



Parshat Vayishlach
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A Song That Plays On
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Tomorrow night we will be singing the song of a man who died 28 years ago. Had he been alive, Leonard Bernstein would be 100 years old. However he died relatively young, at the age of 72. And yet, all these years later, we still think about Leonard Bernstein.

Which raises the question: do you have to be a musical genius for your song to play on after you are no longer here? Let's say that you are an ordinary person who works and loves and lives and gives and passes, with no soundtrack attached to your name. Is it possible that 28 years after you pass people will still remember and celebrate you?

In the 1950s, Rabbi Isaac Klein gave a sermon entitled *Spiritual Longevity*. I know this because this fall, Rabbi David Wolpe gave Rabbi Klein's sermon, in his name. Same title, same theme, same development. It was a sermon for the generations, valid in the 1950s, valid in 2018, because it posed a challenge that is timeless.

Rabbi Klein pointed out that we often pray for more time. Lord, please give me another year. While this plea for more time is a basic human instinct, the truth is we don't have much control over the outcome of this prayer.

Try as we might, we cannot guarantee our longevity. We can eat right, drink moderately, not smoke, exercise regularly, avoid bungee-jumping, and still not attain longevity. In 1977 a man named Jim Fixx wrote a book that became a best-seller. It was called The Complete Book of Running. Jim Fixx is widely credited with starting America's fitness craze, making the case that regular exercise, including regular running, is good for your health. When Jim Fixx started

running, he weighed 214 pounds and smoked two packs of cigarettes a day. Ten years later, when his book came out, he had lost 60 pounds. He no longer smoked. He felt great. He looked great. Run! Exercise! You will look and feel great, too. He was the best salesman for his book. And then, at the age of 52, just after his daily run, he dropped dead of a heart attack. We cannot exercise our way to 100. We cannot broccoli our way to 100. We cannot pray our way to 100. What then is a more helpful prayer?

Rabbi Klein coined the phrase “spiritual longevity.” That is, our impact continues even after we are gone. Spiritual longevity is a prayer over which we have more control.

After all, when we look at the people we love and admire most, we seldom love and admire them because *of the number* of years they lived. We don’t say I really loved Mama because she lived till she was 94. We don’t say Papa was so inspiring because he made it to 97. We love Mama because of who she was, we love Papa because of who he was, because of their personal qualities, not because they made it to their 90s. Rabbi Klein challenged his congregants: *do not be Methuselah!* Of all things, do not be Methuselah!

Who is Methuselah, and why should we *not* be like him?

Methuselah is the oldest person in the Bible; he attains *the* greatest longevity. But his longevity is his only recorded accomplishment. Genesis 5:27 records: “All the days of Methuselah came to 969 years; then he died.” Do not live a life where the most notable thing about your life was your longevity.

Spiritual longevity is possible for us all. I want to ask you two questions that flow from the life of Leonard Bernstein that would enable all of our songs to play on.

Here is the first question. Are you giving yourself away to something or somebody else who is worthy of your life? Giving away your life is the touchstone of a life well lived.

I think here of a memorable sermon I heard by Andy Stanley called *Happiness: Part 5, You Are Not Enough*. Andy Stanley was talking about happiness, but what he said is equally true of spiritual longevity. He asked the question how can we be happy? He observed that if you pursue happiness directly, it eludes you. You cannot exercise your way to happiness. You can spend three hours a day at Lifetime Fitness. That makes you more fit. It does not make you happy. You cannot acquire your way to happiness. You can buy a bigger home and a fancier car. That means you have a bigger home and a fancier car, but it does not make you happy. You cannot consume your way to happiness. You can take ever more elaborate vacations to ever more exotic locations. That means you take cool vacations, but it does not make you happy. You cannot exercise your way to happiness. You cannot acquire your way to happiness. You cannot consume your way to happiness.

How then do you become happy? Andy Stanley's answer: you can *serve* your way to happiness. You can *volunteer* your way to happiness. You can *give* your way to happiness. Happiness is *an outcome*, a *byproduct*, that happens when you are focused on giving your energy away. As Andy Stanley puts it, only when you empty yourself can you be filled up with happiness.

That is true also of spiritual longevity. We attain it when we give our gifts away. I see this happen literally every night of the week. One night a few weeks ago, I was walking into the evening minyan with a member of our shul who does not usually go to evening minyan. I asked him what bring you here tonight. He said I have Yahrzeit for my father. He explained that his father died when he was 24. That was 42 years ago. He said he has not missed a Yahrzeit in 42 years. I said wow. You have mourned your father almost twice as long as you had your father. What was it about your Dad that inspired your undying, your eternal love? Oh my Dad was

amazing. So loving. So supportive. So wise. A day does not go by when I don't think about my Dad. I look forward to honoring his Yahrzeit every year, and I will do so as long as I am alive.

His father was not blessed with longevity. He died when he was young, and he left a young son. But his father earned the blessing of spiritual longevity. By how he lived, how he loved, how he gave, his song plays on.

Leonard Bernstein the musical genius is very rare. But some version of a person whose decency earned the undying love of a family member who honors their Yahrzeit forever, that beautiful story plays out in the Gann Chapel literally every night of the year.

So the first question is: are you giving yourself away, and to whom?

And here is the second question: Where are you tying yourself down, what local community are you deeply contributing to?

The answer for Leonard Bernstein was the state and people of Israel. Leonard Bernstein had a lifelong love affair with Israel. In October 1948, having returned from his first visit to Israel, Leonard Bernstein wrote to his mentor, Koussevitzky:

How to begin? Which of all the glorious facts, faces, actions, ideals, beauties of scenery, nobilities of purpose shall I report? I am simply overcome with this land and its people.

During Israel's War of Independence, Leonard Bernstein conducted the Israel Philharmonic 40 times in 60 days. He repeatedly put his own life at risk. A writer named Susan Gould relates:

It was not unusual to experience nearby artillery fire mid-concert, and at one performance at Rehovoth, he was called offstage mid-Beethoven piano concerto and told of a possible air raid. According to the Palestine Post, "he returned to the piano as if nothing had happened." The outwardly unflappable Bernstein said: "I never played such an Adagio. I thought it was my swan song."

Bernstein's conducting his concerts during the war famously had a material impact *on* the war. The Egyptian army had massed on the southern border ready to attack the Negev. But the Egyptian army sensed a big Jewish presence in the Negev. Susan Gould quotes a contemporary account of what happened in the Negev that day.

The well of the amphitheatre is alive with chattering soldiers—men and women of the front-line army, Jews from Palestine and the British Commonwealth and other locations. Local residents arrived, and some wounded soldiers were transported by ambulance from the hospital nearby. At 3:30 PM, the concert began. Bernstein played three concerti in a row, not only a bonanza for his listeners, but also a first for him: Mozart's K 450 in B flat, Beethoven's First Piano Concerto, and Gershwin's Rhapsody in Blue, a most extraordinary and ambitious encore!

When Egyptian planes saw this crowd, they reported it as Jewish troops massing in large numbers in Beersheba. As a result Egypt withdrew its troops, leading Chaim Weizman to observe: "Who would take time in war to listen to a Mozart concerto?" To this day Israeli military people will say that Leonard Bernstein's concert that afternoon, in persuading Egypt not to invade, was pivotal in helping Israel win its War of Independence.

When we recall Leonard Bernstein at 100, it is not only his musical genius that moves us. It is his deep commitment to one place, to one people, to which he returned and gave and served and sacrificed. None of us can compose his music. But all of us can emulate his passion for a community to which we will devote our lives.

Leonard Bernstein reminds us of the power of deep locality. What place, what community, what cause, will you tie yourself down to, in a way that lifts you up?

Our prayers for longevity are not always answered. But our prayers for spiritual longevity can inspire us to live a life of lasting impact. And so we pray: Lord, help us give ourselves away to somebody else, to something else, that is worthy of our energy, and help us

not flit to lots of places where our impact is diffuse, but help us tie ourselves down to a place, to a cause, to a community that we hold dear, so that when our days are over, our song will play on.