

Bat Mitzvah Dvar June 8, 2007 – 22 Sivan 5767

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Numbers 14 1-10

As we enter the Book of Numbers, Chapter 14, Israel is on the brink of entering the Promised Land. Scouts had been sent out to survey it; The Israelites had been given *carte blanche* to possess it, guaranteed by God. The stage is set for triumph. The good news: it was a good land, a VERY good land, “m’od, m’od”, milk and honey, tree-sized branches of giant grapes, surplus beyond their wildest dreams. The bad news: seemingly unbeatable odds against formidable enemies. It was a good land, it was their land, it was commanded by God that they take this land, and yet the Israelites “quailed” from the task (sorry: I just couldn’t resist). The commanded task represented triumph, “happily ever after”, it represented fulfillment, it meant their very survival—yet the task seemed too great, the enemy too numerous, too powerful, too entrenched to go forward.

The Israelites were afraid of the Anakites, the Amelekites, the Hittites, the Jebusites, the Amorites and Nephilim who populated the region they were to enter. This enemy was real, as real as the proof of plenty. Were the spies, returning with bounty, fearful and dispirited? They had been separated from their community and the relative comforts of camp to live by their own wits in the wilderness for forty days. Isolated from their support network, and without the spiritual reassurance of being close to Moses, Aaron, and their families, they dutifully reported the bounty; but looming greater in their eyes, greater than the Promised Land, was their certain doom at the hands of the hostile nations inhabiting it. Fear prevailed. A fear of annihilation by a numerous enemy that inhabited the land they were commanded to enter. Suddenly, the Promised Land they had been pursuing had become an overwhelming threat. Yet there was another enemy just as likely to kill them, the waiting and passive enemy that was the vast and hostile desert; and yet, the people were immobilized with fear.

There is an irony in this: how unconscious the Israelites were to their obvious, present danger, how much their lives were hanging by a Divine thread. After all, as dangerous as the inhabiting tribes were, the Israelites had been assured of victory by God. But they were surviving the equally hostile environs of the desert only by the grace of God delivering water and manna. The spies already had proof that God would sustain them—yet, they could not overcome their limitations of fear. They could not see that there was no “going back” to save themselves—truly, there was only going forward. Either circumstance—going forward to meet the hostile nations or going forward into a desolate wilderness—each represented a threat to survival. Still, the spies (and the soon-to-rebel Israelites) failed to see that what was sustaining them at present would have sustained them in the endeavors to come.

Sometimes it seems that a mitzvah is unreasonable, or too difficult to perform. We think we must turn back from it, forgo the blessing or the enlightenment, whatever would await us with its completion, because the task seems too huge or too frightening. What if we believed that there was a reason that it must be done, a reason that would be revealed to us in its doing? That the doing—in and of itself—WAS the mitzvah, not the outcome? We might lose our fear of doing it, and do it anyway. In our imperfect efforts, we would bring ourselves closer to perfection.

There are times in a life when one finds oneself wandering in the dangerous uncertainty and desolation of a desert. Sometimes we are faced with seemingly insurmountable obstacles, and we feel directionless and overwhelmed. When one's destiny appears pathless, the road endless, the spirit nearly empty. So we choose to better ourselves or change our circumstances, and sometimes we start down what appears to be a long and daunting road with no end in sight. The task may seem insurmountable. There is no comfort in saying, "yes, well, in a couple of years, this will all be behind you, and look how far you've come." We feel immobilized to begin. We cannot tolerate remaining stuck where we are, and yet moving into unknown challenges seems too great a risk. At these times, when we most need the comfort of faith, we are least likely to be able to grasp hold of it.

There is a saying among some counselors in the healing communities, to "act as if". Acting as if says, "Yes, well, of course you're too afraid to take the action you need to take. But what if you were a person of courage? What would that person do?" This expression represents an act of faith, an act of the imagination that permits us to go beyond ourselves. When faced with great adversity, when trying to overcome what appears to be overwhelming odds, sometimes it benefits us to "act as if". What does this mean?

It is easier, somehow, to imagine another person imbued with the characteristics we so desperately feel we lack to achieve a goal. We can't see ourselves making it, but we can imagine another person doing these things. "Acting as if" permits us to see an image of someone doing what we cannot do. And then, with this image in mind, we do it. We act as if we were the person with enough courage. It starts with one small thing, and then the next, and the next. Each item is not so big, in and of itself. Each item is doable. Soon we notice that we've stepped away from the desert. There are moments of reward and respite. We may not even notice that we ourselves are the ones who had courage. Just as we tend not to seek out God in the good times, we also tend not to credit ourselves with the fortitude we had to meet God halfway. A mitzvah is a commandment. We step forward on faith to achieve it. Faith is the act of creating a miracle. Miracles are not made by one alone; they take a partnership, an agreement between heaven and earth to accomplish them. Had the Israelites faced their fears, they would have circumvented much suffering, wandering, and the loss of a generation. When we meet God halfway, with faith and courage, we can create a miracle.