The Possibilities of Impossibilities: Thoughts for Parashat Yitro, February 7, 2015

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In a recent sermon, Rabbi Shaul Robinson of the Lincoln Square Synagogue in New York City referred to an amazing incident in the life of Dr. George Dantzig (1914-2005), one of the greatest American mathematicians of the 20th century. In 1939, when Dantzig was a graduate student at the University of California, Berkeley, he arrived late to class one day. The professor had written several problems in statistics on the blackboard.

Dantzig assumed that these problems were a homework assignment. He copied them into his notebook and then worked on them over the next few days. When he turned them in, he mentioned to his professor that the problems were a bit more difficult than usual and he apologized for handing in the assignment late.

During the coming weeks, the professor, Dr. Jerzy Neyman, studied Dantzig's solutions: and he was absolutely stunned by them. The two problems on the blackboard had not been homework assignments at all. Rather, Professor Neyman had put them on the board as examples of two problems that no one had been able to solve! And now Dantzig had solved them! He told Dantzig that if he put his two solutions into a notebook, this would qualify as his doctoral dissertation. Dantzig's work was simply incredible. He had solved problems that had eluded the greatest mathematicians.

Why was Dantzig able to solve problems that had mystified the most outstanding mathematical minds?

Rabbi Robinson offered a suggestion: George Dantzig had not realized that the problems were impossible! He came to them with an open mind, without fear or hesitation.

Other mathematicians had been daunted by the reputation of the problems as being beyond solution. They assumed that they would not be able to succeed in solving them.

The lesson: when we approach situations—even those that others consider to be impossible—we can succeed if we believe success is possible. Mental attitude is vitally important.

A famous Midrash tells that God offered the Torah to the various nations of the world. They asked Him what the Torah contained. God told them: the Torah teaches the highest morality: it forbids murder, theft, adultery…. When the nations heard this, they responded: it is not possible for us to accept the Torah. The demands are too great for us. Human beings can't be held to such high standards. So then God offered the Torah to the people of Israel. The Israelites responded: we will follow the teachings of the Torah and we will study them. We are ready to accept the Torah.

The children of Israel had just been redeemed after several centuries of having been enslaved in Egypt. They were a motley group of ex-slaves who could hardly be expected to be the vanguards of human civilization. Other nations were established, had governments and armies, had the infrastructure of stable societies. The other nations might have been expected to rise to God's challenge far more readily than the Israelites. But it was the Israelites who chose to receive the Torah. It was the Israelite nation that gathered around Mount Sinai to experience the most dramatic revelation of God's will in the history of humankind.

Why did Israel succeed where others had failed? Israel did not think it was impossible to experience God and to live according to God's commandments! Israel was not daunted by the challenges that lay ahead. Because Israel believed in the possibility of success….they were able to succeed.

Certainly, the history of the people of Israel has had its share of ups and downs. Life has not always been—and is not today—without its serious problems. We face physical and spiritual threats that would surely daunt any other people. And yet, the Jewish people has been characterized by an incredible inner courage, an absolute faith in God's ultimate redemption of humanity. In spite of everything we have faced, and continue to face, the Jewish people are amazingly optimistic; things will get better; humanity will improve; the Messiah will come.

Rabbi Israel Salanter, the famous 19th century sage associated with the Musar movement, used to say: When people come to a wall that they can't go through, they stop. When Jews come to a wall that they can't go through—they go through!

When we approach problems and situations that others consider to be impossible, we remain undaunted. We strive to make the impossible—possible!

Angel for Shabbat