

## Like Breathing

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John Lennon once said, “If I’d lived in Roman times, I’d have lived in Rome. Where else? Today America is the Roman Empire and New York is Rome itself.”

Just as enterprising ancients made their way to Rome, people come to New York in search of opportunity and freedom. Jewish immigrants called it the *goldene medineh* (golden country).

So many songs and films have tried to capture the vibrancy and romance of the city.

I picture the opening scene of *Working Girl*—Melanie Griffith arriving on the Staten Island Ferry, passing the Statue of Liberty as Carly Simon sings, “The New Jerusalem.”

How many Americans have harbored that dream? I know I have.

But just across the Williamsburg Bridge, you will find an entirely different vision of life. Although the Hasidic community of Satmar lives literally in the shadow of Manhattan, the two worlds could hardly be further apart.

A couple weeks ago, I took a tour of Satmar Williamsburg led by Frieda Vizel, who spoke here at TBE in March. Before leaving, I stopped at a bookstore and bought a copy of *Vayo’el Moshe*, the Satmar Rebbe Joel Teitelbaum’s magnum opus.

Rabbi Teitelbaum, who escaped Nazi-occupied Hungary and rebuilt his community in Brooklyn, is best known for his uncompromising opposition to Zionism.

For that reason, many otherwise learned Jews probably dismiss *Vayo’el Moshe* without reading it.

I think that’s unfortunate.

To my mind, Rabbi Teitelbaum’s view of Zionism—which I don’t agree with—is but one expression of a much broader spiritual vision that I find quite compelling. It’s a vision that refuses to judge the greatness of a human life by what we accomplish, by the power we wield, or by the prestige we acquire.

The rebbe takes the title of his book from *Exodus* 2:21: “*Vayo’el Moshe*—“Moses swore an oath” to stay in Midian with his father-in-law, his wife, and their son.

Our parashah this week echoes that commitment: “If anyone makes a vow to God or takes an oath...they shall not break their word.” (*Num.* 30:3)

Judaism takes promises seriously.

What matters for Rabbi Teitelbaum is that Moses embraces the responsibilities God has entrusted to him: He faithfully tends to his family, his flock, and his community.

Who knows—maybe Moses knew that God would call him one day to bring the Israelites out of Egypt. Maybe he even dreamed about it.

But he didn't spend his life wishing he were somewhere else.

This is where Satmar differs so dramatically from New York.

New York celebrates ambition. Time moves relentlessly forward. Success means building the next thing, achieving the next goal. If you're not taking the next step, you're falling behind.

Rabbi Teitelbaum sees the world differently.

For most of us, time is linear: Yesterday is behind us; tomorrow lies ahead.

But for the Satmar rebbe, time is cyclical: Shabbat comes every week. The holidays return every year.

Prayer each morning. Meals each evening. Parents caring for children. Children growing into adults.

The same rhythms, again and again.

Life isn't about getting somewhere. It's about inhabiting those cyclical rhythms with faith and dignity.

It's like breathing.

Nothing dramatic happens when you breathe. Nothing really changes.

Each breath resembles the last one—and yet life itself depends on repeating that same rhythmic action, over and over again.

This, for Rabbi Teitelbaum, is where true human dignity is found: not in power, not in prestige, not in achieving the next goal.

It's found in the quiet rhythm of ordinary life: waking up in the morning, getting the kids to school, going to work, coming home, eating dinner together, reading, praying, being with friends, celebrating Shabbat, keeping your promises, and doing it all again and again.

Secular culture tells us that fulfillment comes from striving, overcoming, and making things happen in the world.

I believe that. But I also know it's a partial truth—and that too much ambition and drive can consume you.

Rabbi Teitelbaum challenges us to ask: What if the holiest parts of life aren't waiting somewhere out there for us to go and get?

What if they're already here—in the ordinary responsibilities and relationships God has entrusted to us?

I don't want to romanticize Hasidic life, and I would never choose to live as a Satmar Hasid.

But the more I study *Vayo'el Moshe*, the more I appreciate this insight.

We Reform Jews—myself included—tend to be so enthralled by the New York idea of greatness.

But the Satmar rebbe reminds us that another vision of greatness is possible—if we choose it.

That kind of greatness is found in the dignity and faithfulness with which we live the ordinary every day.