



Helping Our Teens

By Rabbi Nicole Roberts

Chances are, if you've heard a few sermons in your life, you've no doubt heard the story about the young man who falls off his horse, breaks his leg, and thinks he's cursed with bad luck, only to find that his bad luck was actually good luck, because when the Russian army came to his village to conscript soldiers, they didn't take him. Because of this, his life was spared, and he was able to marry and have children. It's a much longer story than that, with a whole chronology of events that look at first like blessings and become curses, and events that look at first like curses and become blessings. The bottom line in the story being that, of course, we never really know. Life goes on, and the things that happen to us play out for good or for bad, depending, perhaps, on how long life goes on, but more likely – and more to the point of the story – on how we *look at* life, whether with fatalism or optimism – as a sentence to which we are condemned, or as a journey from which we constantly learn. Blessing, or curse... who gets to make the call, and when is the *final* call made?

Truth be known, I'm not a big fan of this story, usually because it goes on for too long, and I don't think it takes such an extended telling for mature adults to get the basic point. It's not rocket science. But the other day, I had an encounter that led me to a much richer understanding of the story, and I want to share this with you. I was sitting around my dinner table with a small group of teenagers at our monthly Get Real program, where I engage the teens in discussion around issues of particular relevance to their lives, and we focus on Jewish decision making – what that means and how we do it. This week, I presented them with a list of Jewish values and the texts they derive from. Among those that most sparked their interest were (a) not engaging in *lashon hara* (speaking ill of others or gossiping), and (b) not shaming others in public.

With regard to *lashon hara*, I showed them, Proverbs and the Midrash state that [quote] “death and life are in the power of the tongue.”¹ And with regard to shaming, the Talmud teaches that [quote] “one who embarrasses another in public, it is as if that person has shed blood.”² I felt some compulsion to explain that this was hyperbole, an extreme analogy used for the sake of emphasizing a point – that point being that it can be really, really dangerous to engage in either of these acts, because like murder, you can't take back what you've said or done to someone that has hurt or shamed them. I felt the need to explain that of course the rabbis knew that taking a life was a more severe crime than slander or gossip or public embarrassment. That wielding swords was more physically dangerous than casting words at people. But then one teen piped up and came to the texts' defense.

“Actually,” she said, “words and embarrassment *can* be a matter of life and death, because words can lead to bullying, and sometimes bullying takes place on social media,

¹ Prov. 18:21 and *Lev. Rabbah* 33:1

² B. *Bava Metzia* 58b



which is public, and this kind of public shaming leads some teens to suicide.” A chilling point. The other teens all nodded their heads. The texts rang true for them, even at face value, without much stretching of the imagination. Where I saw hyperbole, they saw reality. And it occurred to me: this is the world teens live in – a world of hyperbole come true.

Teens live in a very dramatic world. Aside from the fact that they are expected to negotiate life without the benefit of a fully formed prefrontal cortex and while riding the waves in a sea of hormonal change, they simply don't have the benefit of having lived on this earth long enough to know that curses can become blessings and blessings can become curses – that life, God willing, is long, and that it unfolds in ways we could never expect, if we can just stick around long enough to find out. In their world, the first serious breakup could be the last serious relationship – they don't know. The party they didn't get invited to could be the sign of a new trend or permanent categorization and subjugation. The summer job they didn't get could mean not being able to replace the broken phone they need to stay as connected as the rest of their friends, and then what?

I didn't bring up these specific scenarios with the teens around my dinner table, or the long-winded story about the man and the horse and the broken leg. But I did suggest that there is a tendency for people their age to jump to extreme conclusions about life, and they wholeheartedly agreed with me. This is why the campaign to keep LGBT kids alive through the traumas of harassment promulgated the phrase, “It gets better.” Because many teens assume that the way it is today is how it's going to be forever. As author Joanne Fedler writes in her book *Love in the Time of Contempt: Consolations for Parents of Teenagers*: “Their pain is unfiltered and seems interminable...In their world, it feels as though there will be no end to their suffering. Parents really need to ‘get’ this.” But at the same time, Fedler advises, we adults have “had longer life experience than they've had. This counts for something. We know that unendurable situations end, and that solutions we can't ‘work out’ sometimes reveal themselves when we least expect it. We need to find a way to let them know this.” And then, in the most brilliant line of the whole book, she writes: “Our teenagers need to understand that when life doesn't feel like a party, it doesn't become meaningless.” The young man who fell off his horse was spared his life – the story didn't end with the broken leg. There was reason to go on. It's not just that if you wait around long enough the tides will shift and blessings will become curses and curses will become blessings and that “it gets better.” The deeper meaning, is that life has meaning, even when it doesn't feel like a party.

This week in our parasha, a lost, young Joseph encounters a nameless man who points him in the right direction so he can find his brothers. Blessing, or curse?

Joseph's brothers sell him into slavery so that he winds up in Egypt. Blessing, or curse?

In the coming weeks, we'll read that there was a famine in Canaan, where Joseph's family lived while he rose to power in Egypt. Blessing, or curse?



Joseph reunites with his father and brothers, and they all end up in Egypt together. Blessing, or curse?

At the end of Breisheet, upon their father's death, we learn that Joseph doesn't get too caught up in blessing and curse. His brothers are remorseful and fearful, but he reassures them: "although you intended me harm, God intended it for good, so as to bring about the survival of a great many people" – survival of those he saved from the famine, perhaps, or the Jews whom Moses will one day lead out of Egypt...

This is the type of faith we need to instill in our teenagers and in our selves: Not just that our luck may one day turn around, but that amid the dramatic twists and turns, our lives have purpose. "When life doesn't feel like a party, it doesn't become meaningless." Come blessing or curse, there's reason to stick around.

Shabbat shalom.