

A Teaching from Rabbi Weintraub:

Live Beyond Your Means

Shabbat Bamidbar / Shavuot

Whether they believe in miracles or not, most Jewish adults will be able to identify the miracles which the Bible associates with Passover. Few however will be able to discuss the miracle associated with Shavuot, the Holiday seven weeks after Passover, celebrating the giving of Torah at Sinai. Then, the miracle was less supernatural, but it was no less amazing: a horde of ex-slaves, only recently liberated from the most degraded existence, enthusiastically accepted the hundreds of Torah Mitzvots!

Stress, as we understand it today, is caused by the perception of an insurmountable gap between what we believe we ought to do and what we feel we are capable of doing. Surely, the Israelites at Sinai, who had no recent history of self-governance or personal responsibility, whose as slaves had been as respected as farm animals, must have trembled at the responsibility of Torah. What helped them to overcome resistance?

As always, the example of Moses is instructive. In the Portion of Bamidbar, this year immediately preceding Shavuot, G-d instructs Moses to count the number of Levites from the age of one month up (men of other tribes were only counted beginning at twenty). Rashi (Number 3:16) imagines Moses asking G-d how he can fulfill this instruction since it would involve entering the tents of Israel, and counting the suckling infants, a violation of privacy and sexual modesty. G-d replies "Asei Atta Shelcha, V'ani eh'ehseh Sheli" You do your part and I'll do my part." Moses proceeds, and as he stands at the entrance of each tent, G-d goes inside. A Heavenly Voice then comes forth and announces the number of infants inside.

Why didn't G-d just tell Moses the number of infants inside? What was the point of using Moses' valuable time for a task G-d would really complete? All of us, when we take any meaningful challenge, are accepting a task that only G-d can complete. Every creative challenge feels sometimes beyond our capabilities. I don't know of anyone who has started a business, written a book, raised a child, or preserved a marriage who has not in their deepest recesses--and usually repeatedly -- felt that the goal was thoroughly beyond their means. To restrict your efforts to what you can judge now to be "within your means" is often an invitation to mediocrity. The miracle of Shavuot is the partnership of humans and G-d, which allows us to transcend ourselves and grow.