

Patience, Young Grasshopper

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Rav Chaim Zanel Abramowitz (no relation to Jessica), the Ribnitzer Rebbe, led the beleaguered Jews of Moldova under the Communist regime. Under the most difficult of circumstances, he maintained a fully observant lifestyle, even meticulously observing the custom of immersing daily in the mikvah. Often, the mikvah was a lake that was frozen solid, into which he would have to bore a hole before immersing and then chop off blocks of ice. In his youth, the Rebbe learned *milah* and *shechitah*, and endangered his life on countless occasions to perform a *bris* for a Jewish child, or to *schecht* an animal, allowing a Jew to eat kosher meat. In 1970, the Rebbe was able to leave, and he lived for several years in Yerushalaim, from where he moved to the United States, where he settled in the Sea Gate neighborhood of Brooklyn. Eventually, he moved to Monsey, where he passed away on *Isru Chag* of Sukkos in 1995, at what is thought to be 92 years of age. The Rebbe was a remarkable Torah scholar, though he was known less for his learning and more for his ascetic practices. He fasted most days while wrapped in tallis and tefillin, and donned sackcloth and ashes every night to mourn the destruction of the Beit HaMikdash, while bawling bitter tears. He was also known for being a *baal moyfes*,

a miracle worker, and once reportedly admitted about himself that he could see “from one end of the world to the other.” Tens of thousands of Jews came to the Rebbe for blessings- whether for finding a *shidduch*, for children, for health, for success in business dealing and anything else¹, and reported that his blessings were remarkably effective. Tens of thousands of people a year still visit his gravesite, where they report similar miracles happening as a result of their supplications.

A personality like this often has someone handling his affairs, known as a *gabbai* or a *mashbak*, which stands for *meshamesh bakodesh*, who serves the Rebbe in helping him perform his holy work. This person’s job is to make sure the Rebbe is where he needs to be, to handle the crowds that come to visit, and carry out tasks the Rebbe requests, usually with the greatest of discretion. The Ribnitzer Rebbe had a devoted gabbai who was extremely close with him; for a year, that gabbai even slept next to him, essentially living in his house despite having a family of his own. But the gabbai’s service of the Rebbe became too much for his wife to bear, and one evening, she was one of those who came to the Rebbe in tears.² “Rebbe, I can’t do it anymore. I have little children at home, and my husband is always with you! What am I supposed to do?”

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<https://jewishmusicalnotes.com/%F0%9F%95%AF-rav-chaim-zanvil-abramowitz-ztl-the-ribnitzer-rebbe-1902-1995-24th-of-tishrei/>

² <https://mishpacha.com/50-and-counting/>

The Rebbe replied, "Please, leave him here and I promise you will *never lack for anything for the rest of your life.*"

The gabbai's wife left, knowing she had received a powerful blessing from a holy man.

For those calendar buffs out there, there is an interesting and perplexing question posed by the timeline of the Mishkan. In an enigmatic passage in the Midrashic anthology Yalkut Shimoni, our sages tell us that the construction of the mishkan concluded on the 25th of Kislev:

א"ר חנינא בכ"ה בכסליו נגמר מלאכת המשכן ועשה מקופל עד אחד בניסן, כמו שכתוב ביום הראשון באחד לכחדש תקים את משכן, והיו ישראל ממלמלין על משה לומר למה לא הוקם מיד שמא דופי אירע בו והקב"ה חשב לערב שמחת המשכן בחדש שנולד בו יצחק דכתיב לושי ועשי עוגות ואמרו לו שוב אשרוב אליך, ומעתה הפסיד כסלו שנגמרה בו המלאכה אמר הקב"ה עלי לשלם, מה שלם לו הקב"ה חנוכת השמונאי

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..R' Chanina said - on the twenty-fifth of Kislev the work of the tabernacle was completed, but it was left folded up until Nisan, as it is written "On the day of the first month, on the first of the month, you shall set up the Mishkan of the Tent of Meeting." (Shemot 40:2) Israel were murmuring against Moshe saying 'why wasn't it erected immediately, maybe some flaw happened to it?' The Holy One intended to mingle the joy of the tabernacle with the month in which Yitzchak was born, as it says "...knead and make cakes," (Bereshit 18:6) and they said to

him "...At the appointed time, I will return to you, at this time next year..." (Bereshit 18:14)

Now because of this the month of Kislev, in which the work of the tabernacle was completed, lost out. The Holy One said 'it is incumbent upon Me to make restitution.' What restitution did the Holy One make? The rededication of the Temple by the Hasmoneans

On a homiletical level, I can understand the connection between the dedication of the Mishkan in Nissn and the birth of Yitzchak. After all, the latter was preceded by the baking of special bread (i.e. Matzah) and the birth was announced to take place "At a special time," a *mo'ed*. But a more fundamental question has to be asked: why wait at all? If the Mishkan was completed on the 25th of Kislev, why not dedicate it on that day?

I'd like to share an answer with you from the great Yerushalmi *maggid* Rav Mordechai Druk, whose 14th yahrtzeit was observed this past week. Rav Druk follows the commentators (including Rashi, among others) who view the Mishkan as atonement for the sin of the Golden Calf. What was the character trait that caused that tragic episode? Impatience. They needed answers, they needed leadership, they needed gratification- and they needed it *now*. When the Jewish people saw that Moshe tarried in descending the mountain, they had no patience to wait for him. Instead, they selected another

“leader” immediately. Rav Druk pointed out further that Aharon tried his best to employ stalling tactics, in the hopes that the angry and anxious mob would calm down. As Rashi explained it, this was the rationale behind Aharon ordering the men to bring their wives’ jewelry. Surely they would never part with it, and would therefore talk their husbands out of participation, during which time Moshe would return. Similarly, Aharon said *הג לה' מחר* - there will be a festival for God *tomorrow*- not today.

In order to repair this negative character trait, God had to train them that even after the Mishkan was built and everything was ready, they would still have to wait. If they could be patient, if they could rise above their need for instant gratification, God would eventually imbue the structure that was ready and waiting with His divine presence.

How appropriate it is, then, that we read about the building of the Mishkan in between these two dates- and right around Purim. We invoke the story of Purim to demonstrate that God’s salvation, through a dramatic reversal of fortune, can occur in an instant. But Achashverosh’s discovery that Mordechai had saved him from assassination took place a full *five years* after he did so. During that time, Haman had been elevated to a position of power and had set in motion his genocidal ambition. *The story of Purim is as much*

about patience as it is about deliverance. Maybe that's why God wanted the Mishkan to be built in the month Yitzchak, who was awaited for so long, was born- because that, too, was about waiting.

Of course, we all understand that patience is virtuous, but I know that I struggle with actually making it a part of my life. Cultivating patience is not helped by the world we live in, in which instant gratification is available at our fingertips. Whether the delivery of groceries or dinner, shopping online or watching a movie, the time lag between the appearance of a desire and its fulfillment can often be measured in seconds. How can we develop patience when it seems like there is no need to do so? Perhaps it is worth viewing patience, and willpower, as a muscle; This was the premise behind the 2011 book "Willpower," by Roy Baumeister and John Tierney. Like any muscle, willpower will not work if it is used too intensely in the short term; it will become fatigued and then atrophied. But it will work well if it is regularly exercised and developed in the long term. There is a Confucian concept called chiao shun, meaning "to train"- to build up resistance and anticipation. It doesn't mean that you need to deny yourself or others what you or they want- just to delay it for some time, something Baumeister calls the "Gestation of Desire." Cultivating this trait yields benefits for parenting, marriage and interpersonal relationships as well, because it exercises the muscle that is patience. To

paraphrase the Rolling Stones, if we learn that we can't always get what we want- or, at least we can't always get it when we want it- then we will be less frustrated when the people we love don't do what we want, when we want it. In addition to cultivating discipline, self control and patience, it also has the added benefit of increasing our appreciation for the thing we or our kids want when we, or they, finally receive it. Think about how joyous it was on the day the Mishkan was finally dedicated- an event the Jewish people eagerly anticipated for three months- and how much they appreciated it when it was finally ready for them. I think that's also the message the Ribnitzer Rebbe was trying to impart to his gabbai's wife. Not only was he blessing her- he was also empowering her to see that she would reap enormous blessing if she could wait just a bit more. Now, I'm not saying that what the Rebbe asked of his gabbai, and the gabbai's wife, is appropriate for everyone. Ignoring one's family, even for the sake of holy causes or people, is usually a recipe for disaster and not for blessing. That's why it was especially comforting and necessary that the Rebbe blessed the family- because those blessings certainly came true. Do you know who that gabbai was that served the rebbe so selflessly? It's none other than Mordechai Werdyger, better known as Mordechai Ben David or MBD, the legendary Jewish singer who has touched the souls of countless people over his career of more than 50 years, and is still going strong, he should live and be well. Every album he puts out is a hit, and even in his early 70s, as

a great-grandfather, he is in fine voice, still wildly sought-after as a singer and entertainer. MBD was at the Rebbe's side for five years, witnessing many of the miracles the Rebbe performed, and he attributes his success in life to that blessing the Rebbe gave Esther Werdyger for being patient. The Rebbe's lesson is one that applies to us, too, because it really is what it means to be a Jew- to work, and hope for change and blessing but recognize that it won't come quickly or without effort. Instead of giving up on ourselves or on others, instead of giving up on institutions and on communities, we should continue to invest our energy and time in making them- and us- better, even if the improvement we seek will not happen on the timeline we'd prefer. The key is to focus on the long term- to be patient. This is an especially important message for anyone who supports and loves Israel these days. The belief and the hope that better days will come in Israel certainly seems like the way Oscar Wilde described marriage- "The triumph of imagination over intelligence." But as the popular saying and song based on the words of Rav Kook goes: עם הנצח לא מפחד מדרך ארוכה, the eternal nation is unafraid of the long road, the winding and rocky one one that will ultimately, please God, lead to redemption. On Purim, we pray for a dramatic and immediate turnabout, but let us also remember the lesson of God's delay in resting his presence on the Mishkan. *Anything worth building, is worth waiting for.* May we witness His revealed presence among us, speedily in our days.