

Vayeshev 5781

Tired

The Hebrew title of this morning's parashah, Vayeshev, has a range of meanings. It can mean 'to sit,' 'to stay,' and 'to dwell.' All these have in common the idea of a sort of plunking down and not moving for a while - a period of relative inactivity.

Or, as I suggest we understand it this year, a period of being tired.

Because we really are tired. When I make my Shabbat phone calls, or send emails, or just wave at people, the message I'm hearing over and over again is one of fatigue. 2020 has been so hard and now it's going to be winter, and everything we are hearing is that winter is going to be just as tough.

And we are tired. (Can I hear an Amen?!)

It turns out, in fact, that we are a bit more than just tired. A couple of weeks back, Dr Betsy Stone of HUC-JIR published an article called "Endless fatigue. Give yourself a break."¹ In it she explains why it is that we feel so worn out at the moment. She writes:

The way our brains and bodies are supposed to work in crisis is simple. Quick reaction and then slow recovery. Get frightened, act, and then calm. There's a surge reaction and then a reset. That reset can happen in sleep, awake, alone, with others – but that reset is essential.

At the beginning of this crisis, we were in surge mode...Did we reset? Many of us did not. The impact of this lack of recovery is something we call surge fatigue.

We can take this idea and hold it up against the way that the rabbis of our tradition understand the state of being asleep. In a word, sleep is dangerous - it leaves our bodies vulnerable and our souls roaming about - that's why we thank God every morning for returning our souls to us once again. And the

¹ <https://ejewishphilanthropy.com/endless-fatigue-give-yourself-a-break/>

Talmud² even teaches that sleep is one-sixtieth of death, as if to say that it's a state we should only enter with the greatest reluctance.

Fatigue, surge fatigue, Zoom fatigue, call it what we like - we are going into this season with less energy than we would like.

So how can we help ourselves?

The first thing to do is to acknowledge that the tiredness is there. Sometimes we spend more energy resisting something than we would do if we accepted it and found a way to sit with it. Over the past few months, how many of us have said, "no, I'm fine" when we really needed a nap? How many of us have answered, "nothing" to the question, "is anything wrong?" How many of us never got asked in the first place? The truth is that we're tired - let's not push that away, because it's real. There's a strength that comes from being truthful.

The second suggestion is, once we have acknowledged our fatigue, to turn towards it. There is a beautiful poem by John O'Donohue which says this so well, so let me use his words rather than mine:

This is the time to be slow,
Lie low to the wall
Until the bitter weather passes.

Try, as best you can, not to let
The wire brush of doubt
Scrape from your heart
All sense of yourself
And your hesitant light.

If you remain generous,
Time will come good;
And you will find your feet
Again on fresh pastures of promise,

² BT *Berakhot* 57b

Where the air will be kind
And blushed with beginning.

O'Donahue's message seems to be that hibernation is a necessary process. So perhaps rather than trying to floor the pedal when it feels like we ran out of gas a long time back, we can let ourselves be just a little. My mother used to suggest, 'take a little vacation every day.' Perhaps we can find some space for ourselves in which we can switch off without having to resort to Netflix or other distractions. Perhaps for once we can just let ourselves be, fostering our energy and compassionately nourishing ourselves, finding some sense of *vayeshev* that makes sense to us.

And the third thing we can do is to use this 'down time' to dream.

The Rabbis of the Talmud may not think much of sleeping, but they are way more positive about dreaming. They describe a dream as 'one-sixtieth of prophecy.'³ Just like Joseph's dreams, which flood the parashah with color and light, our own dreams may come into better focus when set against lassitude and darkness. In many ways, Joseph is at his strongest when he's in the pit, or in the dungeon - perhaps his dreams sustained him through those dark and lonely times. It may be dark, and we may be tired - but human beings have the power to dream, and those dreams give us the power to live.

So this year I wish us a dreaming Hanukkah. I wish for us to be able to acknowledge our fatigue, to settle with it and to use it to rebuild ourselves from the inside. There is no shame in being tired. If we can hold our fatigue gently, then perhaps it will offer us its own Hanukkah gifts.

Shabbat shalom and happy Hanukkah.

³ *ibid.*