

“Achieving Greatness Begins in Believing It”

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Rabbi Jay M. Stein

A few months before ordination, senior rabbis from all over the country come to the Seminary in search of the appropriate assistant rabbi for their congregation. Although my father had strongly dissuaded me from applying to become an assistant rabbi, I signed up for one interview with the senior rabbi of a congregation in the suburbs of Chicago. The placement director strongly discouraged me from setting the interview because he felt I was not the best candidate for that prestigious congregation. However, I signed the interview schedule anyway because I thought what could be the worst thing to happen. I would have a nice half-hour conversation with Rabbi Vernon Kurtz and then we would both be on our way. As it turned out, we hit it off pretty well and then as they say, “The rest is history.”

After a few months in this suburban Chicago congregation, my parents came to visit. While driving them to the airport after their visit, my father remarked, “You live in Disney World.” It was his way of saying, “This isn’t real.” This is an unbelievable congregation but it is not like the real world of the conservative rabbinate. There are very few who get to occupy these pulpits. Subtly he was saying exactly what the placement director had said, “Don’t get used to this because you are just the assistant and at some point you will have to leave and go out into the real world. There are only a few who occupy such places of honor – and you won’t be one of them.” As my father had done so often throughout my life, he was trying to ease the pain that reality often brings.

Very few are fortunate to arrive at the top of their professions and my father didn’t want me to get discouraged in the event that I wasn’t one of them. After all, I am my father’s son. The son of a rabbi who changed lives, a rabbi who brought great comfort, the son of a rabbi who taught brilliant classes all from the medium size bimah of Bridgeport, CT. Maybe we weren’t meant for the great pulpits of the Simon Greenberg’s of the world, the “bog-stage,” so to speak. However, from the day I stepped out in front of the overflow service at North Suburban Synagogue Beth El of Highland Park, IL, I knew I was destined for greatness. Do you know why? It was because my wife told me so. All kidding aside, I heard the voice inside my head all along. I knew mediocrity would not suffice.

I sat at the back of my classes all through school, dreaming of the great man I would become. I thought of the great things I would accomplish. As I grew, the specifics changed. When I got married I knew that I would try to become the best husband. (Still more work to be done.) When we had children I set my sights on fatherhood. (Still more work to be done.) All along I continued to return to the dream of the rabbinate, and given the length of years in all of these arenas, I will achieve my dreams. I always knew there was something special about me, there was something different about me and today I am here to tell you, there is something special about you, there is something different about you. However, you don’t need me to tell you everything is possible. Our tradition is filled with examples of people who overachieved.

This week's reading brings us to Joshua because he will succeed Moses when he dies. I can only imagine what it must have been like for Joshua to assume this mantle of leadership after the greatest leader of all time. All Joshua needed to do was to look at the example of Moses and he, too, would be inspired toward greatness. Moses began as a shepherd with a speech impediment, yet he still he rose to greatness. He must have thought it was possible.

We know that even though Moses protested to God and the people about his abilities, inside he must have had an inclination that he was destined for something great. His greatness wasn't measured in years, yet it is the number of years that he lived which has become the marker for a full life. Today, when we offer wishes for a long life, we say, "May you live to be one hundred and twenty years," This is a reference to Moses who lived 120 years.

The remarkable thing about the 120 years is that it isn't the longest life noted in the Torah. We know Jacob lived to 147, Abraham lived to 175 and Isaac lived to 180. Therefore, we note that the wish of living to 120 cannot possibly be about length of years, but rather it must be about the type of life lived during those 120 years.

The text then offers Moses' commentary, "*Lo oochal od lavo v'latzeet* - I just can't do it anymore." Moses tells us that he has lived a full life and accomplished a great deal. He has conquered personal challenges and overcome powerful enemies. Moses has done so much, but now he is finished. The Talmud, (Sotah 13a) commenting on Moses arriving at this stage in his life, tells us how Moses used to run to the task before him with great energy and capacity, able to take 12 strides in one step. Now he cannot. The Talmud said he used to have great insight but his mental acuity has now diminished. The Talmud also remarks that Moses had lost a step and was starting to lose touch. It was time for him to go.

We can understand that. We have all known, heard about, or loved someone who has out-lived their capacity. We also know of those who have lost all quality of life, yet are still alive. "Moses," says the text, "begins to realize this and is blessed to be able to go." Not everyone is so fortunate. What is most amazing and instructive in this Talmud conversation is not the timely coordination of Moses' death but the fact that this example of Moses' death is brought about amidst a discussion of "What is enough in life?"

The Talmud begins by asking, "Who could be greater than Moses? When answering its own question, it says, "*V'yomer adonai elai, rav licha* – and God said to Moses, "It is enough." (Deuteronomy 3:26) God said to Moses, "It is enough. You have lived long enough. You have done enough." In answering the question, "Why does Moses die?" The answer is, "He had accomplished enough."

When we reach our potential, wouldn't it be great if a voice would come down from heaven letting us know. I often wonder if that would be enough. How many of us driven to succeed, would, upon hearing the news that we have achieved all that we could, would respond by saying, "All right, now I will sit down and relax." On the other hand, how many who have given up already, would have worked harder if we had known that at some point a voice would let us

know when we could stop the struggle. You see, the problem with potential is you never know what it is.

When I was growing up, measuring ones IQ was in vogue. It was as if one could measure the potential of an individual by a series of metrics and markers. We found little correlation between the intelligence quotient and the capacity for achievement. Then we thought to measure emotional intelligence and found that this might give us greater insight into how we relate to one another, again missing the mark for achieving success. The problem with all of these tests is success has always been measured in output or career success.

However, in this season of the year, on this Shabbat between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, we are asked, “What is real success in life?” What does success look like and when do we have enough? Are we living a meaningful life? Are we living lives of connection with God? Are we fulfilling God’s plan for bringing us one step closer to a messianic age, repairing our fractured world? So, we must ask the impossible question, “Have we done enough?” So, to the second question I offer this answer, “Until you have heard the voice, keep working at it.”

Now, if we could only figure out which voice to listen to. Have you chosen to listen to the voice of people in your past, people who have told you that you can’t do something. Have you chosen to listen to those negative detracting voices? Have you chosen to listen to those people who love you and care about you but might not really understand you? Have you chosen to ignore those voices that understand you but ask more of you than you think you are capable of?

This season of the year is about making choices and it offers us plenty of time for reflection and for listening to an inner voice. I believe that is God speaking to you in your heart, because it is only God that knows our true potential. Every day I have occupied this pulpit, I have enjoyed it so it isn’t over yet, because I still hear the voice. The voice of God urging me forward, on to the next challenge. There is no question that I heard the sounds coming from the mouths of people telling me to set my sights a little lower so I would not be disappointed, but each time I have channeled that comment into motivation.

We have incredible potential. We have God-given talents and the world needs our contribution.