Strengths and Weaknesses: Thoughts for Parashat Shemot

View PDF

By
Rabbi Marc D. Angel
Angel for Shabbat, Parashat Shemot

by Rabbi Marc D. Angel

A story is told about a famous musician who was to perform a violin concert. The orchestra began the program, but just as the musician put his bow to the violin one of the four strings snapped with a loud pop. The audience gasped. The conductor stopped the orchestra.

The violinist immediately signaled the conductor and orchestra to continue with the program. He played the entire concert with a violin of three strings…and he played masterfully. He was able to improvise and compensate so that the missing string was not noticed. At the conclusion of the performance, the audience gave an enthusiastic standing ovation. Everyone was amazed.

The moral of this story is that one must play with the violin that one has. The broader moral is that life must be lived with the talents and shortcomings that one has. Instead of focusing on our deficiencies, we must focus on our strengths. We must be able to improvise and compensate for what we lack in order to "perform" our lives with maximum effect.

In this week's Parasha, we read of God's appointment of Moses to lead the Israelites out of Egyptian bondage. Moses is reluctant to accept the challenge. He states: "I am not a man of words…for I am slow of speech and of a slow tongue (Shemoth 4:10)." It is as though Moses was saying: I can't properly play a violin with only three strings. My deficiency prevents me from accomplishing the goal. God replies to Moses that He is the One who empowers people. "Now therefore go, and I will be with your mouth and teach you what you shall speak (4:12)."

I believe the operative phrase in God's words to Moses is: "now therefore go." God was instructing Moses not to dwell on his weaknesses but to take initiative, to move forward, to draw on whatever strengths he did have. If Moses could rally his courage and confidence, God would help him to succeed.

Many people fail in life because they dwell on their deficiencies rather than on their strengths. They underestimate their ability to perform masterfully, to rise to greatness. They don't realize that overcoming one's shortcomings is one of the wonderful challenges of life. Instead of being discouraged by a three-stringed violin, a true musician is energized by the opportunity to reach beyond usual boundaries, to test the limits of one's abilities.

People are sometimes discouraged by their past failures. They lose confidence in their ability to undertake new challenges. They think that if they failed it the past, they are destined always to fail.

Kohelet teaches (2:14) that "a wise man, his eyes are in his head." This means that a wise person is alert, sees clearly. The verse also alludes to the fact that eyes are in the front of

one’s face, not in the back. A wise person looks forward, not backward. Whatever things have transpired in the past—the glories and the failures—are done and cannot be retrieved. There’s little point in gloating over past successes or mourning over past disappointments. Life is ahead of us, not behind us. Just as past success is no guarantee of future successes, so past failure is no guarantee of future failures. The great challenge to human beings is to look ahead, to grasp the adventure of life, to draw on one’s talents and energies, to overcome weaknesses and deficiencies.

“Now therefore go.” God’s charge to Moses is a charge to each of us to strive to reach our maximum potential, to let our strengths and talents prevail over our fears and weaknesses.

Angel for Shabbat