Religious Aspirations and the Entrepreneurial Spirit: Thoughts for Parashat Re’eh

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Angel for Shabbat, Parashat Re'eh
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Some time ago, I met with a friend who is a very successful entrepreneur who deals with top people at leading high-tech companies such as Microsoft, Google and Amazon. He told me that when these companies look to hire new employees, they especially value applicants with entrepreneurial experience—even if these applicants had run their own businesses and failed!

Why would they want to hire “failed” entrepreneurs?

My friend explained: a high percentage of start-up companies fail. To start such businesses requires imagination, risk-taking ability, creativity, hard work. These are exactly the qualities the big high-tech companies are looking for. Even if the entrepreneurs failed in their own businesses, yet they have demonstrated unique courage and willingness to think “out of the box.” They showed that they were willing to try something new and to invest their lives in it.

If people are willing to think imaginatively and to work hard at developing their plans, they increase their odds of success. Even if their original businesses did not turn out well, they eventually can find the right framework for their talents and energies.

It is not “failure” to have high aspirations that one has not fulfilled. It is failure for one not to have had high aspirations in the first place.

This week’s Torah portion begins with the words, “behold I set before you this day…” Rabbi Hayyim Benattar, in his Torah commentary “Ohr Hahayyim,” offers an interesting interpretation based on the words “Re’eh anokhi.” He suggests that these words might be understood in the sense of Moses telling the people of Israel: “behold me” i.e. see how high I’ve been able to rise, to have related to God “face to face.” In setting himself as a model, Moses was reminding the Israelites

that each of them could rise to great spiritual heights. If they would each strive to the best of their abilities, they could achieve great things.

Moses was calling on the Israelites to have high religious aspirations. Even if they experienced many failures along the way, they ultimately would maximize their opportunities for spiritual growth if they kept striving to attain their ideals. It is not “failure” to have been unable to fulfill all one’s aspirations: it is failure not to have aspired in the first place.

Religious life is not static. Indeed, the hallmark of religion at its best is an ongoing sense of striving, failing, growing, falling back, moving forward. Religion at its best is dynamic and life-transforming. Those who are masters of religious life are precisely those who demonstrate “entrepreneurial” spirit: the willingness to try, to take risks, to invest oneself totally in a set of grand ideas and ideals, to fail but then to pick oneself up and try again.

Religious life is deficient when it lacks enthusiasm and energy. Unless we are growing and developing, we are stagnating or regressing. Religion isn’t about maintaining a dull status quo: it is about dynamic self-transformation and spiritual growth. It is looking to the example of Moses and other great men and women—and aspiring to raise ourselves to their models.

Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook, who was Ashkenazic Chief Rabbi of Israel in the early 20th century, once compared religious life to being on a ladder. Was someone on a higher rung more “religious” than one on a lower rung? Rabbi Kook answered: it depends which direction the people were going. A person might be on a higher rung—with more knowledge and greater level of mitzvah observance—and yet be stagnant or actually on the way down the ladder. Another person might be on a lower rung of religious knowledge and observance, and yet be ascending, moving up with each passing day. So the one who is ascending is experiencing a dynamic and growing religious life, while the one on the higher rung is experiencing a dry and diminishing religious life. The one on the lower rung is aspiring to grow, while the one on the higher rung has surrendered to rote and dullness.

Religion is not a part time sideline, or something to do in our spare time. It isn’t a collection of laws and customs for us to perform in a mechanical way. It is, at root, a framework for striving toward a dynamic relationship with the Almighty. It is not so much a pattern of life as an attitude toward living, of reaching beyond ourselves, of aspiring to raise ourselves above the mundane, of climbing one more rung in our quest for self-understanding and confrontation with the Divine.

Yes, we will surely experience failures along the way. But it is not these failures that define who we are. What defines us is our aspirations…and our willingness to strive to attain them.

Angel for Shabbat