

"RISE AND SHINE"

One of the results of the revelation of the Torah at Mount Sinai was the fascinating effect it had on Moses himself:

ימשה לא ידע כי קרן עור פניו בדברו אלו
As a result of the encounter with God, the face of Moses began to beam, and he himself was not aware of his radiance, or halo. So noticeable were the physical traces of this historic spiritual achievement, that ויראו מעשת אליו; Aaron and the elders and all Israel were afraid to approach Moses, so did his face glow.

Of course, that was a singular and unique event in the annals of mankind. Yet, in a measure of speaking, anyone who undergoes a spiritual experience of significance feels that he is in some way transformed or transfigured, and experiences a glow or radiance even if it be only internal.

People who are sincerely religious aspire to such a sensation. In addition to obedience, we inwardly yearn for some tremor, some sense of exaltation, something that will elevate us even momentarily beyond the humdrum of existence. That is especially true of the younger generation, those who look with amused contempt on the goals of achieving "the good things in life," which we, in the innocence of our youth, were told could be supplied by DuPont and a secure job. They are now benefitting from the affluence their parents' generation achieved. They take it for granted, and see that it is not all as satisfying as it was made out to be. And so they genuinely search for inspiration, for illumination, for a special feeling of transcendence. Unfortunately, they sometimes seek to satisfy these longings by artificial means -- mistaking the narcotic experience for an authentically spiritual one. Yet, the need and the desire is fairly universal.

How, then, does one achieve this?

Apparently, the Rabbis asked a similar question. In the Yalkut we read the question: מהיכן נטל משה קרני הוד? , from whence did Moses derive the rays of glory?

ברביא
הוא אומר מן הלוחות. ארכן של לוחות ששה
טפחים והיה משה מחזיק בשני טפחים, והקבה בשני טפחים
ושני טפחים דיווח באמצע ומשם נטל משה
קרני הוד.

R. Berechiah says that Moses derived the rays of glory from the Tablets. The Tablets were 6 tefahim (a tefah is the length of a human fist, about 4 inches) high. Now, Moses held on to 2 tefahim of the Tablets, and the Holy One held on to the 2 top tefahim of the Tablets. In the middle there were 2 that were ungrasped, either by Moses or by God. And from those 2 middle tefahim -- Moses derived his rays of glory!

I take this passage to mean that there are three areas of existence: the unattainable, the already attained, and the yet-to-be attained.

The two tefahim held by the Holy One ^{re}present the unattainable. Not everything in life is possible for man to achieve. In the 19th and early 20th century, when our civilization was intoxicated with the heady successes of science and technology, it naively believed that anything man wanted he could achieve, given enough funding for his research projects and the brains to carry them out. But this was the social and cultural analogue of the young adolescent, first feeling his muscles and overwhelmed with his potency. Maturity requires of us to banish any illusions of omnipotence. Judaism teaches us that not everything in the realm of the spirit (or any other area) is given to man to know and to attain. We are taught that humility and a sense of our physical limitations and spiritual finitude are the first step towards wisdom. Ben Sira exclaimed: בְּמוֹפְלֵא חֵמֶךָ אֵל תִּדְרֹשׁ, "in what is wonderous to thee shalt thou not inquire." The effort to wrest the secrets of God results only in dreadful failure. Over-ambitiousness in any area of life, the effort to over-reach into that which lies beyond the ken of humans, as a species or as individuals, leads to frustration and bitterness; not to a halo but to a hell of unhappiness.

The two tefahim that Moses held refers to successes already achieved. There are those, both individuals and organizations, who do nothing but revel in past accomplishments. Instead of concentrating on problems at hand, they delight in telling you about all the things they once did. This repetition, a litany of old and faded glories, is no way to achieve a halo. Stand on your dignity and you crush it. Rest on your laurels, and you flatten them. Complacency and smugness can never lead to inspiration. Past glories and successes are significant primarily insofar as they are a springboard for future creativity.

The area of life that does lead to radiance, to the glow of deserved satisfaction, comes from the גאון, the part inbetween, that which signifies the distance between the real and the ideal, between the possessed and the possible, between what the Israelis call הרצוי והמצוי. To try for more than I have already achieved, and push the limits of that which is at all achievable -- that is the way to attain the halo of success.

So it was with Moses. The spiritual level he had already achieved was not sufficient to give him his קרני הקוד, his rays of glory. The areas that were beyond human possibility, Moses was wise enough not to attempt. He did derive his radiance from his restlessness to achieve more than he did, but what he yet could.

All creativity consists, therefore, of two steps: of locating those two tefahim of "empty space," and of reaching for it. Whether it be in music or engineering, medicine or psychology, in history or matters of the spirit, it is important to know one's limits and to push at them.

Judaism, in all its branches, has never demanded of man that he be an angel. It never sets impossible demands upon him. It is one of the foundations of our faith that Torah and Halakhah are all achievable without surpassing the limits of human ability. It is possible, always possible, to live up to the standards of Torah. Torah does not ask us to strain ourselves beyond human limitations. But neither does Torah ever allow us to feel smug and self-righteous. It seeks to inculcate in us the feeling of dissatisfaction, of restlessness with present achievement. Hasidism put it this way: if you cannot be a zaddik, at least be a hasid of a zaddik!

If there is a single community of Jews who illustrate to me this attainment of the rays of glory as a result of pushing into the two tefahim of "empty space," it is -- Russian Jews. Consider the conditions under which they live -- the tyranny, the oppression, the fear, the risk. Yet, they marshall all their courage and their intelligence. They do not try to overthrow the Communist government, but they do try to get out to either Israel or America, to reestablish their lives as Jews. Their courage, their heroism, their bravery give them a halo. When I look upon a Russian-Jewish immigrant, whether in Israel or here -- and as long as I am here, I will never bring myself to pass judgment upon a Russian Jew who comes here instead of to Israel -- I see, almost visibly, a halo about his head.

This concept is something that is important to all parents. In raising our children, we sometimes tend to extremes. Occasionally, we see a child as an extension of ourselves, and we try to achieve through the child what we failed to do in our own lives. As a result, we may set goals that are too high, too exacting, too demanding, for the talents and abilities of a particular child. If we push too far, if we attempt to reach to "the two tefahim of the Holy One," we run the risk of psychologically destroying the child and ruining his self-confidence. The other extreme is a policy of laissez-faire: things will take care of themselves. We then allow a child to follow his own patterns of inertia and indolence, and we remain satisfied with the "two tefahim of Moses." If we fail to push just a bit beyond, if we fail to inspire and to urge and to encourage the child to transcend his present level, then we are permitting him to stagnate. The proper way, on the basis of the idea we have found in this passage, is to help a child, by inspiration and example, to exploit his latent talents and interests and abilities. That is how children develop the נרני הדוד, and give their parents the glow of what we call "nachas."

But above all else, this principle applies to the principle of Torah. I know that I sound like a broken record, but I believe it is my duty to repeat this at every occasion: no one has the moral right to call himself an Orthodox Jew if he merely observes the mitzvot. The most important mitzvah is -- Talmud Torah, the study of Torah. One who does not study the Torah at least once during the day and during the night -- or at the very barest minimum (and this is decidedly less than the Halakha demands) at least attend a she'ur, a lecture in Talmud or Torah once a week -- a person of this sort cannot call himself "Orthodox." Smugness and complacency in our own religious lives are not going to give us a feeling of satisfaction in our Judaism. Our problem is not trying too hard, but trying too little. And if we have not been attending sufficiently to the study of Torah -- our own study of Torah, not only that of our children -- perhaps these words will give us enough of a guilt feeling to try to improve our situation.

Perhaps a wonderful example of this glow of satisfaction, these נרני הדוד, is the feeling of warmth and enthusiasm and inspiration that came for those of us who joined in the first all-night Torah vigil on the eve of this Shavuot.

I was pleased beyond words that some 75-80 people stayed with us, studying Torah until about 1:30 or 2:00 in the morning, and that about 45 remained all night long, culminating in the Shacharit services at 4:30 to 6:30 A.M. Those who joined us were not even

conscious that time had passed. The text caught us up in its intellectual excitement, its spiritual insightfulness, and before we realized it, we had spent a whole night studying Torah. Everyone who was with us knows what I mean when I say that we experienced a bit, even if only infinitesimal, of the קרני הקודש which Moses felt when he reached out for those "two tefahim of empty space." We tried for empty space -- for that which we had not achieved or attempted before, but which was attainable by us -- and it certainly was worth it!

It is worth repeating, in this respect, a very well known Hasidic story. It is told of the saintly Hasidic master, R. Zusya, that when he was on his deathbed, his Hasidim noticed him weeping. "Why do you weep, O Rabbi?" they asked him. "I weep," he said, "because I fear having to come before the שולחן ערוך, the Heavenly Court." The Hasidim were puzzled: "You, O Rabbi, have to fear the judgment of Heaven? Do we not all know that you have led an exemplary and saintly life?"

"No, my children, you do not understand. I am not afraid that the heavenly Judge will ask me, 'Zusya, why were you not self-sacrificing like Abraham?' I will tell him, quite simply, 'I am not Abraham, I am only Zusya.' I am not afraid that He will say to me, 'Why were you not wise like R. Akiva?' I will tell him, 'I do not have the intellect of R. Akiva, I am only little Zusya.' But my great and overwhelming fear is, what shall I answer when the heavenly Judge says to me, 'Zusya, why were you not Zusya?'"

That is the great question. No one demands that we be more than we are, more than Zusya. But what we ultimately must answer for is why we never fulfilled all our expectations, why we never exploited all our potentialities, why Zusya was not Zusya.

At this time, on Shavuot and as we approach Yizkor, we are summoned to pause for that moment of reflection: are we wasting our energies striving for the impossible? Or are we-- what is more likely -- prone to be satisfied with "the two tefahim of Moses," with what we already have, ceasing all effort and inspiration and aspiration?

It is in a precious moment of this sort that the empty space on the Tablets beckons to us: reach for it, and glow. Rise -- and shine.