



Sunday Neurosis

רב יוסף ביומא דעצרתא אמר עבדי לי עגלא
תלתא אמר אי לא האי יומא דקא גרים כמה
יוסף איכא בשוקא (פסחים סח:)

Rav Yosef, on Shavuot, would request that a choice calf was prepared [for feasting]. He would say “were it not for that day of causation, how many Yosef’s would there be in the marketplace?” (Pesachim 68b)

An enigmatic segment of Gemara indeed. Rashi explains it to mean that Rav Yosef was expressing gratitude for the fact of the giving of the Torah on Shavuot. For were it not to be, he would have been like any other random ‘Joe’ in the marketplace.

I was talking with my father in the early days of Covid-19 isolation and I mentioned how one of the many realisations that this time period brought to bear, was how the most important relationships are with our immediate family members. My father pondered this for a moment and added, “and how the most important relationship of all, is with oneself.”

With many a quiet Shabbat on my hands, I had much time to unpack the wisdom in my father’s words. For many people, time spent alone can be frightening. Viktor Frankl, the renowned Auschwitz survivor and father of Logotherapy, spoke of

a condition that he labelled Sunday Neurosis. He defined it as “that kind of depression which afflicts people who become aware of the lack of content in their lives when the rush of the busy week is over and the void within themselves becomes manifest.”

Sigmund Freud deemed the ‘will to pleasure’ as the central driving force of humanity. Alfred Adler argued with his teacher and posited instead that it was the ‘will to power.’ Frankl, who pioneered the third Viennese school of psychotherapy, argued with his predecessors (both of whom happened to be Jewish) asserting that it was rather the ‘will to meaning’ that propelled human behaviour. While much ink has been spilled on these conflicting understandings of humanity, in Frankl’s identification of Sunday Neurosis he found the flaw in both the Freudian and Adlerian worldview. We may rise the ranks of social hierarchy and indulge our every whim, but there comes a Sunday in our lives – a point in time when we are forced to face ourselves, stripped of anyone to call us by our titles and separated from the things from which we derive pleasure – and this is a moment of truth. A moment in which our feeling of worthiness is contingent not on what we have, but on who we are.

One whose life is driven by power or pleasure will suffer through these Sundays, yearning for the workweek when the fleshpots re-open and the hierarchy is reinstated. By contrast, those whose lives are meaning-centric will relish these ‘Sundays’ – the precious moments in which one can bask in the existential wholesomeness that is the reward of a life saturated with purpose.

Shavuot, a day which is metaphorically associated with Sunday, occurring seven full weeks after *מִקְרַת הַשֶּׁבֶת*, is the day that makes the Sundays in our life replete with meaning. Rav Yosef recognised this truism in his statement – without Shavuot, without the Torah which provides our lives with endless meaning and purpose, we’d just be another Joe in the marketplace. We’d be without real purpose, chasing the dollar and whatever power and pleasure come with its purchase.

Shavuot is the day that forever enabled the flourishing of our relationship with the most important person we know, our own self.

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