Thought Tools

Up the Down Staircase?

June 4, 2009
12th day of Sivan, 5769
Volume II Issue #23

"Man on Wire" is the title of a 2008 movie documenting Philippe Petit’s 1974 high wire walk between the twin towers of the World Trade Center, a quarter of a mile above the streets of Manhattan. The movie enchanted me. More importantly however, the film maker’s camera revealed a truly vital life lesson. During the entire forty-five minute stunt, I never once saw Philippe look down.

This really resonated with me because when I first learned to ride a motorcycle, my instructor insisted that when going into a curve, “Fix your eyes on the end of the turn.” Focus your eyes on where you want to go because where you look is where you will end up.

Well, I seldom ride motorcycles and I never walk a tight rope but many times each day I do have the opportunity of focusing my vision on the destination I wish to reach. I am sure you do too.

In real life, we cannot always control our destiny. Things happen. However we can control whether we view those events as ladders or chutes. If we view them with downcast eyes we tend to follow our vision down the chute. But if we lift our eyes upward and view the event as a ladder, it tends to become one.

This is why we read in Scripture the frequent phrase, “...lifted up his eyes,” just as we see in this verse:

On the third day Abraham lifted up his eyes and saw the place from the distance.
(Genesis 22:4)

On this most confusing mission of his life, Abraham thought he was on his way to sacrifice his beloved son Isaac on Mount Moriah. The sight of his destination must have filled his heart with sadness. He was following God’s directive which was leading to great pain. Then Abraham forced himself to raise his vision. Abraham followed this important secret of ancient Jewish wisdom: Lift up your eyes. As difficult as it is, view your next step as an
ascent and it will become one. Instead of ending with unbearable grief, Abraham’s day concluded in glory.

At this time of the year, for many people the things that happen are easy to perceive as rungs in a ladder leading up to better times. Relieved students celebrate graduations and happy couples celebrate engagements and marriages.

However, other things happen too. Romances break up. Marriages struggle for survival. Interviews fail to turn into offers and jobs are lost. Worrying health issues and economic difficulties can exacerbate family tensions.

These are much harder to view as ladders leading to new opportunities but a verse in Exodus can help. Remember that each and every Hebrew word in the Bible has hidden layers of deep meaning.

The last verse of chapter 20 in Exodus is often translated in English like this:

Don’t go up by steps to my altar…

The English conceals something important. In Hebrew, the word for “steps” is “Ma’ALoT”. The root of that word means “ascend” or “go up”. Indeed, fifteen of the Psalms (120—134) are known as the Songs of Ascent, opening with exactly that word for step—Ma’ALoT.

Of course, in reality, steps are bi-directional; one uses them either to go up or down. And here is why this Hebrew word combines “step” and “ascend.” Even when we are forced to take a step down, we must view it as a potential ascent. If we see steps as “ma’alot,” an opportunity for ascent, keeping our eye on the goal just as surely as Philippe Petit did, we can lift our eyes and follow with our bodies.

Listen to King David practice this advice.

A Song of Ascent, from out of the depths I call out to you, Oh Lord... (Psalms 130:1)

From the depths of misery, David clearly identifies himself as moving upwards.

In honor of Father’s Day, graduations and weddings, I am offering my book, Thou Shall Prosper: Ten Commandments for Making Money, at a discounted price this week. Please take advantage of the lower price as well as the final week of free shipping on orders over $49 and I pray that the Torah teachings I am privileged to bring you will greatly assist you in your own personal ascent.

Susan’s Musings
This week's musing - Going up. A Song of Ascent.