


imaginable material and incorporate them into the *mishkan*, a unified structure that permits the Israelites, as a community, to worship God.

It is remarkable that Bezalel has the personal strength to be able to accept all of the gifts that the Israelites brought to him. As rabbis, we know the challenge of receiving highly charged “gifts”; the bearers seek to elevate to holiness these gifts by incorporating them into a larger communal structure. Why doesn’t Bezalel weary of this task? Why doesn’t the Torah show him struggling to maintain the quality of his work against the constant onslaught of objects saturated with people’s aspirations?

A partial answer lies in the fact that Bezalel does not labor alone; he is supported by Oholiab and others. But Bezalel’s ability to directly receive these gifts, however diverse and numerous, indicates his personal qualities of openness and equanimity in the context of the highly charged atmosphere of an engaged community. These are qualities that some rabbis possess in greater measure than others; they can all, though, be

cultivated through ongoing disciplines of self-awareness and self-reflection. Our service as rabbis can be labors that energize us or enervate us, depending on our clarity about our relationships with God, self, and other.

Tradition posits Moshe as the rabbinic model, not Bezalel. Yet the Torah does draw a direct parallel between the qualities of Bezalel, the artisan, and the qualities of the communal leader when, in *Devarim* (1:13), Moshe lists three qualities required of the heads of the tribes. They must be wise, discerning, and knowledgeable, precisely the same three Hebrew roots ascribed to Bezalel. The Torah teaches that to see ourselves as actively engaged in a creative process — with all the attendant uncertainty — makes us effective leaders. We might see leaders and artists as distinct, but the Torah sees leadership as a creative process and the creative process as a powerful vehicle for leadership. Like Bezalel, our rabbinate requires that we possess both gifts and skills, and be fully open to knowing and receiving them. 

## Staying Fit and Fresh: A Spiritual Strategic Plan

BENJAMIN J. SAMUELS

The Talmud teaches that of the generation of the wilderness, only those less than 20 years old and over 60 would enter the Promised Land; all ages in-between would die in the desert (*BT Baba Batra* 121b). For a midlife, mid-career rabbi, these are not promising demographics! To reach the Promised Land, perhaps we must have the vision and vibrancy of youth and the wisdom and experience of age. The question at hand is how can those of us in the professional rabbinate during our in-between years, what some call our prime-time, maintain our DYR (dynamic young rabbi-hood) while tapping into our budding sagacity? How do we do this for the sake of our congregations whom we lovingly serve, and who may themselves demand it of us? And how do we accomplish this for our own spiritual, emotional, and intellectual welfare as midlife questions and crises bloom and congregational, communal, and familial obligations (usually in this order) override attention to self? Ignoring our personal spiritual needs puts at great peril our capacity to minister, teach, and worship, and will ultimately frustrate the noble aspirations with which we initially approached our career and calling.

Fifteen years ago, as a rabbinic intern, a beloved mentor told me that the first ten years of my rabbinate were to be my intellectual apprenticeship. At the time, I thought that this meant that were I to apply myself to learning during this period, I would arrive at the prime of my career full of knowledge, know-how, and wisdom. Having just turned 40, the alleged age of understanding (“*ben arba'im l'bina*,” *Avot* 5:21), and having celebrated my thirteenth year at the congregation I am privileged to serve, I feel less Solomonic than in tune with the observation of Kohelet: “All this I tried with wisdom, I said to myself, ‘I will grow wise,’ yet it is beyond me” (7:23). Thus, I struggle with issues of maturation and rejuvenation, and offer here a few examples of one rabbi’s effort to stay fresh and fit.

From time to time I compose, for my eyes only, a spiritual strategic plan — that is, a structured accounting of my sense of mission, personal and professional goals, and a road map to lead me to their fruition. Self-awareness and reflection are the first steps in self-care; following up resolve with concrete action, of course, makes for results.

For me, *ben arba'im l'bina* is not a terminus, but an invitation, and describes a primary

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need of this age. While I have always been a person of the book, in midlife, I seek more profound understanding, and thus I'm more drawn to the biblical mandate, *b'khol derakhekha dei'ehu*, know God in all your ways (Proverbs 3:6). That and the tradition of *Torah u'Mada* inform my learning goals in both Torah and worldly wisdom. Preparing to teach, speak, or learn *b'chevrutot* establishes a helpful framework for personal learning, but to satisfy my

is just as important, but in some ways more elusive for the professional Jew. And yet, it is essential to an effective rabbinate to aspire to an *avodat Hashem* that inspires self and others. Strategies I find helpful include keeping a journal of thoughts evoked by my daily *tefillot*, visiting and davening in other shuls, and teaching the siddur. There is nothing like the innocent questioning of students to make a teacher revisit ideas taken for granted.

**To preach with integrity requires that we practice our words. This alone requires the youthful dynamism and aged wisdom we seek to nurture and maintain.**

wider interests I take advantage of numerous continuing education Web sites and resources such as YUTorah.org, Torahinmotion.org, and Recorded Book's Modern Scholar series. It is amazing how many *shiurim* and courses I can absorb even while driving during the week!

Spiritual freshness of a more devotional sort

Central to my emotional wellbeing are a range of essential personal activities that require time: exercise, living fully with my children and spouse, and friendships. It is also critical that I still find in the Torah and mitzvot, which are my "work," much meaning, purpose, and inspiration for my personal and family life. A good measure of personal authenticity is the robustness of my religious life at home, away from the sanctuary. To preach with integrity requires that we practice our words. This alone requires the youthful dynamism and aged wisdom we seek to nurture and maintain. 

## On the Margins

JOSHUA LESSER

When a woman called about the synagogue and commented, "We heard wonderful things about your congregation but my husband is afraid that we might be the only ones without purple mohawks and tattoos," I responded, "As much as I hate to dispel that fantasy, we have no one who fits that bill, though you should be assured just as we would warmly welcome you, I'd also welcome that person." The life of a rabbi on the margins keeps life interesting. Being a rabbi who unabashedly welcomes Jews who have not felt comfortable in many settings, is a blessing with costs.

As I quickly head toward my tenth anniversary as a rabbi, I have begun to engage in a *heshbon hanefesh* of what this profession means. And I've become aware of its many layers and challenging questions. How do I need to transform to continue with vitality? Can I continue to uncover a changing rabbinic role? Where is my growing edge and where can I find my sanctuaries?

Working in the same pulpit since ordination, I wonder if this stability has helped me mature and how it might also make my rabbinate feel stale. I've always had a restless soul, so returning to my home city has been a great source of learning even as it has been painful. A product

of the Orthodox day school, I returned as the gay rabbi of the only Reconstructionist synagogue in the state. Part of the drain of this work has been the tension between wanting to bring visibility to a different and authentic model of Jewish leadership *and* the magnification of my uniqueness that has often presented me as one of a few strange exotic fish in a bowl of carp. This "bowl" extends beyond the Jewish community to the larger community in which I live. Not only did this heightened scrutiny put a strain on my first partnership, but it makes dating incredibly challenging. Nearing 40 years old without the family I imagined, has been a sad foil to the wonderful communal life that I helped cultivate in the synagogue I serve.

The "margin" often lessens the risk. For example, because my community embraces pluralism and balances innovation and tradition, I am able to institute new ideas with less resistance. This past year, the synagogue slated a Blues Tisha B'Av service with alternative ways to approach the *kinot* and a contemporary blues lament based on the *Book of Eicha*. We also chanted the traditional text and sat on the floor. Over 100 people observed Tisha B'Av, most for the first time; I saw how a new vision could

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