



Torah Table Talk

A Runner's Motto: Finding our Inner Strengths

Parshat Lech Lecha

Genesis 12:1 – 17:27/ Isaiah 40:27 – 41:16



*Dedicated by Frances and Buddy Brandt
in memory of their grandson, Oren Jacob Brandt-Rauf.
"He was the perfect child."*

In the middle of the sixth century B.C. E. a new empire arose under the leadership of the Persian monarch, Cyrus. Not only did he conquer the Babylonian empire but he allowed the disparate nations who had been exiled from their homes to return to the place of origin and to rebuild their places of worship. For the prophet in the second half of the book of Isaiah, this emperor was God's messenger, even his anointed one. He speaks of this new king being "summoned to God's service." As this empire expanded so did the prophet's understanding of God. The prophet understood Cyrus' empire as being an expression of the will of God. It is God and not Cyrus who is all-powerful. "I, the Lord, am first and will be the last as well." God promises Israel, "the seed of Abraham, my friend," that God will protect Israel and watch over the people of Israel.

The Haftorah opens with a powerful and poetic statement of promise and hope. Just as God never grows weary, those who place their hope in God will never become depleted or weak. God is the source of our inner strength so that even when we think we can't go any farther we find the means to go on.

Isaiah 40:28-31

Do you know? Have you not heard? The Lord is God from of old, creator of earth from end to end, He never grows faint or weary, and His wisdom cannot be fathomed. He gives strength to the weary, fresh vigor to the spent. Youth may grow faint and weary, and young men stumble and fall; but those who trust in the Lord shall renew their strength as eagles grow new plumes; they shall run and not grow weary, they shall march and not grow faint.

Babylonian Talmud Kiddushin 82b

Rabbi Nehorai said: I prefer to put aside all worldly skills and teach my son nothing but Torah, whose interest a man enjoys in this world, while the principal endures for him in the world-to-come. It is not so with other occupations. For when a man falls ill or reaches old age or is beset by afflictions and thus is unable to engage in his work, he will die of hunger. Not so the Torah: it stands by a man, guards him in his youth from all evil, and gives him a future and a hope in his old age. Of the time of his youth, what does Scripture say? "They that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings as eagles" (Isaiah 40:31). Of his old age, what does Scripture say? "They shall bring forth fruit in old age; they shall be full of sap and richness" (Psalm 92:15).

Rabbi Harold Kushner, Who Needs God, Page 136

In June 1981 I told my family that my goal for that summer was to get into shape to run the Falmouth Road Race, a seven mile mini-marathon which takes place every August in Falmouth, on Cape Cod. They were very supportive and to help me get into shape to run seven miles, my daughter Ariel bought me a T-shirt on the back of which she printed ISAIAH 40:31. If you look it up you will see that the verse reads, "Those who trust in the Lord will have their strength renewed. They will mount up with wings as eagles. They will run and not grow weary." It didn't make me a champion at Falmouth, but that verse has been very important to me ever since. It teaches me where to find God in this unpredictable and often discouraging world. God is the power that replenishes, that renews our strength when we have used up all our strength... God works miracles today by enabling ordinary people to do extraordinary things.

Rabbi Solomon Frehoff, The Book of Isaiah

Mount up with wings of eagles: Tur Sinai (Torczyner) here recalls the wide spread legend of the phoenix, the bird which is believed to renew its youth magically, and he indicates that the phoenix legend is referred to here as a symbol of Israel's rejuvenation; only instead of a phoenix, the Hebrew legend speaks of an eagle. Their youth is renewed like the eagle (Psalm 103:3) SO here exiled Israel will renew their strength (verse 3) "And mount up as with wings as eagles."

Questions to Ponder

1. Have you ever found yourself in a situation in which you felt you didn't have "the strength to go on?" What did you do to carry on in this situation? How can faith help a person find the inner resources to carry on against overwhelming odds?
2. What do you think the prophet had in mind when he talked about how people can renew their strength just as the eagle renews its plumage? How was the return to Zion at this time an expression of this idea? How can we apply this idea to our contemporary experience as a community?
3. Note that the translation of Isaiah 40:31 above is different from the way it appears in Rabbis Kushner's and Frehoff's comments. How are they different from one another? Do you think it changes the meaning of the verse?
4. Elsewhere in the Bible we are told that God rested on the seventh day after creating the heaven and the earth: "For in six day the Lord made the heaven and earth and sea and all that is in them, and He rested on the seventh day; therefore the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and hallowed it." (Exodus 20:11) Why does God need to rest if God, "never grows faint or weary?" How can we talk about such anthropomorphic images when speaking about God?
5. How does the study of Torah and participation in Jewish life keep a person young?

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***"All it takes to study Torah is an open heart, a curious mind
and a desire to grow a Jewish soul."***

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