

How can we help our young people make healthy transitions?

by rabbi judah dardik

Beha'alotcha

Numbers 8:1-12:16

Zechariah 2:14-4:7

The Torah is one of the best-selling books in history, and our scholars have combed through it lovingly and carefully for millennia. And then we come across this, in this week's parsha: "For they are given given to me from among the Children of Israel" (Num. 8:16).

Isn't this what copy editors are for? One would expect that seeming typographical errors would have been caught.

Looking in this week's Torah portion, we find repeating text coming in a section about the Levites. It says (8:15-18) that the Levites are to be a priestly tribe, taking the place of the firstborns whom HaShem had saved in Egypt but who were no longer destined to serve in the Temple. But in describing the role of the Levites the Torah repeats itself, by saying they are "given given to me" ("netunim netunim"). Why the repeat?

Rashi's commentary explains that a double phrase of dedication is used because the Levites serve a dual role: to serve and to sing songs of praise.

I was touched to see this comment at this time of year, a time of graduations and transitions for so many. It beautifully describes the hopes of relatives, friends, and teachers, watching the young people in their lives mature. We would like for them to be happy and productive members of society, to work and to sing. How can we help get them there?

I ran across a fascinating insight offered by Rav Yaakov Kaminetzky in his Emes L'Yaakov commentary on the Torah portion immediately preceding this one. He notes that people who take on a special holy vow to separate themselves from certain worldly distractions (called "nazirs") are commanded to avoid contact with the dead, just as priests are commanded.

However, in listing relatives whose deaths need to be taken into account for the nazirs, the Torah mentions only parents and siblings (6:7). What about their children and spouse? How come they are not addressed, as they are for priests?

So Rav Yaakov explains: Who would have the zeal to become a nazir? Who is the kind of person who would accept such restrictions, to go out in a flash of inspiration and vow that they wish to transcend the world around them? Only a young person; it is they who are often so idealistic and quick to act (and at times brash and black-and-white). And so no spouse or offspring are mentioned, because they don't exist. The nazir is a young person.

This might shed light on looking at the transitioning young loved ones in our lives. Given that young people tend toward idealism, to making bold moves, what can we do to support their development into happy and productive lives?

We can start by recognizing a truism. So often as parents, grandparents, family and friends, we assume and hope that children will turn out just like us. But that is simply an impossibility. First of all, they have different parents than we did. Second, the world that they are growing up in is not the world that we grew up in. They are different people, and will come out their own way.

So what can we do? We can recognize that, as significant adults in their lives, we do get to help choose the environment in which they develop. One day they will go off to their personally chosen "great cause," but we can put them in educational settings that will influence their choice of causes.

What will they hold dear? What will they pursue? No one knows for sure. But the choices that we make about their environment during the years of their youth do affect the inputs that will ultimately be major factors in their decision-making.

We want great things for them; we want them to be well adjusted and happy. What are we doing to forward those goals?