Good Intentions Are Not Good Enough: Thoughts for Behar/Behukotai

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By
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Angel for Shabbat, Behar/Behukotai

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I once asked a member of our Congregation if he would attend our weekday morning minyan and become part of our growing "minyan team". He responded: "I would love to attend minyan, but I am not able to do so since I must be at my office early in the morning. With the Lord's help, I'll join the minyan in the future."

Some years later, when I learned that this gentleman had just retired from his work, I called him again, inviting him to attend our weekday morning minyan. He answered: "For all these years, I've had to wake up early to go to my office. Now that I'm retired, I can finally sleep late. So I'm not able to attend morning minyan now, but with the Lord's help, I'll join the minyan in the future."

This gentleman thought that "with the Lord's help" he would one day attend minyan. That day never came. The man passed away years later, without ever having made it to our minyan even once.

In "The Heart of Man," Erich Fromm wrote that "most people fail in the art of living not because they are inherently bad or so without will that they cannot live a better life; they fail because they do not wake up and see when they stand at a fork in the road and have to decide."

We all may have good intentions; but we also have the uncanny ability to come up with rationalizations why we cannot fulfill these good intentions. We find excuses justifying why we can't attend minyan, or can't contribute more to charity, or can't spend time learning Torah, or can't find more time to spend with our families, or can't invite guests to our homes etc. We fail, not because we are bad, but because we don't take control of our lives, we don't have the will-power to make decisions and to act on them. We drift along in our routines, hoping that "with the Lord's help", we'll change our patterns for the better in the future.

This week's Parasha brings us to the end of the book of Vayikra. It is customary in some congregations for congregants to call out at the conclusion of Behukotai: "Hazak ve-nit-hazak, hizku ve-ya-ametz levavhem kol ha-myahalim la-do-nai." Be strong, and let us strengthen ourselves; be strong and let your heart have courage, all you who hope in the Lord. This is a way of celebrating the completion of a book of the Torah, and encouraging us to continue in the path of Torah study so we may complete other books as well.

I think that a phrase from the above-quoted text can be interpreted as follows: hizku--strengthen yourselves, be resolute; ve- ye-ametz levavhem--and God will give courage to your hearts. First, you need to strengthen yourselves, make decisions, start to take action. Then, God will give you the added fortitude to fulfill your goals. We need to take the initiative; we need to demonstrate resolution; we need to assume responsibility. If we strengthen ourselves, we may trust that the Almighty will give us added strength.

If people fail in life because they don't realize they are at a fork in the road and must make a decision, they succeed in life because they do realize that they must take responsibility and must act--and they do!

Angel for Shabbat