

Shabbat Shalom-

Abd al-Rahman III, the emir and caliph of Córdoba in 10th-century Spain, summed up a life of worldly success at about age 70: “I have now reigned above 50 years in victory or peace; beloved by my subjects, dreaded by my enemies, and respected by my allies. Riches and honors, power and pleasure, have waited on my call.”

And the payoff? “I have diligently numbered the days of pure and genuine happiness which have fallen to my lot,” he wrote. “They amount to 14.”

This was a short excerpt in *From Strength to Strength: Finding Success, Happiness, and Deep Purpose in the Second Half of Life*, the new book by Arthur C. Brooks, a columnist for the Atlantic, social scientist, and professor. Throughout the piece, he attempts to explain to his teenage daughter the roots of one of the main challenges of life: how and why we find satisfaction so fleeting.

Given his background in the social sciences and that it's, you know, a book, he gives a ton of background and history that we don't have time for today, but I urge you to get the book and read through.

Brooks makes a few impactful points in the solutions section of his piece geared toward helping us move from dissatisfaction to satisfaction. While there are two that I want to focus on, the third is also a fascinating idea that I want to note. He suggests making a reverse bucket list. One should start with the typical list while being fully honest. This usually ends up being things within the category of power, money, pleasure, and honor. Then he suggests imagining yourself 5 years from now, full of happiness and peace, and trying to write out the forces that got you there. Then, he suggests comparing those two lists.

Invariably, the latter of the two lists, the forces that bring one to a place of calm and happiness are intrinsic as opposed to the first list which often come from external forces. And, wouldn't you know, satisfaction borne out of internalized forces ends up being a lot longer lasting than externally driven ones.

The other two solutions he offers are deeply meaningful. The first is titled "Going from Prince to Sage." He uses the examples of Thomas Aquinas and the Buddha to share that satisfaction lies not in attaining high status and holding on to it for dear life, but in helping other people—including by sharing whatever knowledge and wisdom I've acquired. In other words, elevate others with wisdom to bring more satisfaction to your life. While his examples don't get from our tradition, we know this to be a very Jewish notion.

The other solution he offers is titled “Getting Smaller.” He breaks this down as a practice less driven by getting rid of stuff and more about paying attention to small things and really being present for them. Riffing off of the recently deceased, Thich Nhat Hanh, when you’re washing the dishes, just be washing the dishes. Every day he says, have an item on your to-do list that involves being truly present for an ordinary occurrence. You never know what it might teach you.

While I recognize that for some of you, this may come across as new-agey, I think there’s immense potential in this framework. Especially lately as I have found that more often than not, when I have been asking folks how they are, I get some form of “hanging in there.” Which is totally understandable. I’ve even begun taking it on as my typical answer for so many reasons: doldrums of winter, covid still around although light may be nearing, civil strife, and plenty of other things. So what can we do? And how can our tradition help us in this feeling? And how does that work with Brooks’ piece?

While the answers here may seem contemporary, there is a similar dynamic found in our Parsha this week. When we open up with Parshat Tetzaveh, we get waist deep very quickly in all the specifics of the tent of meeting, the garb of the priests, and the various procedures that need to take place just so. While this could have the potential to make a reader's eyes gloss over, I urge you to not let that happen.

Even the beginning line of the Parshah, if we look closely enough, cues us to something larger. Reading the book of Exodus from the beginning makes you think that there will never be another parsha where Moses isn't named.

From the beginning of his life up through last week's parsha, we get constant Moses all the time. He's the great leader of the people, shepherding them from slavery to freedom to right on the cusp of the promised land. Even when we switch gears and start to learn about the tabernacle, he is the ombudsman through whom the majority of the work is delegated.

It is curious then that this week's Parshah does not contain one explicit mention of his name. Has he suddenly become persona non grata? This is when we pay attention to the first line of the parsha: וְאַתָּה תְצַוֶּנָּה | אֶת־בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל - You, you command the children of Israel. I have translated it literally for you to get the point of this oddity of this verse. The "you" there has to be Moses. He has been the main one doing the acting on God's behalf so although not mentioned by name in this parshah, he is here. But why the doubling of the "you?"

The Alshich Hakadosh, the 16th century Kabbalist answers this with the following:

After hearing all about Aaron and his sons' work as Priests and Betzalel and Ohaliab's hand in the building, would Moses' heart not be soured to say, "'What is this that the Lord has done to me,' as I have no portion in this great thing!" God came to speak to his heart and to comfort him. And God said, "Do not be concerned, since your portion is greater than all of them. For it is through that which 'you command' the Children of Israel with all of the commandments. They also merit in that which 'They shall take the oil to you, etc.' As through this, they will be effective in lighting the permanent lamp - as will be explained - to bring them light for the world to come. However without you, they would not have merited this.

Moses is sad. He feels left out. He sees everyone else getting to do stuff and wonders what his role will be. He's "hanging in there."

God comes to assuage this feeling by saying this whole thing could only happen, all the building, all the lighting, all the ceremony because of your role Moses. Look around yourself, Moses. Pay attention to the little things that are happening. Could any of them really take place without your hand in delegating to Betzalel or inaugurating Aaron and his sons?

Sometimes when we're working at something for so long, we forget about all the little things that got us there-all of those building blocks that we had a hand in. We feel adrift. We feel that dissatisfaction. We're just hanging in there.

And here God reminds Moses to actually look around and pay attention to the myriad ways that he has performed greatness. From that shift in focus, our whole perspective has the potential to shift.

The beauty of this pasuk doesn't just stop there. For if we think about it, it should jump out at us that Moses is the one commanding here. Normally we think of God as the commander in chief so what gives?

The Noam Elimelech of Lizhensk, one of the great Chasidic masters of the 18th century in Poland argues that it is a reminder to Moses and anyone who is involved in work on behalf of others. God can only do so much in the upper realms. The “v'atah tetzaveh-You command” is a reminder to all of us that you have to bring influence and blessing to other people. You can't just rely on God to do it.

That whole notion that the verse is about the people bringing crushed olives to light a flame is more than that. According to the Noam Elimelech, it's the idea that every person has a responsibility to pass wisdom and power to other people to help them “light their



flame” as it were. In other words, to find satisfaction and happiness, become a sage, as Professor Brooks argued.

Power and satisfaction that come to serve just the self tend to be fleeting. But when you can provide and give to others, that is where the long lasting sense of satisfaction comes. So in response to this “hanging in there” that many of us feel, this Parshah pairs beautifully with the piece from Brooks.

Remember your value by noticing the little things around you that attest to all that you have done, both to yourself and to others. Moses was like us too in feeling this struggle. But we can be reminded like Moses was, to be in the moment. Pay attention. As poet Adrienne Maree Brown writes, “what we pay attention to grows,” our self included. And of course, when we find ourselves in

the churn, we can give to others: our time, our wisdom, and our presence. For in that interaction, we can create the metaphorical “ner tamid” that is mentioned in our verse, using our light to ignite others’ lights.

Shabbat Shalom

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