

Rewarding Patience

Rabbi Adam J. Raskin

April 24, 2010; 10 Iyar 5770

Congregation Beth Torah

True story...A few weeks ago, I was teaching at ATID, which for those of you who do not know, is an 11th-12th grade program that meets on Sunday mornings at Levine Academy. It is a collaborative effort that the three Conservative synagogues in Dallas launched a few years ago to provide relevant, substantive Jewish learning during the last two years of high school to our combined population of juniors and seniors. Every week, 40-50 Jewish teens meet for bagels, doughnuts, frappuccinos and Jewish learning with local Conservative rabbis. It's a wonderful program that I am proud to say I had a hand in creating. So a few weeks ago, just after the devastating earthquake in Haiti, I was sitting around a table one Sunday morning with my class. I had my lap-top open to start the discussion with a stirring You-Tube video about the extraordinary efforts of Israeli doctors and rescue teams, which set up the very best hospitals and crisis care in response to the devastation in Haiti. In a momentary lapse from incessant criticism of Israel, even the global press paused to laud Israel's incomparable efforts in Haiti. I wanted the kids to see a particularly moving report that had made its way to You-Tube. The only problem was I could not connect to Levine Academy's network. No network...No You Tube. No You Tube, no opportunity to show the kids this great video, not to mention that it dashed my hopes of demonstrating my rabbinic hipness and technological savvy! In the midst of my panic over not being able to get onto the internet, I had a flash of pedagogical genius: "How many of you have an i-Phone?" I asked. When I tell you that almost every hand went up, I promise I am not exaggerating. "Okay, take out your i-Phones and go to your You-Tube application." Seconds later: "Now type in the words: "Israeli rescue efforts Haiti." A second or two later: "At the count of three, everyone hit play." Just then, I was redeemed as a teacher...it was one of my greatest moments in education as the room filled with the sounds of that You Tube report in stereo, and teenagers watched it together on the very latest technology. The truth is that although I am an I-phone owner, I am really not all that technologically advanced. But let's face it, much of technology these days is just so easy. With one ever so gentle touch, I have a universe of information accessible to me in seconds. I can read the New York Times, listen to NPR, find out the latest weather reports, update my Facebook page, find out when Shabbat candle lighting is anywhere in the world, get directions to the closest Kosher restaurant, get sports scores, show times, music, you name it...just like that! By the way, we had a sidebar discussion in my ATID class about just how much Jewish information is accessible to them in that five ounce 6" X 3" little plastic device. From Torah commentaries to Israeli

newspapers to the entire Talmud, Bible, and Siddur, you can store and access a vast Jewish library on that powerful little machine.

We live in a very fast world. Our ability to communicate from one end of the globe to the other, to exchange information, to buy and sell, to broadcast minute by minute, second by second what we are doing and thinking and feeling is truly mind boggling. Speed is the bottom line, whether it's how fast I can get from 0-60 in my car or how quickly I can get on-line with the latest network...it seems that products live or are outlived based on their speed. Because if there's anything true about this fast paced world of ours, it is that we really hate to wait.

But as new and modern as that seems, it seems that people have always had a hard time waiting. One of my favorite Midrashim, indeed one of the more famous rabbinic parables is based on our parasha this morning, and deals directly with the tension of waiting. The Midrash relates that the Roman Emperor Hadrian once passed through the land of Israel on his way to a battlefield in the east. In his travels, he happened upon an elderly Jewish man, laboriously planting fig trees. The Emperor, pausing to investigate this unusual scene, asked the man how old he was. "I am one hundred years old," said the man. The Emperor replied, "One hundred years old! What do you think the chances are that you will live to enjoy the fruit of these trees you labor so much to plant?" The elderly Jew replied, "My lord, Emperor, I labor to plant these trees because if I merit it, I myself will enjoy and eat the fruits of my labor. And if not, then my children will." This renowned emperor, who was in a hurry to conquer another land and amass more territory, could not immediately understand the altruistic, patient behavior of this old Jew. Invariably as Emperor, he was not accustomed to wait for anything...Food, wine, servants, all at his beckon call. And today we are like emperors, for whom waiting and patience have become *past nisht*...it's unbecoming, unfitting of a modern person to have to wait for anything or to make anyone else wait either.

Now as much as I love my i-Phone, I also am acutely aware that the drive for instant gratification has a very unhealthy and unrealistic side. This is the very crux, I believe of a particularly unusual mitzvah in Parashat Kedoshim. God tells Moses that when the Jewish people enter the land of Israel and plant fruit trees they must refrain from eating the fruit of those trees for the first three years! All those oranges, and dates, and figs, and mouth watering produce are off limits for three full agricultural cycles. But just when you begin to contemplate the losses you might incur from waiting out those three years, or the labor of maintaining those trees without being able to benefit from them immediately, God promises: *lehosif lachem tevuatcha*...**That the reward for patience is an even larger crop at the end.** I think a lot about this...It is so difficult to have patience when the future seems unclear...it seems so unreasonable to possess forbearance when you have a goal in mind but you aren't sure how or when you're going to get there.

This is the significance of the mitzvah of *orlah*; the power of patience when working toward life's most important outcomes. When patience replaces impulsive decisions or hasty verdicts, we almost always benefit from the toil of persistence and perseverance. Rashi quotes Rabbi Akiva as saying that the whole idea of cultivating a tree without being able to eat its fruit arouses the *yetzer ha'ra*, man's evil inclination which demands: *Why do I have to go to all this trouble for nothing?* How many of us have felt the evil inclination invade our sensibilities, urging us to give up or to give in when we do not see immediate results or experience instant gratification? In response to that evil inclination the Torah promises a certain prosperity; guarantees that goodness and change and hope will indeed come to those who work patiently to accomplish it.

Three years later the Emperor Hadrian returns from the battlefield and is once again greeted by the elderly Jew, this time with a basket full of sweet figs. The old man reminds the Emperor of their conversation three years prior, and presents the basket of figs to the Emperor as a gift. Hadrian, deeply moved by the man's faith and altruism, returns the basket to the old man...not filled with figs, but brimming with Roman gold coins instead.

In the *Birkat Ha'mazon*, the Grace After Meals, we sing the words of Psalm 126: *hazor'im be'dimah, be'rinah yiktzoru*...Those who sow with tears, will reap with joy. Having patience in the journey of life is sometimes filled with anguish and anxiety. But more often than not, I believe, there is great reward for those who recognize the power of patience. For those who never stop planting or cultivating...even if they don't taste all the fruits of their labor--like the elderly Jew in the Midrash--they are nevertheless enriched by the knowledge that their children and the people they love will indeed be blessed by their efforts.