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The Tree of Growing Up

Bette Davis famously said “old age ain’t no place for sissies.” This is a quote that launched a thousand novelty t-shirts and coffee mugs and tote bags. If I were designing one of those inspirational coffee mugs I would add on the words “and adulthood is no place for cowards.”

There is a long intellectual tradition in Europe, with many American offspring, that valorizes childhood as the most noble stage of life. The French intellectual Rousseau is credited with being one of the “father’s of childhood” for his portrayals of childhood innocence and curiosity. This intellectual and cultural tradition has noticed something real. Childhood curiosity and enthusiasm is inspiring. And childhood innocence is precious. But children aren’t innocent because they are good. Children are innocent because they are not morally accountable for their actions.

Parashat Bereishit is a story of Creation and that means it is a story of childhood. Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden were not children, the Torah suggests that they were created as fully adult human beings. But if their bodies were mature, their experience of the world was childlike. Adam’s first actions, pointing and naming the animals that surrounded him are the actions that a child makes to give order to his or her surroundings through the use of speech: dog, tree, bus, garbage truck! And the first sin, which as Rabbi David Silber has noted, is really the archetype for sin in the Torah, seeing something and taking it, reflects the impulsivity of a child who cannot delay his gratification or recognize that just because she wants something is not the same as having a right to take it.

By the end of the parashah, Adam and Eve are fully adult and world-weary. They become adults through the process of God’s curses after the primordial sin. They become aware of their nakedness and of their own sexuality and the way it subjects each of their bodies to the embarrassing evaluations of the other. They are informed that their desire to become parents and to bring children into the world is inextricably linked to elements of pain and heartache that no epidural could ever cure. They learn that survival will entail struggle and unceasing hard work. They become aware of their own mortality and that of every person they will ever love.

My colleague Rabbi David Fried has recently published a brief essay that demonstrates how the outcome of the curses are inevitable elements of adulthood. The Torah’s vision for humanity is that we emulate God’s actions. We fashion and we create and we name just as God fashioned and created and named. And, as Ramban famously writes, we are even meant to use our own judgments to figure out what is good and bad. But, whereas Adam and Eve sinfully hoped that eating from the Tree of Good and Evil would allow them to evaluate good and evil without any role for God, the Torah’s vision is that a life of mitzvot gives us the tools to discern what is “right and good in the eyes of God וְעָשִׂיתָ הַיָּשָׁר וְהַטּוֹב בְּעֵינֵי ה'.

Adults are not fully innocent because we are accountable for our wrong choices. But we are also recognized for our good choices and have the potential to shape the world in bigger and more sustainable ways than even the most charismatic child. A perspective in which children are our role models and heroes is, ultimately, an abdication of responsibility for the world and the people with whom we share the world.

Many synagogues are marking this weekend as the one-year anniversary of the massacre of worshippers at the Tree of Life Synagogue in Pittsburgh. It seems complicated and perhaps problematic to commemorate a Jewish event, especially the deaths of eleven people, according to the civil calendar. The massacre did occur on Shabbat, (I vividly remember being told about what had happened by the security officers while we were gathered here in shul on Shabbat morning), but it was not Shabbat Bereishit. But, for understandable reasons, many Americans and many American Jews are going to commemorate the massacre tomorrow and many Jewish communities are devoting time this Shabbat for reflection and commemoration.

Jews have lived in what would become the United States since 1654. And there was not one single massacre of Jews on American soil for the first 364 years of American Jewish history. There have been two deadly attacks this year, and several close calls. A naive perspective on the potential for murderous antisemitism to take hold in America is no more than the naive perspective of a child and cannot withstand the scrutiny of a mature evaluation.

The loss of childhood innocence is always traumatic. It is frightening to realize the ways that America may not be as immune as we had thought from some of the more grim realities of Jewish history. It is appropriate to mourn the loss of innocence alongside mourning the loss of life. But childhood always ends. Our greatest prayer for our children is that they grow up and become adults. Adults have the ability to control our reactions. In the phrasing of Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik: we can assert control over our own destiny in the aftermath of tragedy by ignoring unanswerable questions about “why” and instead asking “how” we can honor the past as we construct a better future.

As a mature American Jewish community, we can name antisemitism as the first human named the world around him. We can seek out and strengthen alliances with men and women of good will of every race and religion. As much as we are protected by the walls of this building we are mostly kept safe by the enduring fact that our fellow citizens and neighbors are happy for us to live and worship among them.

There are synagogues which are often empty which filled to capacity the week after the massacre in Pittsburgh. Many of those synagogues are filled again today with Jews wishing to show their identification with their People and with others wishing to show their solidarity with Jews. It is a very meaningful tribute when a frequently empty synagogue is filled with worshippers. For a congregation like ours which, thank God, is filled with worshippers each week, we have a different sort of tribute to offer.

We have started Sefer Bereishit again. We are relearning and retelling the oldest story of our people. We know the Torah doesn't have a happy ending - we just read the ending days ago. Even Sefer Bereishit doesn't even have a happy ending. But through the retelling of this story, and learning it again and learning it deeper and learning it better, we create order and meaning in our world. As we start this cycle of Torah reading we remember all of those who cherished the Torah and all of those who were a part of our people who will not be reading or hearing the Torah this year. We lift our voices and we open our ears and our hearts for the words of Torah and in so doing we assume the positions of our murdered brothers and sisters in an eternal phalanx of Jews grabbing hold of the Torah for dear life.

Rabbi Nahman of Breslov pointed out the obvious truth that is only obvious when a spiritual genius like Rabbi Nahman of Breslov points it out: If you believe that the world can be damaged by human actions, then you must also admit that the world can be repaired by human actions. That is the responsibility of adulthood. That is the burden. That is the curse. And that is the blessing.