

FACING THE CHALLENGE

by Tziporah Heller

The new vice president looked around at his brand-new office with the same look a new mother bestows on her newborn baby. He scrutinized each detail with a mixture of love and anxiety: the paneled walls, the parquet floors, the Anderson windows with their 22nd-story view, the genuine copies of Impressionistic art. This is what he had dreamed of during his slow climb up the corporate ladder. As he sat down on the soft leather of the executive chair, he thought to himself, "This is me."

Suddenly he heard a knock on his oak door. Not the right kind of knock. Not reflecting the kind of awe and trepidation the knocker should feel for the executive occupant of this office. As he said, "Come in," he picked up his state-of-the-art telephone. He nodded perfunctorily to the fortyish man dressed in noncorporate attire standing at the door and, looking out at his view, spoke into the phone with quiet authority. "I appreciate the trust that you have demonstrated in buying Magnum. As vice president of sales, I am authorized, of course, to speak for the entire Magnum board. No, it's not necessary to speak to Mr. Norton. I will see him at golf later. Have a good day," he concluded the conversation.

Looking up at his visitor with that tinge of impatience, reserved for the important-and-too-busy, he asked, "What can I do for you?"

The visitor's eyes twinkled with scarcely concealed amusement. "I'm here to install the telephone," he replied.

Self-discovery is the key to facing all of life's challenges, because until we recognize who we are, we cannot possibly know how to properly respond to the challenges life presents.

According to the Torah view, each human being is essentially a soul -- that is, an eternal, spiritual entity created in the image of God. The soul descends to this physical plane in order to actualize its potentials through the process of facing and overcoming challenges.

The first step in this process is self-definition. The new vice-president in the above story looked at his executive office and felt "this is me." Not "these are the surroundings which I prefer," but rather "I am defined by these status symbols." To the extent that one's self-definition is external, one's life goals will be external, and only external challenges will be recognized and engaged. The most common result of such external definition is some version of the pathetic vice president, who had achieved his external goals but still had such a woeful sense of his true inner worth that he had to impress everyone who knocked on his door.

An eternal soul cannot be satisfied by temporary accomplishments. That is why the lives of even the most successful icons of contemporary society often end with bitterness, disappointment, and a sense of futility. Although their external accomplishments were real and impressive, decades later who really cares who recorded the bestselling hit of 1939 or who was the Most Valuable Player of 1951? On the other hand, public figures who distinguished themselves through inner feats, such as extraordinary giving or concern for others, usually end their days with a sense of accomplishment and contentment.

How does this process take place? Where does Torah in its broadest and most universal sense fit into the picture?

All souls come to this world to ascend spiritually, not just to climb the corporate ladder or to achieve any other form of material success. Of course, external goals are also important and are usually an integral part of one's life's mission, but whether one defines oneself in terms of developing inner traits (such as kindness) or in terms of external accomplishments (such as making a million dollars) will make all the difference in how one approaches every aspect of life.

Begin with an honest assessment of your character traits. Do you need to work on becoming more generous, more truthful, more patient, more self-assertive, or more forgiving? Although we could all stand to improve in all of the above areas and twenty others besides, each of us has a unique profile. Even a couple decades on this planet should make it obvious to you which traits you most need to focus on.

Because it is God's will for each of us that we grow spiritually in a particular area, He provides us with repeated tests in that area. So if you find that homeless beggars are always accosting you (though they seem to leave your best friend alone), you might question if you have an issue with generosity. If every day provides a stream of anger provoking incidents, you might question if you need to work on developing patience.

Once you admit to yourself where your character flaws lie, you will begin to perceive challenges

where you had previously seen only bothersome events. A friend told me that as an overweight teenager she hated walking up the zillion steps to the Philadelphia Art Museum. When she finally decided to go on a diet, she realized that they were the world's best place for step aerobics.

* * *

After confronting our own identity, the second step in facing challenge is to recognize which events and situations are sent as challenges to us. Most of us fail our challenges because we do not recognize them. They are camouflaged by the veil of the mundane. We think of challenges as the stuff theatrical dramas are made of: parents faced with an autistic child, a journalist having to choose between truth and a Pulitzer Prize, a teenager deciding to give up drugs. In truth, every one of us, every day, is faced with challenges which will determine whether we make ourselves into spiritual heroes or failures.

In fact, by the time the grandiose, dramatic choices face us, our response will already be determined by the aggregate of our seemingly trivial, daily choices. That is why gentiles who risked their lives to save Jews during the Holocaust invariably answer the question of why they did it with a plain-as-the-nose-on-your-face response. The great choice was not made the night they opened the door to their neighbor's trembling children. It was made throughout the course of their whole lives, every time they chose to put themselves out for the benefit of a stranger. A person who never bothered to stand up and give up her seat in a waiting room to an elderly person will simply not become the quiet hero who can stand up to the Third Reich.

Another reason that challenges often go unrecognized is that we do not realize that there is no such thing as an objective challenge. All challenges are totally subjective and individual. This accounts for the disproportion between objective reality and human beings' responses to events. One person may see her six-year-old child accidentally spill a glass of water on the kitchen floor and fly into a tempestuous rage. Another (albeit rare) person might miss a plane because of an inept cab driver and respond by grimacing and asking when the next plane leaves. For the latter paragon of equanimity, missing the plane was not even a test. For the former, the spilled water, which would take less time to clean up than to calm down from the rage, was a major challenge.

Each character trait can be viewed as a continuum, from the highest perfection to the lowest. The point of challenge for every human being is the point on that continuum where possibility and inner struggle meet.

For example, imagine the continuum of altruism, where murder (not giving someone the space to live) is the lowest point and Rabbi Aryeh Levine, the well-known "tzaddik of Jerusalem," is the highest point. The choice box, or the area on the continuum where genuine choice is possible, for any one person is relatively small. I venture to say that none of you reading this book has ever seriously entertained the possibility of killing another driver on the freeway because he cut you off. Given who you are and how you were raised, murder is not in your choice box. At the other end of

the spectrum, probably none of you reading this book has seriously considered rising every morning before dawn and spending the rest of your day helping prisoners, lepers, and anyone who needs anything that you can give, without salary.

Since neither of those options are in your choice box, they are not your challenges. You do not deserve to pat yourself on the back for all the people you didn't murder today, nor should you feel guilty for not devoting your life to charity work. Where there is no possibility of accomplishment, there is no challenge.

For challenge to be real, it also has to be difficult. Where there is no inner struggle, there is no challenge, and therefore no growth.

So, although we tend to acclaim donations to charity according to their objective size, the real measure of people's tests in generosity must take into account how much they have and how difficult it is for them to part with it. Thus, for a billionaire to donate \$500,000 to the Cancer Society may be no test of generosity for him at all. On the other hand, a person who is worried about how she will pay her electric bill pulling the last \$20 bill out of her wallet and giving it to someone collecting for the poor may be achieving a tremendous spiritual victory...

For a deeper sense of this crucial point, imagine someone, let's call him Ted, who has been laid off his job as a computer programmer. The bank has threatened to foreclose on Ted's house. Ted's best friend Bob feels terrible about Ted's predicament. It occurs to Bob that he could take the money he had been saving for a vacation in Hawaii and give it to Ted to cover his delinquent mortgage payments. Because Bob had been looking forward to this vacation all year, it is a difficult choice for him. Therefore, it constitutes a genuine challenge. His choosing to give the money to Ted would be a heroic response to his challenge.

Ted may have a dozen other friends who never even considered paying his mortgage payments for him, either because they are not as close to him, or because they don't have the money, or because they are nowhere near that level of altruism. For these individuals, Ted's mortgage problems present no challenge. Conversely, Ted may have wealthy parents for whom it is also not a challenge; of course they will bail their son out without blinking an eye. Bob's inner struggle is what defines the test.

Therefore, if you are unclear about which of your daily experiences are challenges, be alert to what is difficult for you. If you balk whenever anyone asks to borrow any of your possessions, you may

have a generosity problem which bears working on. If you would rather swallow the loss than return a faulty purchase to the store and have to face the person behind the customer service desk, you might look at your lack of self-assertion. If it is hard for you to accept gifts and favors, that may be your precise area of test. Not only does difficulty define the test, but your areas of test highlight which character traits you should be working on in this lifetime.

Printed with permission from InnerNet.org and excerpted from "[Let's Face It!](#)" with permission of [Targum Press](#).