Choose Life: Holy Day Conversations II
From the Ziegler School of Rabbinic Studies

Accompanying Texts For Study and Discussion Groups

1) WHAT ARE WE PRAYING FOR THIS YEAR (Rabbis Brad Artson, David Wolpe and Ed Feinstein)

"Open the gates of righteousness for me": In the next world (time of judgement) everyone will be asked, "What was your occupation (or job)? Your work in the world?"

If the person answers, "I fed the hungry," they [angels] will say back, "This is God's gate. You, feeder of the hungry, enter."

If the person answers, "I gave water to the thirsty," they will say back, "This is God's gate. You, giver of water to the thirsty, enter."
[If the person answers], "I clothed the naked," they will say back, "This is God's gate. You, who gave clothing to the naked, enter."

And the same for those who raised orphans, performed acts of tzedakah, and embraced acts of loving-kindness....

**Questions:** What is YOUR occupation? What would be on your resume? How would you answer this in light of this midrash?

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**Pirkei Avot 6:9**

Rabbi Yossi b. Kisma said: Once I was traveling on a journey and I came across a certain person. We greeted one another, and he said to me, "Rabbi, from where are you coming?" I answered, "From a great city of scholars and sages." He replied, "If it would please you to live in our community, I would compensate you with thousands of gold dinarim, precious gems, stones and pearls." I replied, "Even though you would give me unlimited silver, gold, precious stones, and pearls... I would not live anywhere except in a community where there is Torah."

**Questions:** What is wealth according to this rabbinic source? How would you define Torah according to this text? How do you read this text in light of the DVD conversation on mentorship, growth and ideals?
Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Essays -- First Series*

Our strength grows out of our weakness. Not until we are pricked and stung and sorely shot at, awakens the indignation which arms itself with secret forces. A great man is always willing to be little. Whilst he sits on the cushion of advantages, he goes to sleep. When he is pushed, tormented, defeated, he has a chance to learn something; he has been put on his wits, on his manhood; he has gained facts; learns his ignorance; is cured of the insanity of conceit; has got moderation and real skill.

R. Abraham Joshua Heschel, *Between God and Man, 72*

In our own lives the voice of God speaks slowly, a syllable at a time. Reaching the peak of years, dispelling some of our intimate illusions and learning how to spell the meaning of life-experiences backwards, some of us discover how the scattered syllables form a single phrase. Those who know that this life of ours takes place in a world that is not all to be explained in human terms; that every moment is a carefully concealed act of His creation, cannot but ask: is there anything within His voice is not suppressed? Is there anything wherein His creation is not concealed?
2) SOCIAL JUSTICE, COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT, AND JEWISH VALUES (Rabbis Brad Artson, Harold Schulweis, and Sharon Brous)

Babylonian Talmud, Berakhot, 32a

“And the Lord spoke to Moses, You go down at once” (Exo. 32:7). (While the two witness the events of the golden calf)

What is the meaning of “You go down at once”? [This question is asked because, in fact, Moshe does not go down and directly follow God's order.] R. Eleazar said: The Holy One, blessed be he, said to Moses, "Moses, go down from your position of greatness. Have I made you great for any reason other than for Israel? Now that Israel have sinned, what do I need you for?" Then Moses grew weak and did not have the power to speak. When he said to him, "Let me alone that I may destroy them" (Deu. 9:14), Moses thought, "This matter now depends on me." Then the two witness the events of the golden calf.

He [Moses] immediately stood and became strong in prayer and sought mercy. The matter may be compared to the case of a king who grew angry with his son and was physically punishing
him. The king’s friend was sitting before him, afraid to say anything to him. The king said, "Were my friend not here, sitting before me, I should have killed him." The other realized, "This matter depends on me." He then stood up and saved [the son].

"Let me alone, then, that my wrath may blaze up against them and destroy them. Then I will make of you a great nation." (Exo. 32:10)

R. Abbahu said: Were it not a that verse of Torah fully spelled it, it would never have been possible to make such a statement. The verse teaches that Moses seized the Holy One, blessed be he, like a man who grabs his friend by his garment. He said to him, "Lord of the world, I shall not let you go until you forgive and pardon them."

“And I will make of you a great nation” (Exo. 32:10):

R. Eleazar said: Moses said before the Holy One, blessed be he,"Lord of the age, now if a stool with three legs cannot stand against you when you are angry, a stool with only one leg [that is, Moses] surely should not be able to stand! Not only so, but I have to be humbled before my forefathers, for now they will say, 'See how the provider whom he set up over them seeks greatness for himself and does not seek mercy for them!""

“And Moses implored (ויחל) the Lord his God” (Exo. 32:11):

R. Eleazar said: This verse teaches that Moses stood in prayer before the Holy One, blessed be he, until he had exhausted him....

And Samuel said: This verse teaches that he gave himself up to death in their behalf. For it is written: "And if not [if you won't forgive Israel's sin], erase me, I pray you, out of the book which you have written’ (Exo. 32:32)."

Raba said in the name of R. Isaac: This verse teaches that he made the attribute of mercy rest on them.”

And the Rabbis say: This verse [32:11] teaches that Moses said before the Holy One, blessed be he, "Lord of everything, it would be profane (or, perfectly common) of you to do such a thing."

**Questions:** What is the relationship between Moshe and God according to this long text? Is this 'Moshe' a paradigm for all humanity? Or only leaders? Is Moshe humble or bold in this text? Or both? How?
Some porters broke the wine keg of Rabbah bar bar Chanan. He took their cloaks.

They took the matter before Rav. He [Rav] told Rabbah, "Give them back their cloaks."

Rabbah said, "Is that the law?!"

Rav answered, "Yes! [as the verse teaches] 'So that you walk in the way of the worthy.'" (Proverbs 2:20)

They [porters] were given back their cloaks. Then the porters further said, "We are poor people. We we worked all day and are bent over [from the work], yet we have nothing to show for it [we didn't get paid]."

Rav said to Rabbah, "Go, pay their wages."

Rabbah said, "Is that the law?!"

Rav answered, "Yes! [as the verse teaches] '...and keep to the paths of the just.'" [Proverbs 2:20]

Questions: Do the porters deserve their cloaks back? To get paid? What is the guiding principle behind this text?

Whoever can prevent her household from committing a sin but does not, is held responsible for the sins of her household; if she can prevent the people of her city [from sinning], she is held responsible for the sins of her city; if the whole world, she is held responsible for the sins of the whole world.
...To pray to God who brings peace on earth as He does on high without lifting our voice or finger to struggle for peace trivializes the function of the prayer for peace. There is nothing we can rightly pray for that does not make demands on us. The object of petition is to energize us to act outside the threshold of the sanctuary.