

Behar

Delivered by Rabbi Aaron Krupnick May 20, 2016

We all know that we should save for a rainy day. It's common sense, but of course, it's not that common. What the old bromide means is, "You never know what will happen in the future, so it's better to plan for it today." Common sense, but not so common. I'm not going to ask for a show of hands but I can already anticipate the answer. Which do you think is larger, the number of people here (or in America for that matter) who have insurance on their I-Phones OR the number of people who have life insurance to protect their spouses and children from financial hardship if they pass? My guess is that the number of people who insure their phones is far larger.

Why? Well, you could say it's just because it's cheaper to buy the I-Phone insurance than a life insurance policy. But I think there's something else at work here. I think we insure our phone quicker than we insure ourselves because we NEED the I-Phone now. We know what it will feel like to not have it. But we have a much harder time imagining a future without us and so we have a harder time putting away money to protect against what is inevitable. We live, for the most part, in the "here and now."

But the Torah gives us a very different model. It STARTS with people living in the here and now, but gives us a longer-term vision of our lives as the story unfolds.... A snake tempts Eve, and Eve tempts Adam and soon they are eating apples, and you know how that worked out. Immediate gratification in the here and now led to a long term loss. Basically, the Torah starts by showing us the pitfalls of living only in the here and now. But by the time we get to this week's portion, when the Jewish People are already a nation, a new system, one of delayed gratification and future forecasting, is already put into effect. This week's portion teaches us that for six years you are allowed to work your fields, but in the seventh year you have to let it just produce on it's own. You can eat the stuff, and so can the poor and animals, but you can't plant and reap in the seventh year like you can in the preceding six. So how do you have enough to eat? Easy. You train yourself to know that the lean year is inevitable and that if you put some away, if you don't consume all your food immediately, you'll have more for later. In other words, while it is tempting to consume what you have, you'll benefit more if you can save some for later, even if it means depriving yourself of some of it now.

What percentage of Americans are saving for retirement? About 1 in 10. And part of the reason is that more than half of Americans do not have access to 401K plans. They can't participate in plans that will automatically take part of their salaries off the top before they get the money. If they did, they'd feel it less, worry about it less, and save more. But of the remaining half, most of them still don't save because it is easier and more fun to enjoy now and worry later, than put in a little worry now and enjoy later. So the Torah forces us to confront the fact that you are, by definition, going to have challenging times and so you must prepare for them. That's an important part of what Shmitta, this seven year agricultural system is all about.

But there is another aspect of Shmitta that has real psychological implications for us as well. The ability to put off the immediate gratification in the here and now for a longer term gain can have profound implications for our growth as individuals. You may be familiar with the "Marshmallow Experiment" done some years ago. Psychologists took a group of 4 year olds and

tested each one individually. The child was put in a room and told that they could eat one marshmallow now, but if they waited for the grown-up to return, they'd get two marshmallows. Two-thirds of the kids ate the marshmallow right away, and 1/3 waited until the adult returned and they got two instead. Kind of obvious... But what makes this experiment so interesting is that psychologists then went back to the same kids 14 years later to see how they grew up. And what they found was that the group who could wait for the second marshmallow scored an average of 250 points higher on their SATs! Wow! How do we account for that?!

It's probably because the kids who could wait for the marshmallow could also wait to watch TV until their homework was done. They could put off immediate gratification for a longer term goal, whether it was another marshmallow or better grades. And I believe that what turned them into better students can also help to foster our own spiritual growth as individuals and as families.

When it comes to our kids, it is easier to see the immediate benefit of them being able to kick a soccer ball with greater skill than it is to anticipate what it might be like for them to feel competent and confident as young Jewish adults. It is easier to see the immediate benefit of passing a test in public school than it is to see the long term comfort of Jewish community that comes from attending Hebrew High on a regular basis. And for us it's easier to sleep in than it is to get up for shul. But at the same time, we know the inner peace that comes from feeling part of what goes on here.

True spiritual harmony is found, I believe, in the proper balance of enjoying life in the here and now, and also delaying the immediate gratification that sacrifices our long term goals. Shmitta gave our ancient ancestors both a greater sense of enjoying their food in the moment and the motivation and discipline of saving for the lean year. A meaningful spiritual life is found in that same balance. And yes, you can have it all. You can live fully in the moment and at the same time plan for the future. Yes you can. For when you know you have planned for the future, stock-piling positive spiritual experiences that nourish your soul in the here and now, you take out some of the element of worry and thus live more fully in this moment. The key is to enjoy life now, feeding your soul in times of plenty, and, at the same time, anticipate what spiritual strength and experiences you might need to draw on should challenges arise. Investing in our own spiritual lives now will help us to live more fully in the years to come.