Israeli woman who has opened up new doors for Israeli artists seeking an American and an international audience with their music. She, too, in this song adopted by Apple to promote their latest computer, is no stranger to the pains that come with change and the taking on of a new soul. We have spoken about your love for music on a couple of occasions. I hope that this album will inspire you in your hopes and dreams to color the world as you have done on this day, in the same way that her music fills my heart and soul with her words of hope and encouragement. May the light of the menorah that is a part of the Torah reading for this morning bring illumine the notes of melody and harmony that are a part of your living soul, as you learn to accept the challenges of change that comes with improvisation as well as replay the notes of others in your musical endeavors.