

A Parable: Thoughts for Parashat Haazinu

There was once a king who had two advisers. The advisers had a luxurious life as long as they bowed to the whims of the king. The king's whims were many. He often made unreasonable demands. He was harsh in his criticisms. He expected the advisers to be at his service constantly. He humiliated them by always reminding them that he was their superior, that he could order them around at will. As long as they complied, he rewarded them generously.

One day, one of the advisers resigned from his position. He left the palace and soon drifted into poverty. The days of opulence were over for him.

The other adviser continued to serve the king, and now had to work twice as hard since the other adviser had left. But the benefits were many. He lived in wealth and honor. People bowed to him. He was the envy of many who wished they, too, could have such ready access to the king.

After several years had passed, the king's adviser decided to visit his former colleague who had left the king's service. He found his colleague living in a simple hut, eating thin soup.

The king's adviser sneered at his former colleague: "Look how you've sunk into poverty. If you had remained an adviser to the king, you would have been rich and honored. You wouldn't have to live in a hut and eat thin soup."

The former adviser replied: "If you had left the service of the king, you, too, could have lived in freedom and self-respect. You, too, could have been free of the tyranny of the king. You could have broken the yoke of this earthly king in order to serve the King of kings."

To the public, the king's rich adviser seemed to be the epitome of success. He lived in the palace. He basked in luxury. He had power over others.

The poor former adviser, though, knew better. He knew that in spite of the outer trappings of success, the king's adviser was nothing but a glorified slave. He

attained worldly “success” at the cost of selling his soul. The poor former adviser did not have the outer trappings of success; he had something far more valuable: he had self-respect and inner freedom. He was not answerable to the earthly king: he was answerable only to the King of kings.

In our busy and competitive world, we sometimes find ourselves in the position of the king’s advisers. Some choose to be slaves to the blandishments of “success,” willing to forego their personal freedom and self-respect in order to attain luxuries, or fame, or influence. They run in the rat race, not realizing that the cost of “winning” is losing one’s own dignity in the process. The more the world thinks they are “winning,” the more they are actually “losing.”

Others choose to remain free and above the fray. This sometimes entails losses of money, prestige, and influence. But they have won something far more important. They have been able to stay focused on the really important values of life, and have realized that worldly “success” does not necessarily ensure genuine happiness, feelings of self-worth or ultimate meaning in life.

“Teshuva” means repentance. In this season of “Teshuva” it is appropriate to review our philosophy of life and our deeds—and repair what needs to be repaired.

“Teshuva” also means “answer.” We are obliged to recognize that an answer is expected from us! When we understand that we are answerable to the King of kings—and not to the whims of worldly kings—we have taken a giant step forward in self-realization.

“Whoso is wise, let him understand these things; whoso is prudent, let him know them. For the ways of the Lord are right, and the just do walk in them; but transgressors do stumble therein” (Hosea 14:10).

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