

BOREDOM

by Rabbi Berel Wein

The most dreaded words that a parent, teacher or guardian can hear from one's child, student or ward is "I am bored." The rabbis of the Talmud long ago cautioned us against boredom as a state of mind that brings one to desolation, depression and even anti-social behavior. Now that the schools are out for the summer vacation the question of what to do with the young is a pressing one.

The truth is that young people are very creative in keeping themselves busy and occupied. But in our times when children spend a great deal of their time in front of a television set or a computer screen or a play station gadget this innate power of creativity has become dulled.

Jaded by the constant excitement of these continuously moving images, ordinary games, activities and projects pale in comparison. So boredom sets in easily and following the examples of violence and cruelty that are the regular fare of the current media world, violent behavior becomes the accepted antidote to boredom.

While the current public protests between extreme Haredim and equally extreme secularists on the Sabbath here in Jerusalem undoubtedly have deep ideological roots, a lot of the participants just see it as a chance to let off steam, confined as they are in a life style that otherwise is too boring for them.

I have always felt that in the United States and other Western countries professional spectator sports have been a release valve for much of the boredom and frustrations of the population. Here in Israel where any type of sport activity and loyalty to professional sports teams is forbidden in Haredi society, this outlet is not present. Confrontation with the police and burning rubbish becomes the release valve for their boredom and frustrations.

The fact that sports here in Israel is doctrinally connected with the desecration of the Sabbath makes something which could be a unifying factor in Israeli life into an activity that sharply divides the society along religious and non-religious fault lines. There is a long history of this in Israel. The socialist secularists that controlled the yishuv and later the state and its institutions saw sports

events on the Sabbath as a "necessary" ingredient in their quixotic attempt to create the "new Jew."

They failed to rid themselves of the "old Jew" and the vaunted "new Jew" never really arrived. But the Sabbath desecrating sports scene is part of the debris of that failure of attempted social transformation. So with no real outlet to boredom, violence against the police in a holy cause certainly has an attraction that cannot be minimized or wished away.

Anyone who has knowledge of the true nature of the Jewish religious scene is aware that its political leaders and rabbis have very little actual power and control over the masses of that society. There is a percentage of religious Jews who find an outlet for their boredom in study and intellectual pursuits. But this is certainly not the case for the masses that search for other tried and tested methods - such as violent demonstrations - to relieve their boredom.

Boredom does not only afflict the young. Many studies have indicated that older people especially retirees suffer from boredom. No longer active in their chosen professions or commercial enterprises they are faced with somehow filling the hours and days of their existence. Mental and physical exercise is key to survival in such a situation.

Boredom leads to atrophy of mind and limb and eventually to decline. It is difficult for people who have never read books or attended classes in their active lives to adapt themselves to such activities later in their lives on a regular basis. But all experience and observation teaches us that such an adaptation is as important to longevity and good health as any health regimen, physical care and wonder drugs can be.

Boredom is essentially the enemy of life, certainly productive life itself. And the truth of the matter is that there are so many interesting challenges and projects that one need never really suffer from terminal boredom. This is especially true regarding Torah study and Jewish subjects. The richness and variety of Torah study can and should be explored and exploited. Social activities and friends are also great aids to dispel boredom.

The Torah really makes no provision for retirement from life's activities and the pursuit of knowledge and spirituality. Solomon warns us in Kohelet about "days that we no longer have any desire for them." Defeating boredom is a most positive life experience - and I hope that you did not find this article to be too boring.

Shabat shalom.

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