

Dreams are for Coloring Books:

Midlife's Marvels

By

KJ Hannah Greenberg

Dreams are for Coloring Books: Midlife's Marvels

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Preface

Now, Slowly

One form of entitlement that bogs down folks are assumptions about what we “ought” to receive in our relationships. For instance, I might presuppose that my husband “ought” to want to learn with me twice a day, or that my children “ought” to want to give up the precious hours of their vacations to help me prepare our home for holidays. In both of those cases, not only are my beliefs unrealistic, but they are also harmful.

Both of those cases find me assuming that my needs, i.e. the items on my agenda, are more important than are the items on the agendas of my loved ones. My husband likes me and loves me. He holds as precious the time we share. Yet, he has other urgencies. In no particular order, he needs to: work, rest, pray, eat, parent, and so forth.

Likewise, my teens, appropriately, do not necessarily gravitate toward “gee, we’re off from school now. It would be wonderful for us to spend all of our free time helping our mother.” They have exams for which to prepare, friends with whom to catch up, sleep with which to get reacquainted, and much more that calls to them during their unstructured time. It’s audacious for me to expect my children to tailor their schedules to our family’s needs, as those needs are perceived by me.

On other levels, expecting my closest relations to integrate their lives with mine is not at all outrageous. The more private time that my husband and I share, the greater our family harmony. The more that my children help me with our household chores, the more that I am freed to engage them in fun or in discussions about their futures.

The trick, which I have yet to master, is knowing how, simultaneously, to: articulate my needs so that they are heard, encourage my spouse and children to articulate their needs so that they are heard, acknowledge the entirety of all of our needs, and manage my family’s meeting as many items in our community of needs as possible given our humanly finite resources.

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I think developing this aptitude is a lifetime's work. Slowly, very slowly, I progress toward that end.

My husband is valuable. My children are valuable. I am valuable. Sometimes, our needs complement each other. Other times, they conflict. In the process of learning how to weave them together, I am growing personally, parentally, and professionally. *Dreams are for Coloring Books: Midlife's Marvels* explores this process of combining and refining family and personal needs.

KJ Hannah Greenberg
Jerusalem, 2017

Introduction

Recycling

The notion of recycling is often associated with taking something that has lost its worth and converting it, refashioning the item, actually, into something with increased utility. “Recycling,” though, can refer, as well, to taking something that retains worth and reactivating it, e.g. taking a beneficial habit and then using it in new ways in one’s life.

I have several such behaviors that I am striving to reactivate. I am working on returning to better sleep hygiene. I am trying to engage in more regular exercise. I am attempting to eat more greens and less junk food, and to do so more consistently. The good news is that the more I recycle any of these choices, the easier it is to recycle others.

For instance, yesterday, I walked. I got off the bus before I needed to and got on, when I had to return, much later than was necessary. One good end of that activity was that I fell asleep much more quickly than I had in weeks and I slept more soundly. To boot, some swelling that had been filling my tissues disappeared.

Thus, since I slept better, I woke feeling more fit. I feel more energized to walk, again, today. I am more inclined, as well, to seek healthier meals and snacks. The sensation of being less internally blocked, coupled with the sensation of less weightiness, are too precious to mire with unhealthy comestibles. Sleeping well and exercising inspires me to eat better.

It follows, that when I eat more sanely, I feel more whole. Happily, my good habits, when reused, galvanize each other.

Parental Matters

The Greatest Glory

These days, for many folks, “thriving” is synonymous with fiduciary “success,” or with renown. Self-actualization, in the form of purpose, i.e. in the form of meaningful choices, often gets passed over as so much “old-fashioned” tosh. No one seems to care whether or not they or their buddies live on morally high ground.

During my first few decades, I, too, was guilty of aiming for externally-awarded significance. Blessed with book smarts, I sought to become an academic.

As “experts,” professors are paid decently. What’s more, it’s “classy,” literally, to announce to others that you are “Dr. So-and-So” and that you have a university appointment. It doesn’t hurt, either, that for the most part such entitlement includes pedagogical autonomy as well as the right to determine your own research agenda. As long as you publish, you don’t perish. Rather, you linger in intellectual purgatory.

There’s an emptiness associated with authoring scholarly books, journal articles, and symposium presentations. Professors cultivate the same limited number of courses for decades and their research is apt to focus on very narrow snippets of thinking. To boot, they must spend many hours of time on committee work on and other such bunkum. Even the most illustrious of the bookish gets reduced, at some point, to a handful of footnotes. As for the rest of us, we teach, we write, and then we fade to nothing.

Worse, the academic life tends to consume all other aspects of personhood. In my teachers’ generation, women were told to forgo marriage if they chose to be professors. In my generation, women were told to teach or to reproduce, but not to attempt both.

I chose offspring over citations. Remaining a professor meant I would get noticed at certain types of parties. Becoming a mom meant my life could morph into something substantive.

My transition was hardly seamless. I knew how to put together conference panels and how to referee journal articles. I could teach

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select topics with small effort. I had no clue, though, how to interact with mothers who were not academics, how to change diapers, or how to motivate myself to endure bouts of sleep deprivation that would not, ultimately, be rewarded with more publication credits.

To wit, after my first child, a daughter, was born, I eyed my students with what I considered to be fondness. After all, each of them was someone's offspring. Likely, none of those undergraduate noticed the soft glances I bestowed upon them that year.

After my second child, a son, was born, I proffered my students, silently, of course, the wonder I felt regarding gender diversity. I had no liberal political agenda; what I experienced was a personal appreciation for both sons and daughters. Not only was each of my students someone's child, but each was beautiful in their femininity or masculinity.

By the time my third child, a daughter, was born, I was no longer starry-eyed. Although I had given up full-time teaching and all manner of research toward the end of my first pregnancy, I had, for a while, tenaciously held onto a limited number of courses. That reality changed when the kids outnumbered my husband and me. Once a week, twice, at most, I taught an evening class. My instructional experience was no longer bookended by stimulating concepts, the reward of empowering students to become critical thinkers, or thoughts of returning to research. Rather, I focused on how quickly I could race to shower and dress before class and on how quickly I could hurry to rip my shirt open, once I returned home, to feed my newest nursling.

By the time that my fourth child, a son, was born, the academic life no longer loomed as vital. I had undergone a high risk pregnancy and had, for many months, focused on and prayed for a live and healthy child. There were plenty of other men and women to roll forward research agendas and to share their insights with students. The ivory tower seemed less and less inspiring.

I did return to the classroom, but never with the same fervor. There were roads to dig among posies, and crayons with which to draw on walls. I was needed to mash bananas, to make clover crowns, and to guarantee that our cats wouldn't get trampled on by my family's small giants.

The kids grew up. Quickly, they moved from potty training to training wheels. One after another, they entered school.

These days, one of those shoots is a mother, another is in the army, a third is in college, and the youngest is nearly finished with high school.

They do their own laundry, push me out of our kitchen so that they can prepare food the way they like it, and rarely ask my opinion on their clothing. It's not so much that they are inaccessible, given the frequency with which they call, text, or otherwise communicate with each other, as it is that they have developed into young adults.

Had I stayed a full-time professor, my students would not have outgrown my services. Every year, there would have been new freshmen and new graduate students. Every term, I would have taught the same ideas in the same sequence.

As per my research, there were only a handful of scholars who missed my contributions when I stepped aside to raise my children. Plenty of other achievers quickly filled in that gap.

My truth, contrary to the message often perpetuated by contemporary society, is that parenting rocks. My boys and girls get only one mother. I can't help but make a lasting impression on them. More importantly, they can't help but make a lasting impression on me.

Because I merited nurturing my children, I got to learn a lot about myself. By virtue of devoting decades to my sons and daughters, I was able to reify and then to actualize my personal values. Had I continued to make my workaday world my highest priority, I would have had to continue to give life to professional standards and to siphon my energies into raising professional ideals.

More specifically, I remain grateful that I made my kids' stacking blocks and their sharing of toys, their discovering how to stand up to bullies, their learning to find fresh ways to complete trigonometry assignments, and their time management and budgeting strategies my greatest urgencies. In trading professional accomplishments for motherhood, I won the greatest glory.

Scratch and Sniff

Recently, one of my offspring offered an astute observation; we moms sometimes ask our children to undertake behavior that we, ourselves, would never dream of undertaking. More specifically, that child said, "You know what really annoys me? You grownups say, 'here, sniff this and tell me if it's spoiled.' If it's spoiled, why would I want to sniff it?"

He was right. It's one thing to ask our children to reach into spaces into which they fit and into which we don't. It's one thing to ask them to pick up bread or milk on route home from school when the local makolet is at their bus stop. It's also one thing, as they get older and we get more frail, to ask them to lift heavy items for us. It's another thing, however, to ask them to engage in deeds which we, ourselves, find distasteful or abhorrent.

Although I was never the sort of parent to ask my sons and daughters to lie for me, not all parents hold accordingly. Many primary care providers have instructed their kids to make up professional identities for them, to always tell them that they look attractive, or to tell callers that "Mommy's away."

Just last week, when I asked a friend's scion what time her Mommy might be back, that little receptionist (poorly) covered the phone with her hand, and then asked her mommy, in too loud of a voice, when she "might return." I heard my friend whisper back "in an hour." Sigh.

When I was a child, I had a pal whose mom instructed him to steal candies from a store's display. Reasoning that no manager would forbid a child to enjoy a sweet, that parent coached her wee one to pilfer. Inevitably, that classmate learned both to rationalize theft and that his mom was a cheapskate.

There are too many other examples of this dreadful reasoning, of this unjust application of double sets of standards that too often gets applied to parents and children experiencing the same situations. For instance, many youngsters have been instructed to misinform about their age at amusement centers, on public transportation, and at movie houses for the

“reason” of their supervisors pocketing a bit of change.

Similarly, children have been told to place wounded animals outside, where those weakened critters could become prey, so that their adults would not have to deal with the cost or the inconvenience of euthanizing pets. Likewise, albeit less immediately harrowing, lots of boys and girls have been “entertained” with junk food. I’ve seen children gorging enough sugar-laden garbage to send them into hyperglycemic shock just because their care providers wanted a little more leisure time or a nap.

In many cases, we ask our kids to perform deeds that are objectively and personally repugnant. Such modeling is bad for them. Such phrasing of mores sends messages to the next generation that we are thoughtless caregivers. Kids want their providers to be ethical, at best, mindful, in the least.

If it were not bad enough that we ask children to perform acts we, ourselves, would never perform, we are guilty of the opposite, as well. Often, when parents make stupid choices, and know that they are acting unconscionably, they tell their kids not to repeat what dances before those kids’ eyes.

Standing in front of a freezer and scoffing leftover ice cream, while telling a toddler, who wanders in on that spree, because that toddler has had a nightmare, that chemical-filled treats are bad for him, is ridiculous. So, too, is, crossing the street in the middle while admonishing one’s kin to make such transactions only at corners.

Correspondingly, boasting about cheating on taxes, while yelling at boys and girls not to shortchange their contributions to charity collections, not to abscond with their fundraising monies, and not to shirk on their part of teachers’ gifts, too, is worse than hypocritical. Just as it corrupts young souls to be given a double standard on constraints, it corrupts them to be given a double standard on permissions.

Don’t ask your children to button up if you button down. Don’t plead with them to wear longer hems if yours is of questionable length. Likewise, if they ask you why your nail polish is blue and they can only wear pink, fess up. It’s unrealistic to be perfect in our children’s eyes. It’s important though, to teach them to deal with, rather than to cover up, their weaknesses.

Let’s try to make two changes. Let’s not cause our kids to engage in behaviors we believe are wrong. Let’s similarly take responsibility for

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wrong behaviors our kids “catch” us engaging in. We want our children, after all, to realize our principles apply to all of the members of our families, all of the time.

Growing Pains

During a recent Sabbath, My husband and I were fortunate to have all of our children with us. As they grow older, such a convergence is less and less common in our home. In fact, shortly after that holy day, we experienced the first Sabbath, ever, that none of our boys and none of our girls was home.

Consider that Missy Older is married and has moved, with her husband, to Beer Sheva. Consider that Older Dude is in Givati and is stationed in places that can't be disclosed. Consider, too, that Missy Younger is perched on the brink of her Sherut Leumi year, a time when she will be living in Arad, a development town in the heart of the Negev Desert (it doesn't hurt our girls that Arad and Beer Sheva are commutable to each other.)

That leaves Younger Dude, who has a few years of high school to complete. As such, he is and will continue to be the only child of ours who is and will continue to be regularly living with us grownups. Our youngest, accordingly, has found it increasingly "beneficial" to visit his married sister and his brother in-law or to otherwise spend Sabbath out. No matter who guests at our table, it's "boring" to be the only kid here; more and more, he prefers to seek his other kin.

Not only have our kids moved on, literally, but they have physically grown, too. Both of our boys tower over my husband. Both of our girls blossom with that essence exclusively indigenous to young ladies in their late teens and early twenties. When the kids are here, they are simultaneously our little girls and boys *and* a group of sweet young adults that I barely recognize.

Regardless, during the Sabbath when everyone was home, our sons and daughters, our son-in-law, and our guests, specifically, a bat bayit and her intended, among courses, took turns jumping up from the table to clear or to set up dishes. Our young men joined my husband in singing. Our young people shared wonderful Dvrai Torah.

It seems like it was only a few weeks ago when my husband and I had to physically care for those kids before, during, and after Sabbath. These

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days, in contrast, our children do nothing to draw upon our physical energy. No one spills food. Few offspring fall asleep at the first meal; summers, we no longer “take Sabbath early” to accommodate their bedtimes. In addition, everyone gets bathed and dressed beforehand candle lighting... all by themselves.

Further, I make no Sabbath parties for small ones and navigate no neighborhoods to drop them off at friends' addresses. There are no bunches of children marauding through our home in loud voices with gloriously messy hands and faces. No one jumps off of our staircases any longer. No one brandishes pretend swords. No one politely asks, ten minutes after the most recent offering, for yet another snack.

Rather, when not napping, our kids talk of house paint quality and of university exams. They plot together on strategies for improving Older Dude's army leave and for spreading up Younger Dude's completion of high school. The marrieds speak of babies. The next two in line speak of weddings. The kids discuss the relative potency of ammunition and of guns, of ways to improve community programming, and of the pros and cons of a megama in software versus one in chemistry.

When not schmoozing or snoozing, our youngsters study Torah, take walks, or just enjoy each other's presence. Noticeably, none of the ones living out of the house feel compelled, any longer, to ask our permission for anything (but they share their plans with us, anyway, out of courtesy). They came into this world, they grew up, and they are making their own places in “the great out there.”

Nowadays, I have enough personal time on Sabbaths to learn. I also have enough personal time to: read, attend a shiur, and take a nap. I ought to be overjoyed. Instead I'm miserable.

I wasn't ready for this chapter. Despite oodles of warnings about how quickly this time would come, this time came too soon. Our kids grew up too quickly. I wish for more time with them as little ones. I feel old. I look at my spouse, who, b'ayin tova, I've known since we were teens. He looks old, too.

We anticipated marriage. We anticipated parenting. I don't think my husband and I ever thought about, let alone discussed, however, the day when our kids would be so independent. We surely didn't think of the day when we would be down to “one regular customer.”

Regardless, that time is now. Each year has been a blessing, which has brought our children farther along the ordinary path. Baruch Hashem!

B'ayin tova. The universe remains of Hashem's design. He made. He blessed. Our children's growth is not only my husband's and my joy, but is G-d's joy, as well. He, too, was, is, and always will be vital to their development.

One day, IYH, we will have more marrieds. There will be more grandchildren. There will be no one other than my spouse and Yours Truly regularly living in our home.

I'm in no rush. I miss my children.