To Him Who is Prepared…

by

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*Before anything else, preparation is the key to success*

*-* Alexander Graham Bell

*Dayeinu!*

Had He brought us to Mount Sinai,

And not given us the Torah,

It would have been enough for us!

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There is an old Chinese proverb that states, “May you live in interesting times.” On their face, these words might seem like a blessing but, in fact, they bely a curse, a curse which is to a great degree, self-imposed. Interesting times imply uncertainty and few things invite uncertainty as lack of preparation.

It is possible to be the beneficiary of a calm moment in history and squander it. Likewise, you can live in challenging times and find meaning. The difference is preparation. The genius of Joseph’s interpretation of Pharaoh’s dream was not his understanding of the symbolism in the dreams but the ability to then instruct Pharaoh to *use that insight* to prepare for the lean years, thereby saving his people from famine.

Preparation.

In our own time, we find ourselves witness to a new administration which – agree or disagree with its underlying perspective or positions – is proving itself to be woefully unprepared for the task of governance.

I know it is not only me, but the new administration has me feeling tense, anxious, jittery, and ill-at-ease. What will the next impulsive tweet convey? Who is the next “so-called judge” or “dumb” world leader? What Executive Order will next plunge the country into paroxysm of chaos – no matter the underlying policy or possible justification?

More than policy or political perspective, the thing that has the country on edge is the very obvious *lack of preparation* exhibited by the administration. And *that* is enough – more than enough – to set off alarms.

The climax of Parshat Yitro is the most significant event in all of Jewish history, the giving of the Torah. And yet, the bulk of Chapter 19 is devoted not to the event itself but *the preparation* for the event. The Talmud (Shabbos 86b) suggests that Moshe decided on his own that Israel needed more than two days to prepare for this incredible event so he instructed the people to prepare for three full days.

Prepare!

God tells Moshe to instruct the nation, *V’kidashtam* – sanctify them today and tomorrow and then shall wash their clothing. Let them *be prepared* for the third day...” Rashi understands the command to mean “simply prepare” (*sh’yachinu atzmam*). That is, in his understanding to prepare is to avoid spiritual contamination (avoided sexual activity). Ibn Ezra interprets the term to mean the people were to immerse themselves in the mikvah. Onkelos understands the instruction to mean literally washing their clothing for cleanliness so the people can honor this most auspicious of occasions. What all three share is the need *to be ready*.

Further, Moshe was commanded to set fixed limits around the mountain beyond which no one and nothing was to trespass. Every living thing had to, quite literally, know his place.

It is telling that in the Torah, where *every word and every letter* is sacred an entire chapter is devoted to this preparation. Nothing of worth – and *all of life* should have worth – should be approached without preparation. This is true from the simple (don’t we pack carefully in anticipation for the place and needs of where we travel?) to the complex (where surgeons review each surgery over and over and over again *before* performing a single incision to make sure that the outcome is successful.)

Just “showing up” misses the boat.

How many hours does a great hitter spend in the batting cage? How many hours does a great basketball player spend alone in the gym, launching shot after shot after shot? How many practice sessions does the ballerina spend at the barre before attempting a single leap on the stage?

There is a word for a “great” performance accomplished without preparation – dumb luck. The truth is that true greatness is manifested not so much in the ultimate performance but in the determination and preparation spent leading up to that performance.

*Dayeinu*.

Had God brought us out of Mitzrayim but not brought us to Mount Sinai, it would have been enough.

Had God brought us to Mount Sinai but not delivered to us the Torah, it would have been enough.

Inherent in *dayeinu* is Rabbi Soloveichik’s profound insight. Onkelos translates *v’kidashtam*  to mean “preparation.” Rabbi Soloveichik anchors the term to its Hebrew root, which means “holiness”. To Rabbi Soloveichik, holiness *is* preparation and preparation *is* holiness. In this understanding, holiness is not a transcendental phenomenon which is gifted to us. It is not a burden or blessing we bear against our will. We must want it, we must work for it, we must *prepare* for it.

But what does it mean to prepare? There are many, many perspectives on how best to prepare but most of the various perspectives can be boiled down to a few universal steps.

1. Understand what you want to accomplish.
2. In mapping out a plan to move toward your goals, are there examples of others who have accomplished similar goals. There is no need to “reinvent the wheel”! Use time-tested methods for success.
3. Have a “Plan B”
4. Understand the interests of others who might be involved and take them into account.
5. Have a thoughtful, mapped out strategy.

These steps, adapted to individual situations, work as well for the laborer and house painter as they do for the scholar or even the governmental leader. They add up to being prepared.

Our long and cherished tradition of preparedness speaks even to our daily prayer. A pious man was once asked – what do you do before you pray? With deep sincerity he responded, “ I pray that when I pray, I may pray with all my heart”. Our tradition teaches us exactly what that means. To prepare to stand before God in prayer, one needs to fully accept upon oneself the mitzvah of *v’haavta l’reiach ka’mocha* – love your neighbor as yourself.

How powerful is that! In order to prepare to pray with full meaning and devotion, I must be willing to bone with all Jews. We pray to God in the plural, as a community. So it makes perfect sense that preparing to pray, like preparing to receive the Torah, asks of me that I embrace the community. I must love my fellow Jews.

Who among us does, in fact, love *all* our fellow Jews? None of us. Therefore, we are always somewhat deficient in our prayer, we are always *preparing*; we are always on the journey, never quite reaching the exalted destination.

*Dayeinu*

It was at the foot of Sinai that we needed to purify our minds and bodies; there that we had to prepare to embrace this heightened relationship with God. The very act of preparation created and demanded the awe, fear and trembling that reached its apex with the giving of the Torah. The preparation was no less significant than the actual receiving of the Torah. Indeed, it was the preparation which enabled us to appreciate the incredible gift we received.

Only one who adequately and fully anticipates and prepares for a major event or experience is able to fully appreciate and cherish the event itself.

Our leaders would be wise to reflect on these thoughts as they seek to govern. Absent preparation, even the best intentions are sure to go wrong.

*Dayeinu*