

Terumah 2014 -- Living Courageously Pt. 1  
Delivered by Rabbi Aaron Krupnick, February 1, 2014

This week we are beginning a new sermon series called, “Living Courageously.” And I have timed this sermon series to coincide with the Torah portions that we read this time of the year. Our ancestors were slaves, the sons and daughters and the grandchildren of slaves people who knew very little about courage. Any courage they might have had life had been beat out of them in Egypt a long time ago. But now they are free. For the first time they have to start living on their own, making their own decisions. And Gd is – for sure - going to help them. He gave them the Ten Commandments two weeks ago, and then dozens more mitzvot – rules to live by, in last week’s portion. Gd even gives them food and water. But now they really have to start living for themselves. They need to plan for their future.

But you have to wonder: how do people who did not even know if they were going to live or die on any given day learn how to plan for their own futures? How do they learn to plan at all? And the answer comes in the portions we are going to read over the next 5 weeks – Gd gives the plans for the Mishkan – for the Tabernacle. Gd gives them a goal – a set of plans and objectives and says, “Reach inside yourself, in your heart, and do this project.” It’s not so much that Gd needs a “house” – Gd is everywhere. It’s that Gd needs these people to set goals for themselves and to work hard to achieve them. And it is really interesting to note that Gd enlists everyone in this project – he wants them ALL to have a goal. Gd doesn’t say- only the young, only the talented- only the wealthy – only folks with a lot of time on their hands. No, everyone has a unique contribution to make, a particular goal to work towards. And for a group of people who had basically given up on life (or at best were looking for a hand-out from Gd) this goal motivates them. Now they have something important to do. And setting that goal gives them courage – it gives them a sense of mission and purpose.

And what was true for them is equally true today. We need to set goals for ourselves at every stage of our lives. We need to be working towards something that matters to us. Courage comes from setting goals, even when – AND ESPECIALLY WHEN- we feel like life is out of our control. That’s when it really takes courage to roll up your sleeves, to set goals and to get to work. You must set your own, individual goals for your life, and make the best plan for the rest of your life. Setting goals, at every stage of your life is vital.

Look at it this way: You are going to go through life either by design or by default. You are either going to set goals and decide for yourself what’s important for your life, or other people are going to decide it for you. If you don’t have goals for your life you are abdicating control of your life to somebody else and to other things. If you don’t have goals for your life you are not “living” you are just “reacting;” you’re just existing. If you don’t have clear goals then you are just coasting through life, and really, whenever you are coasting you are also almost always going down hill. If you don’t have goals for your life you have already decided to let other people run your life, because you don’t know what’s important so you are going to let other people, and circumstance decide.

You haven't clarified what's important and owned that. Set goals, strive for goals, reach for goals. That process might not take you exactly where you thought it would, but it's going to move you forward. Like we have said in the past weeks, your body is going to give out – it is – but your soul can grow stronger every day of your life when you have goals that you set for yourselves.

And that's what makes this day so special for our graduating class of the Adult Bar and Bat Mitzvah Class. It's not a little thing to commit to a year of study – 40 weeks- and then tell your Rabbi that you have. It's a big thing. It takes courage. And you set that goal for yourself and you did it. And what I especially love about this class is that we have people from all walks and stages of life. Each had something unique to contribute, just like the Mishkan. We have people who are new to Jewish study and people who went to Yeshivas. We have moms and dads and grandparents, too. Each of you pushed yourself further intellectually by setting a goal and working towards it. And in your hearts only YOU know how good this really feels.

In this Torah portion we read of all the materials that were used for the Mishkan, and the very last on the list are the precious stones that the Kohen wore. And the Talmud asks a good question: Why not list the most valuable stuff first? Then the Talmud gives a fascinating answer. It says that the gems came from Heaven with the manna – they just fell out of the sky. But all the mundane stuff, the cloth and the metal came from the People – they had to give up something of their own, refashion it, and then use it for a new purpose in this building project. But because it came from THEM, because they had to work for it, it meant more to them than what was given to them without work. And never mind how gems fall from the sky – think about what's behind this Midrash. The gems were less valuable because they were given and not earned.

You know so many Jews take their Judaism for granted, it's a gem that is handed to them and they don't treasure it. Some people just put it in a closet and forget about it, or even discard it... But not you. You took this gem and held it high for others to see. And like a diamond that refracts light, spiritual energy passed from above through you, and your family and friends could see all its varied colors. You who set this goal have offered up your most precious possession, your own personal gem – your time. And as a result you now have a deeper understanding of just how valuable this sacred tradition really is. You should be justifiably proud of yourselves and know how proud I am of each of you.

You know folks – You show me your calendar and I'll show you your priorities. And if among your priorities is to live a more meaningful life, a more productive life, a more COURAGEOUS life, then you need to set goals for yourself, too. You need to have a plan and you need, at every stage of your life, to be willing to work toward your goal. You have untapped energy, creativity and brain power; I urge you to have the courage to tap into it. Don't coast. Don't be shaped by circumstance. Have the courage to really live...