



***Parashat Behar***  
**May 14, 2011—10 Iyar 5771**  
**Marshmallow**

by Rabbi Wesley Gardenswartz  
Temple Emanuel, Newton, MA

---

The poet William Blake taught us that it is possible to see a world in a grain of sand. But the psychologist Walter Mischel taught us that it is possible to see a world in a marshmallow.

Mischel ran a famous experiment known as the marshmallow study. He sat a series of 4-year olds in a room and put a marshmallow on the table. He told them that they could eat the marshmallow right away, but that he was going to leave the room and then come back. If the marshmallow were still there when he returned, he would give them a second marshmallow.

Eat the marshmallow now. Instant gratification. One marshmallow.

Say no to the marshmallow. Exercise self-discipline. Enjoy two marshmallows later.

The results of course varied. Some children ate the marshmallow immediately. Others could hold out for a few minutes. Still others could hold out for the full 15 minutes. But what was so rich about the study was that it was longitudinal. Mischel followed these children through the years, and the choice that each child made with his or her marshmallow would go on to presage important developments in their later lives.

As David Brooks notes in his new book [The Social Animal](#), the kids who could wait longer and exercise self-discipline did better in school and had fewer behavioral problems than the kids who could not wait, or could only wait a few minutes. The kids who could wait the full 15 minutes got not only a second marshmallow; they got a different trajectory in life. Their SAT scores were 210 points higher. Twenty years later they had higher college completion rates. Thirty years later they had higher incomes. By contrast, the kids who ate the marshmallow right

away had much higher incarceration rates and were more likely to suffer drug and alcohol-addiction problems.

To see a world in a marshmallow. As young as 4, we have a temperament, a character, that predisposes us towards instant gratification, yes to the marshmallow, or to self-discipline, no to the marshmallow. But that temperament is shaped by our surrounding culture, which, especially with the technology revolution, reinforces instant gratification. I want what I want when I want it.

You want information? About any subject? Type it into the Google box, and you get more information than you can ever assimilate in a nano-second. I did an experiment on the marshmallow experiment. How long would it take me to see pictures of 4 year olds struggling with their marshmallows? I typed in marshmallow study, and I got 787,000 results, literally, in 1 tenth of 1 second. That is not *eating* the marshmallow. That is *inhaling* it. I want what I want when I want it.

But instant gratification is not limited to technology. You want dinner, and don't have time to cook? Go to the prepared foods section of Whole Foods. Presto pronto. A few pay checks later. Dinner is served.

So many of our cultural cues nurture the disposition to eat the marshmallow now.

That is why the Jewish message here is so important. Our tradition has a lot to say about that marshmallow. In our reading this morning, God tells Moses to tell the Israelite farmers: don't eat the marshmallow. It's not about what you want when you want it. Six years you can work the land. But in the seventh year, you cannot work that land. The seventh year is a *shmitah*, a release, in which you give the land a complete rest.

This of course correlates with our work week. Six days we can work. But the seventh we are not to work. Why not? What arguments would persuade us today to take seriously the Torah's admonition: *sheishet yamim taaseh melachtecha u'vayom hashvii Shabbat laadonai elohecha*. Six days you shall work, but the seventh is a Sabbath to the Lord your God. You may not work.

Most rabbis today urge Sabbath observance by speaking of the need to renew and to recharge, to be unplugged as a gift to yourself. And that is valid.

Many rabbis in previous years would speak about the Sabbath as a sign of the covenant between God and the Jewish people; or as a sign that God had taken us out of Egypt. Those are also both valid.

But as compelling as these arguments are, there is another which goes to the heart of the marshmallow study. Observing the Sabbath, not working when we want to work, inculcates within us the virtue of discipline. When we say no to working on the Sabbath, we control our work. Our work does not control us.

This message of discipline is a hard sell. What words are more consistent with the temper of the times?

The language of spontaneity. Of fulfilling our passion. Of being true to ourselves.

Or the language of discipline. Of permitted times and activities, and forbidden times and activities. Permitted and forbidden? Who talks like that anymore?

The answer is Jews who take mitzvah seriously. In a hugely important piece he wrote for the journal *Conservative Judaism* a few years ago, Rabbi Harold Kushner argued that we should take the mitzvot seriously *not* because we are halakhic Jews, and *not* because we believe in

saying yes to a commanding God. In fact, Rabbi Kushner argued, most Conservative Jews are not halakhic, and most of us do not believe in a commanding God.

Rather, we should take mitzvah seriously because mitzvah strengthens our capacity to exercise self-discipline. Saying no to ourselves is at the heart of our humanity. It is what distinguishes us from beasts of the field. When a beast is hungry, it eats. But we exercise self-discipline. There are things we eat and don't eat, times we eat and don't eat. When a beast of the field is in heat, it mates. But we exercise self-discipline. Our tradition instills in us monogamy, yes to this partner, no to everyone else.

The marshmallow study reveals that all of us are born with a certain temperament, a tendency to say yes or no to that marshmallow, an inclination towards instant gratification, or towards self-discipline. But if we take the categories of permitted and forbidden seriously, in food, in love, in work, in life, that strengthens the self-discipline that makes us not only more serious Jews, but human beings of greater character, happiness and achievement.

One of my favorite books is a business book called Good to Great by Jim Collins. He studies pairs of companies in the same industry over time. In each comparison, one of the companies remained merely good, while the other company was able to soar, to go from good to great. One of the pivotal differences was that the good to great companies developed what Collins called a "culture of discipline." He writes:

*Throughout our research, we were struck by the continual use of words like disciplined, rigorous, dogged, determined, diligent, precise, fastidious, systematic, methodical, workmanlike, demanding, consistent, focused, accountable and responsible. They peppered articles, interviews, and source materials on the good-to-great companies, and were strikingly absent from the materials on the direct comparison companies.*

For example, he tells the story of two banks, one of which was mired in mediocrity, the other of which went from good to great. The pivotal issue at the time, both banks realized, was there was

too much waste in banking. Banking executives lived lavishly. What was needed was discipline.

The bank whose executives kept eating the marshmallow, the bank whose executives could not say no to themselves, had palatial premises with oriental rugs, floor to ceiling windows that offered sweeping panoramic views, liberal use of private jets, and a special elevator that made an express trip from the ground floor to the executive suite without stopping at the floors where the ordinary mortals worked. That bank languished.

By contrast, the bank that soared had executives that said no to themselves. That bank froze executive salaries for two years; shut the executive dining room; closed the executive elevator; sold the corporate jets; and banned greet plants from the executive suite as too expensive to water. The CEO of this bank famously sat in a beat up old chair with the stuffing hanging out—and when people wanted to spend money on projects that were wasteful, they would take one look at the beat up old chair with the stuffing hanging out and decide that that project was not such a good idea after all. Saying no to the marshmallow allowed this bank to thrive.

The marshmallow study is so evocative because it is not really about 4 year olds. It is about all of us, and the study is ongoing. We will always have a marshmallow of one sort or another on our plate.

Can we say no to that marshmallow, so that we say yes to bringing out the best in ourselves? Shabbat shalom.