

The Day is Short, the work is much
Ruth Ben-Or, Shabbat, September 8th 2018

Quite often, we believe ourselves to be under too much pressure when the reverse is true. Even the poorest and worst-educated of us has more leisure time and more knowledge and more chance at agency than ever before. We may have trouble sifting information from opinions, but, again, contrary to popular belief, this was a problem before the internet, or television or even print. There may be more words, true or false, than there used to be, but we have unprecedented opportunities to speak up and join in, as opposed to tuning in and dropping out. I have to declare a possible conflict of interest here: if you kvetch but don't vote, I have no sympathy for you.

Rabbi Tarfon could neither vote nor run for office and neither could his wife. His deadline for completing the job was literally that: the day of death rather than revolution or even restoration. Perhaps he was not wrong. As we discussed last year, tikun olam was originally about repairing yourself before attempting to repair the world and whether you are preparing for the end of time or the resurrection of your nation, it makes sense to put your affairs in order first.

Absolutism, both the religious and the political kind, is about ideological purity, giving and taking all or nothing. In a totalitarian society, this leads to terror, in a liberal one (count your blessings, nostalgic and new-wave people alike), many people, despairing of being good enough or even of knowing what that would be, will settle for nothing and let the snow-white and blood-red talk among themselves. That does not get us tikun olam, it gets us stasis if we are lucky, paralysis through fear if we are not. This also is not a novelty. Activism of any sort has always been a minority interest. It is only when the desired change, be that the abolition of slavery or human sacrifice, (abolition of animal sacrifice apparently is not universally considered desirable) or the introduction of schools or universal adult suffrage, has already taken place, that we see it as mainstream. Since we can neither see around corners nor along all the prongs of the fork in the road, we cannot say it was inevitable. If we were to judge by those who say glibly that all religions are the same or that if voting changed anything, it would be abolished, some of these changes came close to not happening at all.

When Moses addressed the generation that left Egypt and the one that was born subsequently, they appear to have a lack of moral fibre in common, regardless of the different circumstances and times, which shows that the slave or victim mentality takes more than one generation (and several miracles) to outgrow. Eventually, we learn, Moses too, will die in the desert but knowing that his people will inherit the land. Rabbi Tarfon and his students in many ways lived in a darker age, having known a time when their country belonged to them and that the land was taken away from them, but without knowing when it would be restored. It did not exempt them from studying Torah, nor from observing whatever they still could and participating in a new project, that of codifying the law and establishing religious rituals that did not depend upon a temple or even a country. Secular Zionists thought the reverse: that the establishment of the country need not depend upon religious rituals, but they too realised that they should not desist, even if they did not expect to live to see it. It is worth remembering that Zionism, too, at the time of the Balfour

declaration was a minority position among most British Jews, regardless of religious affiliation or lack of it and that very few saw it as a choice to complete or abstain, it was not a task.

Since it will be Ellul by the time you are reading this, it is also worth remembering that a little action is better than beating oneself up for not acting or even for the false humility that leaves it up to somebody else. Do not think meanly of yourself...which is another perek. Leshana tova tikatevu.