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GROWING INTO OURSELVES

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INTRODUCTION

At first glance, it might seem like Judaism has relatively little to offer folks who are in their teens and early twenties. After all, the lives of our Sages and leaders of the past are markedly different from those of contemporary Jews in many ways, and their understanding of this life stage is hardly an exception. Girls were often contracted for marriage not long after puberty,¹ and, perhaps, not too long after turning thirteen². For most of Jewish history, there was a fairly quick transition from childhood to the assumption of entirely adult roles and responsibilities – and for the most part, work life, family life, and the priorities that informed them were very much in line with those with which one was raised.

For many people these days, there's a stretch of time between puberty and starting a career and committing to permanent romantic relationships – the things generally associated with taking on the mantle of adulthood. Rather, the ten or so years between one's early-to-mid teens and one's early-to-mid or mid-to-late twenties function, in our culture, as sort of an in-between stage, a slower transition from childhood to adulthood than there may have been in times past. This time is often marked by increased independence from parents and the life inhabited as a child, and a move towards self-definition. People at this stage of life often ask – explicitly or, more often, in subtle, implicit ways – questions like, “Who am I?” “What do I want from my life, from my work, from myself?” “What kinds of choices do I want or need to make in order to become the person I hope to become?” It's often a time of investigation and introspection, of regarding the familiar with new eyes and exploring possibilities.

Today's world prizes independence and self-determination, and encourages us to look carefully at the values we embrace, the kinds of lives we choose to lead and with what kinds of people we choose to lead them. This is a good thing. Modernity has given us many gifts, and the wider berth offered for our passions and talents is certainly one of them; it's impossible to deny that we each have more options available today than ever before.

Do the differences in our historical moment from the past mean that Judaism is silent about this process? Of course not! For all of the ways that the external form of “becoming an adult” today seems to diverge from what may have ever been, the process of becoming ourselves - of growing into our deepest values and potential, of giving shape and heft to the way we inhabit the world and even of deciding what this way will be... this process is ancient. Here, then, are a few of the classic ways that Judaism addresses these transitions and transformations.

VENTURE INTO THE UNKNOWN

One of the Bible's great themes is that of leave-taking. God instructs Abraham, then a nice nobody from the land of Ur, “*Lekh lekha*”—“Go, you, from your land and from your birthplace and from your father's house to the land that I will show you.”³ Abraham was commanded to leave behind everything that was familiar, everything that corresponded to the identity and relationships he had held his entire life, and to strike out into the unknown. It's worth noting that God doesn't tell Abraham exactly where he's going from the outset. The first step is that Abraham has to be willing to leave—it's only later, with God's help, that he'll figure out the destination. The medieval commentator Rashi tells us that this leave-taking is for Abraham's “own good,” that he will only encounter his own greatness when he leaves the safe confines of everything he knows and takes for granted, when he takes a risk. And, sure enough, through the challenges and experiences that Abraham encounters along the way, he slowly grows into his own abilities and encounters his true destiny.

This trope is repeated again and again. When Jacob sets off from his family home, he has a dream encounter – that includes, famously, a ladder reaching to the heavens – that proves to be the first step of a long education. After the dream, he cries, “God was in this place, and I did not know it!” Setting out on the journey was the first step, and only

¹ *Mishnah Avot 5:23*

² *Shulhan Arukh, Even HaEzer 1:3*

³ *Genesis 12:1*



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after that is he open to understanding the world in a radically new way. It's this insight that opens the door for him to really grow up, to move from a deceitful trickster to a humbled and responsible head of a household. Moses, too, must leave the Egyptian palace in which he has been raised and find himself on new terrain as a shepherd before – in a powerful encounter with a burning bush – he begins to get intimations of his own destiny, of the role he's meant to play in history. Even the Israelites didn't encounter God until they made their exodus from Egypt, didn't understand the shape their life as a people would take in covenant with the Divine.

It's only when we leave behind the known and the familiar we can forge a new path, one in which our individual (and/or communal) power is finally unlocked. As people reach a certain age, they often move from the script that their parents have written for them and begin to ask what kind of story they might write for themselves. Doing this demands some kind of leave-taking, either in a literal or metaphoric way. We all need to develop into ourselves, and into who we have the ability to become, and we need new experiences and new challenges in order to help us do that. Whether those experiences are about going off to college, about discovering and deepening our passions, about leaving the family home to become economically self-sufficient, about being open to learning lessons about the human heart and relationships, or about trying new things on smaller or larger scales, the message remains the same: there's a time to let go of how things have "always been" and to plunge into the heart of the unknown. It is only when we have the courage to do this—and to try, and to experiment, and maybe, also, to fail along the way—that we open ourselves to discovering our own greatness.

MAKE FOR YOURSELF A TEACHER

This isn't to say, however, that every journey must be undertaken entirely alone. "*Aseh lekha rav*," the text of *Pirkei Avot* instructs us: Make for yourself a teacher.⁴ For, as we begin the process of trying to discern who we are, it's generally helpful to have a guide along the way to help navigate the forests of infinite choice. This has always been true, and perhaps this idea is even more resonant now, since we live in a world in which anything goes, in which moral and ethical ways of discerning are not always at the forefront of our cultural conversations. The right teacher can offer us tremendous insight about exactly *how* to grow into brighter, more fully-realized versions of ourselves, into the people we might someday hope to become. The right teacher will often see things in or about us that we never imagined, and might have suggestions for us – about avenues of study or work to pursue, about traits to cultivate, about books to read or ways of thinking about the world – that might open doors in our hearts and minds that have been, already, too-long locked.

However, the text is intentional in its choice of words; it tells us, "make for yourself" a teacher. It's not a passive process, not by a long shot. Not every teacher is necessarily the right teacher for every student, and it's very much the student's responsibility to find someone whose teachings resonate in the first place, to figure out what kinds of teaching will help foster the kind of transformation that *s/he* is hoping will take place.

And, of course, the notion that we must "make for ourselves" a teacher underscores the fact that, while sometimes we might find the people who will serve as our guides to the unknown in the classroom (behaving, one might suppose, like teachers), just as often, that's not where they'll be – and though sometimes the valuable lessons passed along might relate to intellectual or academic pursuits, more often they may be more about helping develop the heart, the soul, and the whole person. Teachers don't come ready-made; every relationship must be forged, and the lessons learned in it might not be readily obvious either to the "student" or the "teacher" him- or herself. There's an act of creation that must take place, the invention and development of something that has never before existed in this world – this particular relationship.

Sometimes the making of a teacher happens with one person, and more often many teachers present themselves in many guises as the hard questions of creating ourselves and crafting our lives unfold and unfold again in manifold ways. Regardless, the connections and relationships that are created are the result of active, deliberate engagement – the "making," of teachers, and making them "for yourself," hopefully offering insight and sustenance as the long road of becoming unfolds.

⁴ *Mishnah Avot 1:6*



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LEARN TO TRUST YOURSELF

Of course, the student-teacher relationship has its limits. The thing about traversing the unknown – uncovering the particular contours of one’s own unique life – is that there’s only so far that someone else can take you. Though teachers can be indispensable guides along the way, at a certain point, we all have to find the resources deep within as we come into ourselves. The 19th century Rabbi Yehuda Aryeh Leib Alter of Ger, also known as the *Sfat Emet* (“the language of truth”), commented on the passage discussed above, “*Aseh lekha rav*/make for yourself a teacher.” He wrote, “The term *rav*, ‘teacher’, can also be defined as ‘master’ and refers to oneself, rather than an external master. Master yourself!”

And this, of course, is ultimately one of the most important processes that can happen during these in-between years. When we undertake the extensive, confusing work of figuring out who we are and who we want to be in the world, we can find guidance from teachers, mentors and guides who have seen this process through in themselves and in others; ultimately, though, we all have to figure out how to answer these questions for ourselves. Learning to trust ourselves - and to access the intuition that is constantly broadcasting the information we most need about how to make the decisions that we need to make – is the work of growing into our destiny, our greatness. It’s about discerning between what we might want, (or think we want, or think that we should want because that’s what family, friends, or those around us value) and what we need, about what the deepest part of the self and the soul demand. That discernment doesn’t come easy. And it’s not something that’s necessarily dependent on chronological age – there are plenty of fortysomething parents who haven’t learned this lesson as fully as might be useful, after all. But this learning to hear and to trust the self is something that really marks the process of growing into adulthood in the most profound sense. You are, as the *Sfat Emet* suggests, your own greatest master, your own best teacher – if you choose to make yourself this person.

Pirkei Avot tells us, “Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai said to them [his five students]: Go and see which is the best way, that a person should cherish the most. Rabbi Eliezer said, a good eye. Rabbi Joshua said, a good companion. Rabbi Yosi said, a good neighbor. Rabbi Shimon said, foresight. Rabbi Elazar said, a good heart.”⁵ We each have to decide what values we embrace and to use those values as a guide to help us to become who we need to be. A teacher can help us along the way as we set out into the unknown, but at a certain point, we must cultivate for ourselves the eye or heart that will define us. This cultivation will bear fruit and give us the kind of courage that helps us meet our destiny.

MAKE MEANING

As we learn to hear and trust ourselves, and as we begin to set off on the path of becoming, hopefully at some point we begin to see that our journey is not meant to be one for and about us alone. The 20th century theologian Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, when asked what advice he had for younger people, said, “Remember that there is a meaning beyond absurdity. Let them be sure that every little deed counts, that every word has power, that we can do, everyone, our share to redeem the world in spite of all the absurdities and all the frustrations and all the disappointments, and above all remember that the meaning of life is to live life as if it were a work of art... When you are young, start working on this great work of art called, ‘your own existence.’”⁶ When we enact ourselves and our power, our actions are not merely self-serving. Rather, we begin to move in the world in a way that offers not only a sense of personal purpose, but an embeddedness in the world, and perhaps in a relationship with the Divine.

Abraham, after setting off into the unknown, after trials and transformations, became a man who trusted himself enough to argue with God when God asked him to deliver the news of Sodom’s imminent destruction – he audaciously challenges the Divine in the attempt to broker a better situation for the innocent people who might have been indicted along with the guilty. Moses, too, discovers that accessing his personal resources and intuition give him the bravery necessary to persuade God not to destroy the people Israel when they rebel. In both cases, the ability to hear the call

⁵ *Mishnah Avot 2:9*

⁶ “A Conversation with Heschel,” television interview, taped on December 10, 1972. Broadcast originally on NBC’s “Eternal Light” program on February 4, 1973.



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from within leads to a way of relating to the world that's about more than just doing their job. Abraham and Moses chose to understand their own actions as meaningful, their own abilities as powerful not only for themselves, but in a larger context. And as a result, their work had much more profound implications than it might otherwise have done. We have the choice to create meaning in our lives, and to decide what sort of meaning our lives will have – and when we do, we often find that we have the ability impact others in ways that might have been impossible to anticipate.

This, of course, is a lifelong project, but it's one that begins and can already bear fruit during the transitional years of earliest adulthood. What's necessary is the willingness to do the work: to let go of the familiar and leap into the unknown without certainty of what lies ahead; to seek out teachers along the way who can illuminate the path; to learn that, ultimately, those teachers have limits and that we must, at some point, look for guidance within; and to understand that when we understand our own actions as meaningful, the implications can reverberate not only in our own lives, but in the lives of others. It's about asking, "Who am I?" with fearlessness and being open to hearing answers that might surprise. It's about knowing that as confusing and overwhelming as it can be to seek one's place in the world, there are guideposts to help us find our way. And it's about knowing that if we trust ourselves, and the process, we can find the keys to our own greatness, to the person we were meant to be all along.



GROWING INTO OURSELVES – TEXT 1

משנה אבות א:ו

יהושע בן פרחיה ונתאי הארבל קבלו מהם. יהושע בן פרחיה אומר, עשה לך רב, וקנה לך חבר, והוי דן את כל האדם לךף זכות:

MISHNAH Avot 1:6

Yehoshua ben Perahia and Nittai the Arbelite received it [the tradition] from those who came before them. Yehoshua ben Perahia used to say: make for yourself a teacher, and get yourself a friend; and give every person the benefit of the doubt.

STUDY QUESTIONS

- Do you think that these pieces of advice are in order of priority? Why/why not?
- Do you think these pieces of advice are cumulative (ie, that each flows from the one before)? Why/why not?
- Which teachers and friends were formative in your young adulthood?
- Which maxims do you/did you live by when a young adult?



GROWING INTO OURSELVES – TEXT 2

משנה אבות ב-ח-ט

חמשה תלמידים היו לו לרבן יוחנן בן זכאי...אמר להם, צאו וראו איזוהי דרך ישרה שידבק בה האדם. רבי אליעזר אומר, עין טובה. רבי יהושע אומר, חבר טוב. רבי יוסי אומר, שכן טוב. רבי שמעון אומר, הרואה את הנולד. רבי אלעזר אומר, לב טוב. אמר להם, רואה אני את דברי אלעזר בן ערך מדבריכם, שבכלל דבריו דבריכם. אמר להם צאו וראו איזוהי דרך רעה שיתרחק ממנה האדם. רבי אליעזר אומר, עין רעה. רבי יהושע אומר, חבר רע. רבי יוסי אומר, שכן רע. רבי שמעון אומר, הלנה ואינו משלם. אהד הלנה מן האדם, כלנה מן המקום ברוך הוא, שנאמר (תהלים לו) לנה רשע ולא שלם, וצדיק חונן ונותן. רבי אלעזר אומר, לב רע. אמר להם, רואה אני את דברי אלעזר בן ערך מדבריכם, שבכלל דבריו דבריכם:

MISHNAH AVOT 2:8-9

Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai had five students...he said to them: Go and see which is the best way, that a person should cherish the most. Rabbi Eliezer [ben Hyrkenos] said, a good eye. Rabbi Joshua [ben Hanania] said, a good companion. Rabbi Yossi [the Priest] said, a good neighbor. Rabbi Shimon [ben Netanel] said, foresight. Rabbi Elazar [ben Arakh] said, a good heart. He said to them: I prefer Rabbi Elazar ben Arakh's words to yours, since his include yours. Then he said to them: Go and see which is the worst way, that a person should avoid. Rabbi Eliezer said, an evil eye. Rabbi Yehoshua said, a bad companion. Rabbi Yossi said, a bad neighbor. Rabbi Shimon said, a person who borrows but does not repay, whether that person borrows from the Holy Blessing One or from another person, as it says: "The wicked borrows and does not repay, but the righteous one gives graciously [Psalms 37:21]." Rabbi Elazar said, an evil heart. He said: I prefer Rabbi Elazar ben Arakh's words to yours, since his include yours.

STUDY QUESTIONS

- Consider the five qualities in the first paragraph and the five in the second. What is their relationship to each other?
- Which of the qualities do you think is the most formative of identity? Why?
- Which would be your own list of the five most important qualities to cherish, and their inverses?
- Think of five people who influence/d your young adulthood. What qualities do they represent?



GROWING INTO OURSELVES – TEXT 3

רמב"ם הלכות תשובה ה:ב

אל יעבור במחשבתך דבר זה שאומרים טפשי אומה"ע ורוב גולמי בני ישראל שהקב"ה גוזר על האדם מתחלת ברייתו להיות צדיק או רשע, אין הדבר כן אלא כל אדם ראוי לו להיות צדיק כמש"ה רבינו או רשע כירבעם או חכם או סכל או רחמן או אכזרי או כילי או שוע וכן שאר כל הדעות, ואין לו מי שיכפהו ולא גוזר עליו ולא מי שמושכו לאחד משני הדרכים אלא הוא מעצמו ומדעתו נוטה לאיזו דרך שירצה, הוא שירמיהו אמר מפי עליון לא תצא הרעות והטוב, כלומר אין הבורא גוזר על האדם להיות טוב ולא להיות רע, וכיון שכן הוא נמצא זה החוטא הוא הפסיד את עצמו, ולפיכך ראוי לו לבכות ולקונן על חטאיו ועל מה שעשה לנפשו וגמלה רעה, הוא שכתוב אחריו מה יתאונו אדם חי וגו', וחרז ואמר הואיל ורשותנו בגדינו ומדעתנו עשינו כל הרעות ראוי לנו לחזור בתשובה ולעזוב רשענו שהרשות עתה בגדינו הוא שכתוב אחריו נחפשה דרכינו ונחקורה ונשובה וגו'.

MAIMONIDES *MISHNEH TORAH*, LAWS OF REPENTANCE 5:2

You should not for one moment believe what the foolish of the nations of the world, and also the obtuse of Israel say, namely, that the Holy Blessing One decides each person's destiny – whether that person will be righteous or wicked – at the point of the person's creation. This is not the case. Rather, every person has it in them to be as righteous as Moses our teacher, or as wicked as Jeroboam¹, or wise, or foolish, or compassionate, or cruel, or tightfisted, or openhanded, and so on for every quality, and nobody compels them, and nobody has decided for them, and nobody pulls them towards one way or another. They decide for themselves, using their minds to incline themselves towards whichever path they see fit. As [the prophet] Jeremiah put it: "Do not both evil and good issue from the mouth of the Most High?"² which is to say, the Creator does not decide each person's destiny, not that they shall be good and not that they shall be wicked.

And since it is the case that a person who sins diminishes themselves, it is appropriate to weep and mourn over one's wrongdoings and the harm one has done to oneself, as is written afterwards, "Why should a living man mourn?"³ etc. He then states once more that since it we ourselves have the authority and the right, and we have consciously done evil, it is appropriate to return in repentance and abandon our wickedness since it is now open to us to do so – that is what is written later when it says, "Let us test and examine our ways, and return."⁴

STUDY QUESTIONS

- Why do you think these issues of identity come up in the context of repentance?
- How is Rambam using the verses from Lamentations to prove his argument?
- What are the consequences of this kind of free will?
- How do the choices we make influence our identity?

¹ Jeroboam ben Nebat, the first king of the northern Kingdom of Israel. The rabbis of the early tradition despise him because he built golden calves at the northern shrines – see I Kings 11ff.

² Lamentations 3:37

³ Lamentations 3:38 – the verse concludes, "about the punishment of his sins?"

⁴ Lamentations 3:39 – the verse concludes, "to the Holy One our God".



GROWING INTO OURSELVES – TEXT 4

SELF-RELIANCE

When thousands of disciples came to Gerer on a festival, the Gerer said to them, “Let me be candid with you. You cannot depend upon me as an intermediary between God and ourselves. I can merely attempt to point out to you the right paths in good conduct, leading to Godliness. But you must walk thereon without my aid. Learn to stand on your own feet, and even if your Rebbe is not a great man, you will not fall.”

– *Meir Einei HaGolah*, Abram Alter, Piotrkov, 1928, Warsaw 1931, ii 58-9.

STUDY QUESTIONS

- Do you consider this to be an appropriate teaching from a leader to his students? Why/why not?
- What are the consequences of standing on your own feet?
- Why is it relevant that one’s Rebbe might or might not be great?
- Have there been people in your life who taught you such lessons?



GROWING INTO OURSELVES - TEXT FOR GROUP STUDY

The sense of losing myself certainly echoed of how I had felt sometimes at [the dance club] or in the mosh pit, but these experiences against the Providence night sky were raw and unmediated; there was no music, no noise, no motion between me and this feeling of infinity. I had had smaller moments like this in years past, but I don't think it's a coincidence that they began to come fast and furious after my mother's death. My shell had been broken by grief, and perhaps for the first time in my life, I was unguarded enough to perceive a force that, for all of its power, is quite subtle in day-to-day existence.

I was empty, I was open.... My life had shifted radically while my friends' lives had remained fairly constant; I was grieving, while they were not. ...And that created a gap between my friends and me.

Gaps are powerful, potent entities. Inside a fissure, things can grow. In lag time, we can hear quieter impulses too long drowned out by a comfortable noise. In the spaces between our lives as we have known them and our lives as they are, our peripheral vision tends to expand. As Annie Dillard wrote, "The gaps are the thing. The gaps are the spirit's one home, the altitudes and latitudes so dazzlingly spare and clean that the spirit can discover itself for the first time...they are the fissures between mountains and cells the wind lances through, the icy narrowing fiords splitting the cliffs of mystery." Stripped from my usual context, from the comforts of normalcy, I entered, unwittingly, another dimension.

It is inside the gaps that magic happens; an old defense is lowered, sensitivities are heightened, something calls in from the quiet. New questions flicker, and, whether or not we're aware of it at the time, a part of us follows after them. But it takes a long, long time to make sense of the clues we pick up along the way—usually years after we've begun collecting them. The real story of spiritual awakening tends to live beneath the surface for a long time. It's much more subtle, and much less linear than it may appear; many of us absorb small changes in tiny doses over years before they even begin to flit up the first layers of consciousness. I remember biking in the woods outside Providence my sophomore year, gazing up at the leaves and feeling something within start to stir, almost to the edge of what Heschel called "radical amazement." This, he argues, is the beginning of belief. But this feeling didn't assert itself, it didn't demand to be let out, and at the time I shrugged off the sensation. I didn't pay it much notice until years later when, open and wondrous, I combed my memory for help understanding how my life had seemed to shift so drastically. In truth, the veils behind my heart had been lowering, slowly, for a long time—I just didn't notice until the day I found myself laid bare and expansive under the moon.

Transformation, if it's going to happen at all, is protracted, often imperceptible in the moment...Few, if any, of us go to Damascus and have one experience that changes absolutely everything (though in hindsight, we might be tempted to try to identify some turning-point or other as such). More often, certain events make us ripe to regard things with a different kind of lens—though it's never a foregone conclusion that we actually will. Maybe, regardless of a new experience, our defenses or old ways of thinking will remain solidly locked in place. Maybe something from within will shift slightly. And maybe, one day, we'll find ourselves sliding into one of the great, gorgeous, terrifying gaps of time, of stillness, of uncertainty, somewhere in the disquieting space between comfort and crisis.

– Rabbi Danya Ruttenberg, *Surprised by God: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love Religion*, Beacon Press, 2008





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