I Want it NOW!!!--Thoughts on Parashat Toledot, November 26, 2011

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I have been reading a new book by Israeli Nobel Prize Winner Dr. Daniel Kahneman, “Thinking, Fast and Slow” (Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, New York, 2011). On p. 47, he cites a fascinating psychological experiment conducted some years ago by Walter Mischel and his students.

A group of four-year-old children were given a choice between a small reward (one Oreo cookie) which they could have at any time, or a larger reward (two cookies) for which they had to wait 15 minutes under difficult conditions. They were to remain alone in a room, facing a desk with two objects: a single cookie and a bell that the child could ring at any time to call in the experimenter and receive the one cookie. The room had no toys, books or other potentially distracting items, so the children had to deal directly with the temptation to eat one cookie or to wait 15 minutes and thus be rewarded with two cookies. About half the children managed to wait the 15 minutes.

Dr. Kahneman reports on the follow up of this experiment: “Ten or fifteen years later, a large gap had opened between those who had resisted temptation and those who had not. The resisters had higher measures of executive control in cognitive tasks, and especially the ability to reallocate their attention effectively. As young adults, they were less likely to take drugs. A significant difference in intellectual aptitude emerged: the children who had shown more self-control as four-year-olds had substantially higher scores on tests of intelligence.”

This and other psychological experiments have demonstrated a strong correlation between self-control and personal development. Those who want instant gratification tend to under-perform in major aspects of life; those who are able to be patient often achieve greater rewards and self-fulfillment. One who can keep focused on larger goals, avoiding immediate diversionary temptations, has a far greater likelihood of living happily and successfully.

This discussion sheds light on this week’s Torah portion. Our forefather Isaac preferred his son Esau over his son Jacob. He thought Esau had the strength to be

a real leader of people, while Jacob was a quiet boy who stayed close to home. Yet, the Torah describes Esau as an impetuous, tempestuous personality. When he came home from hunting, he was hungry. He wanted his food NOW. He excitedly said that if he didn't get his food right away, he would die! He sold his birthright for a bowl of lentil soup.

Esau was a classic example of one who wants instant gratification, and who cannot defer his immediate desires to achieve a larger or better goal. To him, satisfaction of his momentary hunger was more pressing than the long-range goal of inheriting the birthright and becoming the next link in the family's leadership.

Esau was stronger than Jacob. Esau was more energetic and more physically active than Jacob. But Esau is described as someone who says: I want it NOW! I can't wait. I'll take a bowl of soup now, rather than wait to inherit the birthright. He was like the child who chose one Oreo, instead of waiting fifteen minutes to get two cookies.

Esau's impetuosity was his undoing. It undermined his personal development and ultimately allowed the family leadership to devolve upon his younger brother, Jacob. Although Jacob was weaker and quieter than Esau, Jacob was able to keep focus, putting off immediate gratification in order to attain larger goals. Isaac came to realize that his wife, Rebecca, had made a sounder judgment about the future of their sons; she had understood that the quiet strengths of Jacob would eventually prevail over the impetuous strengths of Esau.

It often has been pointed out that the regimen of mitzvoth teaches us self-control and self-discipline. We may be tempted to eat this food or that food: but the mitzvoth instruct us to wait until we have kasher food and until we recite the appropriate blessings. We may be tempted to do this or that deed: but the mitzvoth instruct us to refrain from work on Shabbat and holidays, to refrain from immodest and unjust behaviors, to put off immediate "gains" for long term commitment to our ideals and values. In short, the mitzvoth serve as a basic framework for helping us to fulfill our potentials, and to lead happy and meaningful lives. They teach us to avoid impetuosity and immediate gratification, and to stay focused on our long range goals of living righteous and good lives.

Some people succumb to the "I want it NOW' syndrome; and most such people ultimately undermine their own potential success and happiness. The Torah and mitzvoth teach us to maintain our self-control and self-respect. If we keep in mind the vision of our ultimate goals and aspirations—and if we can be strong enough to overcome diversionary temptations—we can hope to achieve a life of personal fulfillment and happiness.

Angel for Shabbat