

What I Have Learned in the 45 Years since My Bar Mitzvah

Shabbat B'har-B'chukotai 5781

May 7, 2021

Rabbi Barry H. Block

You are all too kind. In the *Chronicle*, and again in this Wednesday's e-blast, I announced a sermon title, "What I have learned in the 35 years since my Bar Mitzvah." Nobody, not even my parents, hit me with the harsh reality: I am **not** about to turn 48, but 58; 45 years have passed since my Bar Mitzvah.

My best friend, to whom I'm still close, wasn't quite as kind on my Bar Mitzvah day. On May 15, 1976, when I sat down after completing my parts in the service, Keith looked over and, in a loud, audible whisper, said, "Two mistakes!" I still make mistakes when leading services; that hasn't changed in 45 years.

For my Bar Mitzvah speech, I refused to speak about my Torah portion. I pity the poor rabbi who had to work with me. I insisted on giving a talk about God—a theological discourse that reads as if it were written by, well, a thirteen-year-old. I have since learned that one can find deep meaning in any Torah portion. That's not even difficult with *Parashat B'har*, my Bar Mitzvah portion and the first half of this week's double portion.

I also remember the unpleasantness of shopping for my Bar Mitzvah attire. You see, I thought that I was a "fat" kid. I was self-conscious about how I would look in my clothes, and the process of selecting them was torture. The only question was, "Will I look fat in this?"

As I look at a photograph like this one of my grandparents and me on my Bar Mitzvah day, I notice the big hair and the braces, but I don't see a fat kid. No, I wasn't skinny like many of my friends, but my weight should not have been the preoccupation in my life that it was. So, one more thing I have learned since my Bar Mitzvah is that I have suffered from a lifelong struggle with unhealthy body image. I know that I am far from alone, and that many have it much worse.

Eating Disorder Hope lists "five signs and symptoms of unhealthy body image," and I suffered from three: "Experiencing body dissatisfaction and being preoccupied with your body's weight, shape, or appearance; 2. Having feelings of shame, anxiety, and self-consciousness about your body; and 3. Frequently comparing your body to others' and feeling that your body is flawed in comparison

to others’.” Only by the grace of God have I largely escaped the last two signs, which are active and physically dangerous eating disorders.ⁱ

Rabbi Rachel Grant Meyer, reflecting on the second half of this week’s double portion, writes: “The options before us at the beginning of *Parshat Bechukotai* appear dauntingly unambiguous...The [portion] begins, ‘If you walk in the way of My laws and guard My commandments,’ you will receive abundant blessing as outlined in the verses that follow. But, if not, less than a dozen verses later, we learn that horrific curses will befall us...These harsh realities raise many questions. Are these the only two outcomes? Does everything live at the pole of blessing or the pole of curse? Moreover, in a post-biblical era, who gets to declare what is deserving of blessing and what is deserving of curse? Can one person’s blessing be another’s curse and vice versa?”ⁱⁱ

Rabbi Grant Meyer’s piece about the portion is entitled, “Fatness is the Blessing, Not the Curse.” I had first noticed her posting on Facebook about barriers to access for fat people in synagogues. Then, when she visited us as scholar-in-residence, I invited her to teach us on the subject. To my surprise, she had never spoken publicly about the issue previously—and later, she told me that her positive experience with our congregation led to her writing about the issue in greater depth.

Her words describe pain: “Growing up as a fat child and then a fat young adult, I internalized the impossible-to-miss messages from every corner of my life: My body was a sight of curse rather than blessing. I learned quickly that my physical cursedness centered specifically on my fatness.”ⁱⁱⁱ Rabbi Grant Meyer’s central thesis is stated in one sentence: “The curse is not fatness; the curse is fatphobia.”^{iv}

The harms are real and destructive. Rabbi Grant Meyer describes bullying, shaming, employment discrimination, and inadequate, often neglectful, medical care, resulting in low self-esteem and health consequences that go beyond those associated with obesity. She writes: “The curse of fatphobia ranges from limiting and hurtful to lethal.”^v

I would add eating disorders to Rabbi Grant Meyer’s list of the consequences of fatphobia. The National Eating Disorders Association indicates that studies have shown that people faced with weight stigma “are at an increased risk for eating disorder symptoms.”^{vi} ANAD, a nonprofit that provides peer support to those suffering with eating disorders, reports that “someone dies due to an eating

disorder every 52 minutes.” Nearly 29 million Americans are struggling with eating disorders, with a quarter of those attempting suicide.^{vii} In short, fatphobia can be deadly.

Since my Bar Mitzvah, I have learned that making mistakes is OK, even while leading services. I have learned that the weekly Torah portion always has important lessons for us. And I have learned that I wasn't a fat kid. And I have learned some tips, which I would like to share with you: Unless you are a health care professional, and the person to whom you are speaking is your patient, and weight is directly related to the issue at hand, one should never mention another person's weight—not to comment on a perception that a person has gained weight, but even to compliment weight loss, unless the person has explicitly told us that they are working to lose weight. Oh, and there's no exception for pregnancy or the period after childbirth. And if my personal sharing wasn't clear, one final tip: While girls and women, particularly females of color, are particularly victimized by fat-shaming, boys and men are also susceptible. In short, weight—our own and that of others—deserves less focus.

The last Torah verse I read in May 1976 was the one inscribed on the Liberty Bell: “Proclaim liberty throughout the land, to all the inhabitants thereof.”^{viii} Now, forty-five years later, I urge us all, whatever our body type, to free ourselves from obsession with our weight—and even more, with that of other people. Let each of us learn to love the bodies that have been granted to us and to treat them with care and respect. Then, may freedom from fatphobia and all of its negative consequences be proclaimed throughout the land, to all the inhabitants thereof.

Amen.

ⁱ “Five Signs & Symptoms of Unhealthy Body Image,” Eating Disorder Hope, <https://www.eatingdisorderhope.com/blog/five-signs-poor-body-image>.

ⁱⁱ Rabbi Rachel Grant Meyer, “Fatness is the Blessing, Not the Curse,” *The Social Justice Torah Commentary*, edited by Rabbi Barry H. Block, manuscript slated for 2021 publication by CCAR Press.

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid.

^{iv} Ibid.

^v Ibid.

^{vi} “Weight Stigma,” NEDA, <https://www.nationaleatingdisorders.org/weight-stigma>.

^{vii} ANAD Eating Disorders Fact Sheet, <https://anad.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/ANAD-Eating-Disorders-Fact-Sheet-v2.pdf>.

^{viii} Leviticus 25:10.