

Dear Community,

As we near the climax of the Exodus and the forging of Judaism as a faith and as a people, we must pause to ponder the sequence of events that we re-experience through the next few Parshiot. The joy of receiving the Torah, despair at the sin of the Golden Calf, the devastation following the destruction of the Luchot, and finally the joy of the building of the Tabernacle: we relive each step in this dizzying cycle, and cannot let this journey leave us unchanged.

The first step in an attempt to re-engage with this whole epoch requires us to step back and face two questions. The first question is: how can a people whose eyes have witnessed the most dazzling set of miracles imaginable go on to see divinity in a glistening, grazing, farm animal? The second question queries: given that the Jews did sin, and the unbroken set of Luchot that we embraced in the Tabernacle and in the Temple were therefore not the originals, should the giving of the Luchot have any significance to us as a nation?

In order to answer these questions, like all good Jewish debates, we must add to them. The Talmud in Tractate Shabbos states enigmatically: "From the time of the giving of the Torah until the time of Purim, there was a justification for not keeping the dictates of the Torah. What was this justification? When G-d gave the Torah He held the mountain over the heads of the Jews and told them that if they accept the Torah, then all is well, but if they don't, this would be their final resting place." Why was this necessary? Did the Jews not already declare "Na'ase V'nishma," we unconditionally accept the Torah without even hearing its contents?

The answer to these questions can be found in the frailty of the human condition and psyche. Let us introspect about our own experiences with moments of inspiration, and the resultant effects that these moments have had on our lives. How often have we felt that this is it- we are inspired, we are motivated to change our lives, and "this time we will get it right!" Twice a year (Jewish and solar New Year)? More often? And then... that flash of inspiration lasts maybe a minute? A week? Pretty soon, our grand intentions are shattered at our feet, and deflated, we move on as usual. The Mussar masters tell us that the two most powerful forces in the human selfhood are imagination and habit. Both can be used to grow and develop, but both can be the forces that drive our downfall. Habit, when we can change it, is the engine that will keep us growing - but when habit is too ingrained, the rule of reversion to the mean will inevitably bring us back to our starting point.

The Jews saw months of plagues degrading their former tormentors, left Egypt two million strong, saw the hand of G-d at the Red Sea, experienced miracles and clarity... yet they remained creatures of habit, still humans. Yes, they came to Har Sinai inspired, but this moment of inspiration was inevitably fragile and fleeting. When things became difficult, scary, or unpleasant, passion was replaced by doubt, ecstasy by terror. As the nation stood before the mountain and, through the tumultuous skies and charged atmosphere, saw what lay on the line when accepting the Torah, doubt began to creep in. Suddenly their full-throated declaration of religious commitment rang a bit hollow. G-d had to lift the mountain over their heads to demonstrate that the world's entire existence was predicated on this moment. Without a people committing themselves to taking a leadership role in the process of creation, the purposeless world would cease to exist. This visceral concretization of the importance of the Torah renewed the clarity necessary for the massive commitment.

However, since this was again a moment of supernatural revelation and clarity, it could not survive in a real, dark, and confusing world. Depth of belief and commitment does not arrive in bursts of inspiration, but is the outcome of concerted contemplation and hard work. As soon as Moshe was thought dead, the clear messenger of G-d taken from them, the Jews fell back on their old habits and sought comfort in a bovine embrace.

So if G-d knew of this human frailty, why subject the Jews to these dramatic experiences? What was the benefit of doing it this way? If a massive revelation would not effect a steadfast commitment, what purpose can there be for such an event?

The answer is that all change requires two steps. The first step is to clarify the goal. Without a clear goal and purpose, all change intentions stumble at the gate. The Jews needed to experience the truth of G-d and the clarity of purpose to crystallize an image of the ideal, the target where their journey of faith would take them. Yes, they could not yet sustain that level of clarity, but as a flash of lightning in a dark forest illuminates the trail for a moment, the light of the revelation would point to their ultimate path. Although the inspiration cannot last, through hard work - the second step in starting the process of change - we regain the clarity of the inspiring moment. Change is not achieved instantaneously, miraculously. While moments of ecstasy and clarity can propel us to try and achieve change, ultimately, we need to put in the hard work of dealing with our habits and hardened patterns.

In the process of change, we need to be ready to be knocked down and get up again, take the punch and get back into the ring. Holding on to that vision of inspiration is the key to doing so. Small steps lead to large distances, as long as you keep on stepping.

Good Shabbos.

Rabbi Shlomo Agishtein