

IT'S WHERE YOU'RE AT

People often say of human affairs, "it's a matter of timing," implying that given the same talent, will, and drive, success or failure often depend upon the time that they are applied rather than upon innate qualities. Whether it is a matter of being a prospective marriage partner, or running for office, or seeking a job, or undertaking a new venture, whether we succeed or not may often depend on whether we have chosen the right time for our efforts.

I agree to this. But I would add that it is as much a matter of "spacing" as timing. It is important to be in the right place as well as at the right time. It's "where you're at" that counts.

Of course, I have reference to the importance of environment.
האדם צו השדה -- Man is like a plant, and just as a plant will grow and flourish in certain climates and wither in others, so the human personality develops in different directions depending on where it is placed. We are, to a large extent, the product of our environments. Our freedom consists of this, that we can choose in advance what our environments will be. We can determine the milieu in which we will develop, and thus direct our own growth and development.

We read in our Sidra this morning how to construct the furnishings of the mishkan or sanctuary in the desert. We are told that on the golden כפרת (ark-cover) ועשית שני כרובים זהב, "You shall make two golden cherubim." The only previous mention of these "cherubim" comes at the beginning of Genesis: ויגרש את האדם וישכן במקדש לגן עדן את הכרובים ואת להט החרב המתהפכת לשמור את דרך עץ החיים "And He drove out the man; and He settled, at the east of the garden of Eden, the cherubim and the flame of the sword which turns every way, to keep the way to the tree of life" (Gen. 3:24).

A distinguished Orthodox preacher of a couple of generations ago, Rabbi Fortman, pointed out that in both cases, that of the winged guards over the ark and the beings who blocked the way to the Tree of Life, we find cherubim. The difference is this: In the case of our Sidra, the Rabbis tell us, as quoted by Rashi, that they possessed דמות פרצוף של תינוק, the face of a child or baby. In the case of Genesis, Rashi maintains that they were מלאכי חבלה, destroying angels. The same cherubim -- but what a difference! It all depends where you're at: The same תינוקות babies in the Sanctuary are pure gold and guard the ark; but in the jungle east of Eden, in rejected disobedience of God, they are destroying angels, wielding a flaming sword, and blocking the way to life itself.

What brings this to mind is a small and insignificant item which I chanced upon while reading through a column in the Jewish

press recently. I passed over it quickly, then did a double-take, and realized that the most shocking thing of all was that I was not shocked by it initially. The item read: "Rented yachts in Biscayne Bay are the latest fashionable sites for Bar and Bat Mitzvahs in greater Miami."

So that's where we're at! How scandalous -- and how even more scandalous that we are no longer scandalized by such vulgarisms! Are we raising pious Jews or playboys? Does Bar Mitzvah indicate the emergence of cherubim who will guard the ark or, Jewishly speaking, destructive monsters? מלאכי חבלה or תינוקות? The same child raised in a family which considers Bar Mitzvah an opportunity for being socially demonstrative and exhibitionistic, for caterers and gifts, grows up in one direction; a youngster growing up in a family where he is told the real significance of Bar Mitzvah -- or, better yet, told nothing because his education is presumed to have told him for years -- grows into the kind of person who will be yet another guard for the prosperity and posterity of the Ark of the Torah.

The venue of the Bar Mitzvah party is in itself of little consequence. More important is schools -- and here, more important than curriculum or even teachers, is: other students. The peer group will have the major influence over a growing child. Amongst religious children, he or she will grow up as a religious child. Amongst those who scoff, that is what you can expect of that child. It holds true for elementary and high-school, and even more for colleges-- and this kind of decision should not be left entirely to the consummate wisdom of an 18-year-old acting completely without parental intervention. It holds true for summer camps and summer vacation. If families are planning to move, the tinok - malakh habalah decision may hang on what kind of neighborhood they will move to, and what kind of Jewish environment it will afford for their child. The same child, depending on place, can become either a cherub or a destructive angel.

I recently read a story that was published several years ago in a book in Israel. A rich Jew in Poland by the name of Reb Abraham was head of a large family and had a little boy called Shelomoh. Little Shelomoh loved to look at the Sabbath candles of his mother, and once came too close and burned his hand. His wound soon healed, but it left a permanent scar. World War II broke out, and the Nazis invaded Poland. The family succeeded in hiding little Shelomoh with a non-Jewish family, and the rest of them were taken to the concentration camps. All were killed by the Nazis, except for Reb Abraham himself who managed to reach Soviet Russia. Here, however, he did not have complete ease and comfort. With other Jews, he was sent to a camp in Siberia. There he organized a small Shul where a few Jews could gather for prayer and study. This enraged the Soviet soldiers, especially one particular officer by the name of Natyushka, who detested

Jews in general and Reb Abraham in particular. The officer warned Reb Abraham that if he apprehended him in his religious service he will kill him. One night, Reb Abraham entered the synagogue to pray. That night the officer Natyushka happened to have guard duty. He saw the light in the synagogue and heard the voice of prayer. In anger, he burst in, shouted at Reb Abraham, announced he would kill him, rolled up his sleeves, and took an iron bar in his hands. Reb Abraham was petrified when suddenly he noticed, on the hand about to strike him, a scar similar to the scar that his son Shelomoh had many many years ago. He called out, instinctively, "Shelomoh!" The officer was shocked, put down his hand and looked closely at the old man. He then turned at the burning candles and gazed at them and, after what seemed an eternity, screamed out, "Tateh!" (father), and the two embraced and wept. The war was over, and some Russian Jews, who were Polish refugees, managed to get to Palestine. The father and son were amongst those who were so fortunate. The son, a trained soldier, participated in the Israeli War of Independence. He later married, and the three of them live today in Beer Sheba.

Consider the lesson in this amazing tale: The same child raised in a synagogue and with candles, grows up to be a Shelomoh and a hero of Israel. And the same child in a Russian barracks becomes a Natyushka who is ready to kill Jews! A guardian of the Ark -- and a destroying angel.

Adults too show signs of changing with environment. There is a strange passage in the Talmud: *הרואה שיצרו מתגבר עליו ילגש שחורים* וילך לבקום שאין מכירים אותו שם ויעשה מה שלבו חפץ. If one sees that his passion is getting the better of him, what shall he do? Let him dress himself in black clothing, go to a place where he is not recognized, and do what his heart desires.

That is a rather startling suggestion, and should not be acted upon without further individual consultation with one's Rabbi... But the main idea of the passage is something that all of us recognize as the truth: We act differently in different contexts. The same man who at home is moral, controlled by the inhibitions imposed by his reputation among his acquaintances and by the familiarity of his surroundings, may well stray from the path of decency when he is elsewhere, unrecognized, and free from social restraint. The man of cherubic innocence can become a destroying angel.

But a man who is so fickle is really childish. He is, essentially, a *תינוק*, a baby. The true adult, one who is mature, has values and principles that are not so easily shaken. It is only children who are pleasant in the *משכן* and monstrous *מקדש לגלעד*, who change values as the chameleon changes colours.

I confess that I am in a cynical mood these last couple of days, and in this mood wish to suggest a perfect example of that which changes the circumstances: Banks. I know banks which, when trying to attract Jewish customers, are veritable cherubim, *דמויות פרחוק של תינוק*, baby-faced in their ingenuousness. Yet the same bank when interviewing prospective employees and finding a Jewish applicant, will reject him with a cold fury of *מלאכי חבלה*, of destructive angels. A bank which wants to rope in Jewish business, will be genuinely cherubic, and when it is seduced by the Arab boycott will become nothing less than a financial monster. Witness England and France this week!

The problem of these banks will certainly come up in this country in the next week or two. When they do, we must give no quarter to such blatant bigotry. As American citizens, we must not allow the oil-drenched desert sheiks to import to this country their primitive religious discriminations.

But to return to the main idea; we cannot overestimate the influence of environment and location. Whether we are dealing with children or adults, it is where we are which will often determine what we become. "Where we are at" is a good index of who we are.

The choice is ours whenever we contemplate schools or residences or vacations. In or near a *מזרח*, we tend to become *כרובים*. In the wilds "east of the Eden" we are inexorably inclined to play the role of *מלאכי חבלה*, destroying angels.

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