

“If You Build It God Will Come: The Operative Word Is ‘Build’”
February 20, 2010 / 6 Adar 5770
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Malcolm Gladwell once again shares an incredibly simple but dead-on observation in his newest insightful examination of the way the world really works entitled, *Outliers*. If you want mastery in your life you better be prepared to work for it. Gladwell writes: “If you want to get better at something – say writing or playing tennis – there are many ways to build your skills: you can take a class, wake up every morning at 6:00 AM and meditate, read books, interview experts, get an entry-level job in the field or be a genius.”

Yet, no matter what asymptotic magic tricks you stumble upon, there’s no substitute for good, old-fashioned practice-makes-perfect. True experts, the real-deal human beings who shake things up in the world, are not just shrewd managers of super-advanced strategies for success. Although it certainly helps, they aren’t always gifted with lucky breaks early on and they’re rarely geniuses. More than anything else, experts are hard-working people who practice a lot.

The idea that excellence at performing a complex task requires a critical minimal level of practice, surfaces again and again in studies of expertise. In fact, researchers have settled on what they believe is the magic number for true expertise: ten thousand hours.

“The emerging picture from such studies is that ten thousand hours of practice is required to achieve the level of mastery associated with being a world-class expert – in anything,” writes the neurologist Daniel Levitin. “In study after study, of composers, basketball players, fiction writers, ice skaters, concert pianists, chess players, master criminals, and what have you, this number comes up again and again. To date, no one has yet found a case in which true world-class expertise was accomplished in less time. It seems that it takes the brain this long to assimilate all that it needs to know to achieve true mastery... This is true even of people we think of as prodigies.” (Malcom Gladwell’s *Outliers: The Story of Success*)

As we find ourselves watching the emerging drama of the 2010 Winter Olympics, I find myself wondering about the amount of time each athlete has put into their sport to achieve their level of success. Each has reached the pinnacle of achievement for their home country and each may be thinking of the gold, silver or bronze medals. No matter, there’s much more to the games than medal counts. Each athlete has attained something far more valuable than the precious medals they carry. These medals have been transformed from currency or coins to symbols of achievement and, in doing so, these medals become more valuable than their actual weight.

When the Hebrews are asked in this week’s reading, “*tikchu meitam zahav, kesef unichoshet*,” take from them their gold, silver and copper, we begin to recognize the donation that is being sought. On the backdrop of the Olympics, the request is really for something of personal value which far exceeds the value of any material possession. The request that is really being made is that people give something they have worked hard to acquire, something that is worth more than its weight in gold.

You can imagine how slave people must have felt, people not having any personal possessions for well over 200 years. Finally, after finding this wealth, they are asked to give some of it up. These are a people who struggled hard for their liberty and their wealth and now they are asked to part with some of it. However, if we focus only on that aspect of the request then we have missed the point. Isn't that so often the case? When money is at stake we lose sight of everything else. When the gold, silver and bronze medals flash before our eyes, we forget everything else. The Olympics, like the building of the Tabernacle described in this week's reading, are not about the medals. In fact, the vast majority of the athletes will never win a medal and many don't even have that as a goal.

As the US pairs skating couple of Caydee Denney and Amanda Evora remarked after their performance of the short program, "We're just happy to be here. Our goal was getting here. Maybe there will be a medal at some future time but for now we are pleased to have represented our country." I couldn't help but notice that this wasn't just a line they were giving because you could see the pride and joy of the competition on their faces. The dedication, devotion and commitment are obvious in the face of every athlete. This effort, combined with the efforts of so many others produces results wherein every citizen of every participating country should find great satisfaction.

This morning's reading also asks us not to solely or prominently highlight the gold, silver and bronze in the discussion before us. To do so would be to miss the point. The metric for success cannot and should not ever be measured in gold, silver or bronze.

For a moment, please look with me at the parasha. Open to page 485 which is Chapter 25 of the book of Exodus as well as the opening of this week's reading. The root word I want you to see is *eyin, sin heh*, in Hebrew *asah*, or *asu*, or *asita*. In English it means, "To make do." I ask you to count how many times that word, in one form or another, appears in this chapter. I counted no less than 15 times. In fact, the first words of the portion instruct us that the project of building the tabernacle ought to be the main focus, not the tabernacle itself. It is the process of coming together and making an individual contribution, making a decision and then following through with that decision, which truly means that you will be a part of this national project. This is far more important than the final project.

In one form or another we are implored to get involved, to build, to make, to construct, to fashion, to do...something. So it becomes clear that if, *asu li mikdash v'shachanti b'tocham*, we want to build a tabernacle so that God can live with us and live within us, we are going to have to build it ourselves. We are going to have to create that place.

One of the great Hasidic masters, Menachem Mendel of Kotzk, famously asked a learned man who was visiting him, "Where does God dwell?" You or I might readily answer, "Everywhere." The visitor put that more eloquently, alluding to the Psalms: "Is not the whole Earth full of God's glory?" With a bit less sophistication, a child might say, "Here, in the Sanctuary." With a different but equally Jewish mindset someone might say, "In Jerusalem." None of these are bad answers but the rabbi who was aware of non-believers, oppression, poverty, crime, war, suffering, and of all sins major and minor, had a better answer. "Where does God dwell? Wherever we let Him in."

So, to the great Hassidic Rebbe Menachem Mendle of Kotzke, I add only effort, dedication, commitment, and devotion. Often I hear the complaint that I don't feel anything when I come to services. I want a spiritual experience but I don't find it. So often I have heard the concern that I don't have a community, I don't have deep relationships. To which I ask, have you really built the place? Have you really created the space? How much energy have you invested? Have you put in the time?

Let me give you just one example. If we take seriously the equation of Malcolm Gladwell that it takes 10,000 hours to achieve mastery and if you come to services every Shabbat from 10:30 AM to 12:00 PM every week for ten months out of the year, at that rate you will have to attend services for 166 years to master the experience. Now, double the amount of time you spend in services and it would still take you more than 83 years. So, if we take seriously the idea that it takes 10,000 hours to become truly masterful, then we are going to have to re-examine our priorities and re-evaluate our expectations. There are some short cuts that we can take. Again I remind you of the words I opened with this morning. "You can take a class or wake-up every morning at 6:00 AM and meditate. You can read books or interview experts. You can get an entry-level job in the field or be a genius. No matter what asymptotic magic tricks you stumble upon, there's no substitute for good, old-fashioned practice-makes-perfect.

True experts, the real-deal human beings who shake things up in the world, are not simply shrewd managers of super-advanced strategies for success. Although it certainly helps, they aren't always gifted with lucky breaks early on either – and they're rarely geniuses. More than anything else, experts are hard-working people who practice a lot.

If you want success in relationships, if you want success in being part of a community, if you want a connection with God, then you are going to have put in the time. There are going to be setbacks, there are going to be missteps and disappointments – that is part of life. Progress isn't linear. The Jewish people of the wilderness have the sin of the golden calf. We, too, will make our own mistakes – but that must be viewed as an opportunity to re-evaluate, re-examine and re-commit ourselves.