

"To Be a Kid Again"
דבר תורה (sermon) for Yom Kippur Day 5778/2017
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Grey material omitted from spoken presentation.

They say that youth is wasted on the young. Many people yearn to be a kid again. As we age, we tend to look back at our youth and imagine what we might have done differently if we had a second chance. What are the opportunities we missed? Who might we have been, what might we have become, had we soaked up every opportunity that was set before us in the days when we felt like we had unlimited energy and potential?

Unfortunately, as we age and as we lament the missed opportunities of youth, we often lack the time and energy to correct our earlier mistakes. We can't go back. But what if there were some aspect of your youth that you could revisit without that aspect suffering mightily because of your additional years? What if something you didn't take full advantage of in your youth could be recaptured now?

Well, I'd like to suggest one area where an opportunity generally afforded to youth could be capitalized on as we age, perhaps even more fruitfully than when we were young. In this regard, I'd like to introduce to you Rabbi Gradofsky's corollary to the adage that youth is wasted on the young. My theory is as follows: Jewish education is wasted on the young.

Now, before someone tries to run me off of the pulpit, let me clarify that I am not saying that it is a waste to provide young people with a Jewish education. But there is a cruel irony about a Jewish population that, outside of Orthodox circles, tends to terminate Jewish education precisely when the main thrust of Judaism is beginning to become relevant. To be certain, a ten year old child can learn a lot about Jewish history and holidays. A twelve year old can know about a sukkah or a Chanukah menorah or the ten plagues in Egypt. But the main thrust of Judaism is not any discrete list of facts and traditions but rather guidance toward a life of holiness and righteousness. Judaism seeks to guide us and train us how to make wise choices about how we live our lives. And in this light, I lament the tragic fact that just as children are growing into adulthood, at the exact moment that life is starting to present children with serious questions of how they will live their lives, and precisely when their brains are beginning to develop the physiological tools for adult decision making, they are often "aging out" of Jewish education and thus being deprived of the religious and spiritual tools that could be invaluable in guiding them toward a rich and meaningful adulthood.

¹ Note that in case any of the articles referenced in this sermon are taken offline, I have maintained copies of them and can make them available on request.

Let's begin with the physiological reality. As children hit puberty, their brains hit an important growth spurt.² Their prefrontal cortex begins to grow and develop,³ a course of development that will continue through the mid-20's.⁴ The prefrontal cortex is a sort of "CEO of the brain, controlling planning, memory, organization, and mood modulation."⁵ And so, cognitive abilities such as "advanced reasoning, abstract thinking, and self-consciousness" experience rapid growth in the teen years.⁶

Jewish law and philosophy are all about making the right choices in life, about how to live a life of spirituality and righteousness. And so, for someone to really understand all that Jewish knowledge has to offer, that person would have to be at a stage where he or she is beginning to grapple seriously with choices of how to live his or her life. Let's take, for example, the mitzvah of keeping kosher. In summing up the laws of kashruth, the book of Leviticus sums up a lengthy discussion of the laws of kashruth with the statement, "וְהִתְקַדְּשֶׁתָּם וְהִיִּיתֶם קְדוֹשִׁים" And you shall sanctify yourselves and be holy."⁷ The medieval biblical commentator and philosopher Rabbenu Bahaye explains that we achieve holiness through mitzvot, which teach us to curb our desires in favor of what our intellect tells us is good and right. He explains that without conscious intervention, physical desire is stronger than the intellect, both because it develops earlier in a person's life and because it is egged on by all the physical pleasures that are available to a person, whereas intellect is like a stranger in our physical world and therefore it lacks natural allies. Left to nature, Rabbenu Bahaye teaches, intellect would be weakened and defeated by desire. He says, "ולפיכך הוצרך האדם אל התורה והמצות לחזק כח השכל ולהחליש כח התאוות Therefore a person needs Torah and mitzvot to strengthen the power of the intellect and to weaken the power of desire."

And why were we commanded with the commandments regarding forbidden food, the prohibitions of illicit physical relationships, the commandment of prayer, fasts, charity, acts of loving kindness? Because all of them [serve the purpose] of weakening the strength of desire.⁸

ומפני זה נצטוינו במצות המאכלים האסורים ובמצות העריות ובמצות התפלה והתענית והצדקה וגמילות חסדים שכולן להחליש כח התאוה.⁸

² "Adolescent Brains are a Work in Progress: Here's Why"
<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/teenbrain/work/adolescent.html#fnB0>.

³ Id.

⁴ "Risky Behavior By Teens Can Be Explained In Part By How Their Brains Change," *The Washington Post*, http://wapo.st/1w1qgsw?tid=ss_mail&utm_term=.7cc3eb9ef4d2.

⁵ "Adolescent Brains are a Work in Progress: Here's Why," above footnote 2.

⁶ "Risky Behavior By Teens Can Be Explained In Part By How Their Brains Change," above footnote 4.

⁷ Leviticus 11:44.

⁸ Rabbenu Bahaye on Leviticus 11:14. Here is a longer selection from the text:

(מד) והתקדשתם והייתם קדושים כי קדוש אני. הקדושה הזאת לישראל יותר משאר האומות אינה אלא במעשה התורה והמצות, כי עם התורה והמצות יתחזק כח השכל ויחלוש כח התאוות, וידוע כי התאוה חזקה בטבעה והנה היא באדם קודמת לשכלו, כי התאוה מוטבעת בו מתחלת נעוריו שהוא נמשך אחר ההנאות הגשמיות ועמהן הוא הולך וגדל עד שהיא מתגברת על השכל אשר בשבילו נוצר האדם, ועוד שהתאוה מחוברת מכחות הטבעים ומן היסודות ויש לה מחזיקים ועוזרים הרבה והם המאכלים ושאר התאוות הגשמיות, והשכל שהוא עצם רוחני והוא נגזר מן העולם העליון הוא נכרי בעולם הגופות העבים והגסים, ומפני שהוא נכרי אין לו מחזיק ועוזר אלא הכל כנגדו, ובדין הוא שיחליש השכל ותתגבר התאוה עליו בסבת שני ענינים, האחד מפני שהתאוה באדם קודמת לשכל, והשני מפני שהתאוה יש לה מחזיקים ולא כן השכל, ולפיכך הוצרך האדם אל התורה והמצות לחזק כח השכל ולהחליש כח התאוות, ומפני זה נצטוינו במצות המאכלים האסורים ובמצות העריות ובמצות התפלה והתענית והצדקה וגמילות חסדים שכולן להחליש כח התאוה. וזהו שאמר רז"ל בספרי: "והתקדשתם", זו קדושת מצוה, ואחר כך: "והייתם קדושים". והכוונה במאמר הזה כי על ידי המצות יחליש כח התאוות ויתגבר כח השכל שבשבילו נברא האדם.

One of the mitzvot that Rabbenu Bahaye mentions as strengthening our intellect over our desire is prayer. Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel's description of prayer helps explain how this operates:

Prayer takes the mind out of the narrowness of self-interest, and enables us to see the world in the mirror of the holy . . . by taking counsel with what we know about the will of God, by seeing our fate in proportion to God. Prayer clarifies our hope and intentions. It helps us discover our true aspirations, the pangs we ignore, the longings we forgot. It is an act of self-purification, a quarantine for the soul. . . .⁹

Scientific research demonstrates the efficacy of ritual and religion in helping one lead a disciplined life. For instance, a New York Times article a number of years ago quoted psychologist Michael McCullogh of the University of Miami as saying:

For a long time it wasn't cool for social scientists to study religion, but some researchers were quietly chugging along for decades. When you add it all up, it turns out there are remarkably consistent findings that religiosity correlates with higher self-control.¹⁰

The author of the article, John Tierny, explains Dr. McCullogh's findings a bit more:

Religious people, he said, are self-controlled not simply because they fear God's wrath, but because they've absorbed the ideals of their religion into their own system of values, and have thereby given their personal goals an aura of sacredness.¹¹

What's more amazing is that this religious discipline does not come at the cost of enjoying life. As Tierny reports:

Researchers around the world have repeatedly found that devoutly religious people tend to do better in school, live longer, have more satisfying marriages and be generally happier.¹²

When children are 10, 11, 12, years old, they can hardly begin to understand the deep meaning and value behind the rituals they learn about in Hebrew school. What a shame that many children don't have the opportunity to continue to absorb what Judaism

⁹ Quest For God Crossroad Publishing Company, New York, 1987 p. 7.

¹⁰ "For Good Self-Control, Try Getting Religious About It" <https://nyti.ms/2jUZvGg>

¹¹ Id.

¹² Id.

has to offer as Judaism's eternal messages become more and more relevant to their lives. Rather than being blessed with continued growth regarding a corpus of values and practices that would improve the quality and impact of their lives, they are left with just faint whispers of the true depth and meaning of Judaism, just embers of what should be a burning flame.

I hinted as I began this talk that Jewish learning is an area where you can be a kid again, where perhaps you can do even better now than you might have been able to do when you were younger. There is so much to learn, so much room to grow. Many of the values and philosophies that underlie the Judaism you can learn about right now are values and philosophies that you could never have understood, or at least might not have taken the time to understand, when you were younger. And even if age does present *some* challenges to learning, more expansive life experience can help give greater context for understanding the meaning and power behind Torah and mitzvot.

But before you get to thinking that because Jewish learning can accomplish so much even as we age, you should not think that this is a reason to let teenagers "off the hook." Dr. Jay Giedd of the National Institute of Mental Health in Bethesda, Maryland, argues that due to rapid significant brain development, the teen years are a "use it or lose" period:

If a teen is doing music or sports or academics, those are the cells and connections that will be hardwired. If they're lying on the couch or playing video games or MTV, those are the cells and connections that are going to survive.¹³

And so it is critically important that the values of Judaism take root in the brains of people in their teens and twenties through encouraging them to learn about and take part in Torah and mitzvot.

To the parents and grandparents here, I ask you to make sure that you don't allow Jewish education to be wasted on pre-bar/bat mitzvah children, but instead make sure that that early education is a foundation for continued schooling in the values and practices of our faith. Make the investment in Jewish high school education or at least find a Hebrew high school opportunity and make that as important, or even more important than any other "extracurricular" activity. Perhaps take some time to study Judaism with your children and grandchildren.

If you are in your teens and twenties, please recognize that the choices you make right now will significantly influence who you become in the future and make sure that you explore how Judaism can help be a guide in your life. I am reminded of what one of my freshman professors, Rabbi David Wolpe, said to our Jewish philosophy class. He told us to ignore all those people who would say things like "when you get in to the real world . . ." He explained that the real world is a place where our choices have consequences,

¹³ "Adolescent Brains are a Work in Progress: Here's Why," above footnote 2.

and that we were already in that world. How you live your young life will have a tremendous influence on the rest of your life. Please, spend some of your time learning about Jewish practices and values and let them help guide you on your way.

Parents and grandparents, if you want your children and grandchildren to value the lessons they learn about Judaism, then you are responsible for demonstrating that value by acting as a role model and actively engaging yourself in Jewish education. The story is told about a Hebrew school teacher who invites questions from students:

"I've got one," said a boy. "According to the Bible, the Children of Israel crossed the Red Sea, right?"

"That's right," said the teacher.

"And the Children of Israel defeated the Philistines and the Egyptians, and they built the Temple, and they were always doing something important, right?"

"All of that is correct," agreed the instructor. "So what's the question?"

"Well," demanded the boy, "what were the grownups doing?"¹⁴

As you ask your children and grandchildren to value their Jewish education, make sure you demonstrate yourself doing the same. In the coming year, find time to grown in your knowledge and understanding of Judaism. Learn more about mitzvot, their meaning, and their purpose. Study Jewish prayer so that it can take on increasing meaning in your life. There are wonderful books available on every subject and ranging from very basic to extremely advanced. There are myriad websites chock full of information on Jewish law and lore (though perhaps some of those websites should be taken with a grain of salt). Find a good class that you can attend. Make this the year that you invigorate your thirst for knowledge of God and God's Torah. Let your life be a fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy "כִּי מְלֵאָה הָאָרֶץ דַּעַה אֶת יְקוּק כַּמַּיִם לַיָּם מְכַסִּים" For the earth shall be filled with knowledge of the LORD as water covers the sea." Of course, as you learn more, strive to put more of what you learn into practice now that each act can be filled with deeper meaning. When your children and grandchildren ask, "What were you doing when I was going to Hebrew school," be able to say you, too, were learning and that there is a lifetime of learning available in the treasure trove that is our Torah. The book of proverbs says, "כִּי נֵר מִצְוָה כִּי נֵר מְצוּהָ אֹר" For mitzvah is fire and Torah is light."¹⁵ Be sure to grab that flame and to pass it along to the next generations.

There is a well-known saying that "tradition is the handing down of the flame and not the worshipping of ashes."¹⁶ The torch of Torah and mitzvot has been passed down from generation to generation for millennia. As we move toward the Yizkor service let's make sure that the traditions entrusted to us by our loved ones burn in our hearts and

¹⁴ [Readers Digest Funny Family Jokes: Something for Everyone from Age 9 to 99](#), Simon and Schuster 2014. Joke credited to Clarence Krajenke. *Please note that UTJ is a participant in the Amazon Services LLC Associates Program, an affiliate advertising program designed to provide a means for us to earn fees by linking to Amazon.com and affiliated sites.*

¹⁵ Proverbs 6:23.

¹⁶ Alternatively attributed to Goethe, Mahler, Thomas More, and some others.

continue to be a guiding light not only in our lives but in the lives of our future generations. And let us say, Amen.

FOR CLOSING PRAYER AT CONCLUSION OF YOM KIPPUR:

הבינו ה' א-להינו לדעת דרכיך, ומול את לבבנו ליראתך¹⁷
Adonay our God, bless us with understanding of your ways and fashion our hearts to observe your laws in reverence. May the Torah's flame burn in our hearts and guide our path. We pray that we merit through study of your Torah and observance of your mitzvot to pass a glowing torch to our next generations so that so that your guiding light continues to glow eternally. May your Torah lead us to lives of contentment and wellbeing, as it is written, "דְרָכֶיךָ דָרְכֵי נֵעִם וְכָל נְתִיבֹתֶיךָ שְׁלוֹם" its ways are ways of pleasantness, and its paths, are paths of peace."¹⁸ And let us say, amen.

¹⁷ Opening of the abbreviated prayer of Samuel, Babylonian Talmud Berakhot 29a.

¹⁸ Proverbs 13:17.