

This week's Dvar Torah is provided by Rabbi Greg Wall, The Community Synagogue, New York

How do you get to Carnegie Hall?

I missed the Oscars this year, but did manage to catch the finale of the Grammys a few weeks before, and took the opportunity to reflect on pop culture's obsession with ranking artistic and intellectual achievement. While I am thrilled that Tony Bennett won his 16th and 17th Grammy awards at the age of 85 (maybe there is still hope for me?), many of the "best" will simply fade into the rubble of water cooler debate topics.

Inevitably the conversation turns to the historical impact of lack thereof or the recently feted:

Who was the greatest musician of all time?
What is the greatest recording of all time?
Next...
Who was the greatest athlete?
And then (as this is an election year)..
Who was the greatest president?
Who was the greatest thinker?
What was the most important event in history?

Any definitive collection of superlatives is certainly disputable, yet we delight in compiling lists, and making statements that reflect our confidence in ourselves.

It is only natural that sooner or later someone would want to proclaim a certain verse the "most important verse in the Torah"!

In his introduction to the classic medieval work, "Ein Yaakov", Rabbi Yaakov Ibn Haviv quotes a midrash that summarizes a discussion of that very topic.

What is the most important verse in the entire Torah? The midrash quotes three opinions.

According to the sage Ben Zoma, it is " *Shema Yisrael, Hashem Elokeinu, Hashem Ekhad*- Hear O Israel, the Lord is our G-d, the Lord is One.."

(Deut. 6:4)

Ben Nannas (and also Rabbi Akiva) said, "*v'Ahavta l'Reakha k'Mokha*.- You shall love your neighbor as yourself" (Lev. 19:18)

Ben Pazai said: " *Et ha-keves ha-echad ta'aseh va-BOKER ve-et ha-keves ha-sheini*

ta'aseh bein ha-ARBAYIM....And one lamb you shall offer in the morning, and the other in the afternoon" (Ex. 29:39)

This last entry, from this week's parasha, is a bit puzzling...nevertheless, the midrash concludes that Ben Pazai is correct, that this is in fact the most important verse in the Torah.

How can the commandment to bring the *Korban Tamid*, the daily offering, even make it to the top ten?

And isn't this verse, with its reference to sacrificial offerings to be placed on the altar, out of place here in our parasha, with its description of the contents of the mishkan, the holy tabernacle?

The Maharal of Prague (Rabbi Yehuda Loew-remember the Golem?) writing about our discussion, says that consistency is the essence of relationship with our creator.

A peek into this week's reading reinforces that view.

The me'ulim (the one time inaugural offerings) described in our parasha are no guarantee that our special relationship can last past the initial infatuation stage. Judaism-whether the biblical version described here, or the rabbinic version we have inherited to sustain us in exile- requires practice. A lot of practice...

As a musician, I can relate. It's no surprise that we use the same term for both disciplines. I practice my saxophone, I practice Judaism, I have a spiritual practice...As the saying goes, art is one percent inspiration, and ninety nine percent perspiration.

In addition to the obvious benefits of refinement and technique, the commitment demonstrates a deeper connection. We were taken out of Egypt not to founder in a listless freedom, but rather to accept the loving servitude of our creator. This relationship can only mature through constant attention. And, there is an art to it.

Actually, the word "*tamid*" meaning constant, is used in our parasha to describe two other components of the divine service of the mishkan.

The *menorah*, the first commandment given in our parasha, is to burn continually. We connect to G-d by continually referencing G-d's first creation described in the Torah- "Let There be light...", the first of the "ten utterances" that brought the world into being.

Likewise the incense (*ketoret*) described at the end of the parasha is a *ketoret tamid*- a constant fragrance.

The *ketoret*, which also means "binding", is a blend of eleven ingredients, representing a transcendence of the ten stages of creating the physical world. That transcendence is our attachment to G-d.

When the minute details of our lives get in the way we may not always grasp the feeling that we are reaching our potential.

We need to reflect on the fact that the continuity of effort WILL sustain us between the fleeting moments of inspiration.

With experience, those moments will be closer and closer together. It just takes a bit of practice...

Shabbat Shalom,

Rabbi Greg Wall

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