

# WHAT WOULD BE ENOUGH?

WHEN DOES AMBITION CLOSE OUR EYES TO WHAT WE ALREADY HAVE?

## TORAH BLESSING

### DISCUSSING THE SERMON:

In *Hamilton*, both Alexander Hamilton and his wife, Eliza, sing the line, “Look around, look around, at how lucky we are to be alive right now.” When Alexander sings it, he is referring to his luck in getting to take part in an historic moment in American history. It is his justification for working “non-stop” rather than taking time off to spend with his family.

When Eliza sings it, she is talking about how lucky they are to simply be alive. She wants Alexander to worry less about his historic legacy, to be grateful for his blessings, and to be more present for his family.

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### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- (a) Can you think of a time when the relationship with a friend or family member was the sustaining force in your life? When your future may have seemed bleak, but you realized, as Jacob did, “Rav” -- that your relationship with your family or other loved ones was “enough”?
- (b) What makes Alexander’s decision difficult is that what he is striving to do – build a functioning democracy – *is* extremely important. Have you ever had a time when a goal seemed so important that it was worth putting other important things on the back burner? How do you decide when those sacrifices are worth it?
- (c) What part does being able to “look around” – i.e. to be mindful of the moment in which we find ourselves – play in balancing the priorities in our lives? Can you think of a time when someone or something called you to “look around,” giving you a new perspective on how you were living your life?

## VOICES FROM OUR TRADITION:

(1) In *Pirkei Avot* (a collection of ethical teachings compiled around the year 200), we read:

“Who is rich? One who is happy with his portion.”

– Pirkei Avot 4:1

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### DISCUSSION QUESTION:

What do you think this text is meant to teach us? Do you think being happy is a choice? If so, what enables us to be happy with our portion?

(2) *Rabbi Bradley Shavit Artson writes:*

“An ancient midrash [ancient Jewish story] portrays Alexander III of Macedon [-- another Alexander! --] conqueror of the known world, standing at the gate of the Garden of Eden. He demands admission and is told that only the *tsaddikim* [righteous ones] may enter there. Alexander becomes indignant; no one has treated this monarch with such indifference before. To try to save face, he insists that, at the very least, the angel guarding the gate should offer him something of great worth. So the angel gives him a human eyeball.

Puzzled, Alexander places the eyeball on a scale, and in order to determine its worth, he begins to load gold and silver on the other scale. No matter how much of the precious metal he adds, the eyeball outweighs it. Finally, the angel intervenes by covering the eyeball with a layer of dust. Unable to see the gold, the eyeball immediately and finally resumes its normal weight.

The explanation offered by the *midrash* is that the human eye always covets more than it has. No matter how much we possess, enough is never enough.

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### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- (a) Do you think it is significant that the person in this story is Alexander the Great? What does his position have to do with the story?
- (b) Why would a human eye be valuable?
- (c) The *midrash* suggests that the human trait of always wanting more is negative. We might characterize this trait as “greed.” But in addition to greed, our ability to dream of something “more” can be expressed as ambition. As Rabbi Lorge writes, this feeling “that we have some great purpose to pursue . . . can push us to do great, awesome, important things.”

How do we know the difference between ambition and greed? And how can we keep our ambition from getting out of control?