Improving the World, One Person at a Time

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Angel for Shabbat, Parashat Shemini

by Rabbi Marc D. Angel

Aaron the High Priest was called upon to officiate at the sacrificial service of the Tabernacle. This was obviously a special moment in his leadership and he surely should have been eager to fulfill God's will. Yet, the Torah indicates that Moses spoke to Aaron: approach the altar and perform the necessary rites (Vayikra 9:7). The famous commentator, Rashi, offers an explanation as to why Aaron needed this extra prodding from Moses. "Because Aaron was diffident and afraid to approach. Moses said to him: why are you diffident? You were chosen for this."

One explanation for Aaron's diffidence is that he was a genuinely humble person, and felt himself unworthy of the honor and responsibility conferred upon him. This is a tribute to his fine character. He did not seek glory or public accolades; he preferred to be a quiet, private person out of the limelight. Moses had to remind Aaron: you must overcome your reluctance, you are qualified to do this work, you were chosen to be the High Priest.

My grandfather Marco Romey used to tell us: everyone is put on earth with a mission to fulfill. We are each "chosen" to do something with the particular talents and insights that the Almighty has given us. People fail in life because they don't realize that they have a mission, or because they don't feel they have the capacity to do great things. We all need to be reminded (as Aaron was reminded by Moses): don't be diffident, you were chosen to fulfill a mission, you can do important and great things. One person really can make a difference.

We need to focus on what our "mission" in life is--as Jews and as human beings. What are our particular strengths and weaknesses, where can we make the most positive impact, how can we organize our lives in a way most conducive to fulfilling our mission? We also need to overcome feelings of powerlessness and inadequacy. We should not internalize the notion that other people (no matter how great and learned) know better than we ourselves how we can best fulfill our lives. The process of identifying our "mission" requires much serious and candid thought; and then it requires the courage to act in a responsible way to make our lives--and the lives of others--better, happier, more meaningful.

We also need to remind ourselves that "great" things are often accomplished quietly and privately, through acts of idealism, generosity of spirit, compassion. A kind word, a thoughtful deed, a loving affirmation--these can give untold happiness and meaningfulness to others, as well as deep satisfaction to ourselves. Some years ago I read an article about people who were asked to list the ten people they most admired. While some of the respondents listed famous politicians or wealthy philanthropists, all of them listed family members, clergy, teachers, friends who had helped them through difficult times. Whom do we most admire? Why do we admire them? How can we emulate them in our own lives?

Can one person really make a difference? The surprising answer is: Yes. If that person understands his/her mission and has the courage to strive to achieve it, the answer is: Yes. If that person recognizes that spiritual greatness can be achieved through idealism, kindness, compassion and service to others, the answer is: Yes. If that person seeks righteousness and walks humbly with God, the answer is: Yes.

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