Parsbat Va-yigash: Serenity Now = Insanity Later? A synthetic approach to coping with evil

Introduction: Serenity Now!

In a famous Seinfeld episode, Kramer gleans some important life wisdom from George's father, Frank Costanza. Whenever Frank gets stressed out, he says—more like, yells out—Serenity Now! This reminder calms him down and ensures the steadiness of his blood pressure. Kramer likes this de-stressing method and full-on embraces a Serenity Now! lifestyle. He gets egged by kids and tells himself Serenity Now! Jerry asks Kramer about the mess and he brushes it off like it's nothing. "Serenity now, Jerry!" Jerry gives a dismissing shrug.

Albeit entertaining, the Serenity Now catchphrase is also a window into a deeper philosophy on life. Instead of seeing the cup as half-empty or even as half-full, Serenity Now! teaches that everything is good, right now. Nothing is wrong. It's all serene the way it is. Serenity Now! The show progresses and Kramer keeps repeating, and living, this mantra—even while all goes wrong.

Those who have seen the episode know how it ends. One day, Kramer can't suppress his overflowing frustration and goes berserk, destroying twenty-five computers that were being stored in his apartment, all the while screaming, "Serenity Now! Serenity Now!" In the end, one of the characters sums up Kramer's decline in this tight aphorism: "Serenity now … insanity later!"

Serenity Now = Insanity Later?

In this week's parsha, we are presented with a spiritualized Serenity Now! attitude. As we will see, this view sees all occurrences as good because everything in the end comes from Hashem. How can one be anything but serene when one realizes the divine source in everything?

Alongside this line of thinking, our parsha presents an antithetical position on evil. Instead of serenity, we hear, straight from Yakov's mouth, about his rough and evil days. This view recognizes the bad for what it is; while the previous approach ignores it and only sees good. Which view is correct? Through which lens should we approach tough times in life? And is Serenity Now! indeed always followed by Insanity Later, as implied by the Seinfeld episode?

Yosef's theology

Yosef had many reasons to be bitter. His brothers betrayed and abandoned him. He was framed by Potiphar's wife and subsequently thrown into jail. Twelve years in jail afforded him much time to regurgitate the abuse he had suffered.

Fast forward to our parsha. The brothers reunite with Yosef and the childhood dreams of his family materializing. Yosef puts his brothers through some tough tests, and they pass them.

What should he do now? Should he expose who he is? Is he really healed and recovered from all that he went through? Yosef reveals himself to his brothers and reassures them that he harbors no hatred:

ואמר אליהם יוש, אל-חיים: יי יוויה, יי והוויה והויה על רעה; ואלוהים חשב טוב,لمען נשח כים זהוה,להוחיה עפ-רב'.

Do not be afraid, my brothers! I will not harm you. I have no hatred. You may have thought evil thoughts about me; but from Hashem's perspective, there was no evil. Twenty years ago, Hashem already had this day mapped out. God knew there would be a famine and sent me here in order
to save our family. In chapter forty-five (45:8), Yosef says it was God, and not his brothers, who sent him away; and in chapter fifty (50:19-20), he adds that Hashem’s plan was good.

Yosef’s view of the past from the divine perspective allowed him to radically reinterpret the act. This is a spiritualized version of Kramer’s Serenity Now! I am not angry—I am serene—because my brothers did not even send me here. God did! And it was to help our family.

Yakov’s yamim ra’im

In and around this story (47:8-10), we are introduced to a counter approach to evil. Following the epic family reunion, Yosef presents the venerable head of the clan, Yakov, before Pharoah. Pharoah asks Yakov, "How many are the years of your life?" Yakov answers, "The years of my life are one hundred and thirty." He then qualifies these words by adding, "משת רעים והרעים שין מתיי ימי. "Those one hundred and thirty days, they were few and evil. Why was Yakov telling all of this to Pharoah? And what was so evil about his days?

Yakov, like Yosef, experienced his share of trauma. He toiled twenty tireless years for Lavan, and mourned for his lost son, Yosef, for twenty-two years. His daughter, Dina, was horrifically raped and kidnapped. And the fear of his brother, Esav, clouded all of his earlier years. Life has been one tough patch after another. At this moment, when Pharoah asks about his life, Yakov vents his frustration—one world leader to another—and airs the truth. My days were tough—ועלם חוסן! Wow. This is almost the opposite of Yosef’s serene "God did this to us, it is good" attitude. On the contrary, Yakov does not hide behind theodicies. He plainly admits: my days were bad. All of the main commentators, along with the Midrash, see Yakov as depicting his life in negative terms.

Rabbi Soleveitchik’s destiny covenant

So, it appears that we have a clean binary. The view espoused by Yosef is a radical idealism. All that happened was done by God. And it was good. The view verbalized by Yakov is a radical realism. My days were רעים.

This analysis begs the obvious question: which approach is correct? Should we admit and accept that things are bad? Or take the spiritualized Serenity Now! path?

Rabbi Soleveitchik chimed in on this discussion in his Кол דורי ורעים article, penned in 1956. He throws a third perspective into the mix. He critiques the mystical approach, expressed in our exposition by Yosef, saying that Judaism does not escape to mystical theodicies. Our finite minds lack the capability of ever knowing what God is doing. We can only know what we can see and grasp. If things are bad, like the calamitous Sboa, for instance, they are actually bad. We do not cover up evil or explain it away.

From there, he attends to the approach voiced in our explanation by Yakov. He calls this approach a fate covenant. He critiques the extreme version of this view for not being proactive enough. It’s not sufficient to accept and admit our evil fate. We should recognize the factuality of evil, but never stop there. Exposure of evil should propel to immediate action.

He called this third approach the destiny covenant with between Israel and God. When bad happens, we look forward to our destiny, and not backward. This is a clear critique of the other two views. The words of Yosef glance backward with a hyper-spiritualized eye. And the words of
Yakov also look backward—with a realistic one. But the goal, Rav Soleveitchik tells us, is to move forward and use the evil as a means for growth.

When we see evil, we should do teshuvah. We should join in the pain of Am Yisrael and work to improve their situation. Introspection and a practical search for meaning should follow events. Looking forward and not back, we should imbue our lives with rich meaning, purpose, and practical plans for revival and rehabilitation.

A synthetic approach

From two views we have now expanded to three: Yosef, Yakov, and the destiny covenant. But we haven't answered the burning question: which is the right path?

In these concluding words, I would like to suggest a model for incorporating all three methods. We are complex beings and experience life on multiple fronts. Therefore, it may be worth finding a way to integrate and experience all three methods.

One synthetic model would be to assign the three views to three different human faculties: thought, feeling, and action. These assignments can be played around with, of course, but here is one synthetic model that works for me.

On an intellectual we should lean to the Yosefian view. We should strive to "bless on the bad just as we bless on the good" (T. Bavli, Berachot 54a) and mimic Rabbi Akiva's "all is for the best" (Ibid., 60b) attitude.

On an emotional level, it's worth deeply internalizing the Yakov take on our fate—seeing the evil occurrence for what it is. We are allowed, and it's even quite Jewish, to mourn and kvetch over the bad. Just ask my Jewish grandmother…

However, these intellectual and emotive expressions should not, and need not, impede action. In practice, we should look forward, immersing ourselves in the Soleveitchikian destiny covenant, using evil as stimulus for growth.

This balance is not easy. But its value lies in its shedding of the dross often associated with the extremes. Just wallowing in our pain and accepting that all is bad is dangerous. No one wants to hang out with a perpetual kvetch! But escaping to spiritual explanations is also dangerous. It can lead one to destroy twenty five computers in a matter of about ten seconds, under the guise of "Serenity now, Jerry!" But are we merely philosophers? Perhaps there is more to our destiny than this!? Judaism is about action and meaning. Evil should be used as a catalyst for change.

A mitigated Serenity Now!

So does Serenity Now! always lead to Insanity Later? Well, in Kramer's case, it sure appears so. But the Jewish nation is called תולדות יעקב יוסף, the offspring of both Yakov and Yosef. Our spiritual idealism is mitigated by a sobering realism. God has a plan, but this doesn't cover up for how tough things are and might be.

If Serenity Now! has led us to Insanity Later, this is a sure sign we are not living in the correct balance.

Our serenity of Yosef should be tempered by the visceral realism of Yakov and the pragmatic activism of Rabbi Soleveitchik's destiny covenant. Only this way can we remain sane, grow in our love for God, and witness ימינו רעים transformed into ימינו טובים—speedily in our days!