1. Questions.
2. For several years, we would take our eleventh grade students on a class trip to Lakewood. We would have the opportunity to visit the home of Rav Matisyahu Solomon שליט"א, the Lakewood Mashgiach, and he would deliver a short schmues to the boys. Each year we would come just before שבועות – זמן מתן תורתינו, so Rav Matisyahu would share a thought relating to קבלת התורה. Each year he would ask an intriguing question – the מדרשים tell us that before offering the תורה to כלל ישראל Hashem offered the תורה to several other nations. Each one asked “מה כתיב בה – what is written in this תורה?” Hashem would respond with a מצוה that would be very challenging for the specific nation and went against their very nature and way of life. Upon hearing that the תורה would demand something that is antithetical to their very existence each of them rejected the תורה. Rav Matisyahu asked our boys – what would our נסיון be? Which מצוה, if Hashem had to choose one, would have discouraged us from accepting the תורה? Or, as the חידושי הרי"ם asks it, isn’t it unfair that we got the תורה without being challenged?
3. When contemplating קבלת התורה we often think of מגילת רות, which of course is the מגילה that we read at the time of קבלת התורה. The גמרא יבמות דף מז: tells us that when נעמי tested whether רות was willing to do all that is necessary to be a Jewess, נעמי asked her daughter in law if she would be willing to follow the laws of תחום שבת. רות, of course, answered in the affirmative. The כלי חמדה (פרשת בשלח) asks that this is an odd הלכה to use as an introduction to Judaism. Granted, a convert needs to learn about מקצת מצוות חמורות ומקצת מצוות קלות, but why, of all מצוות קלות, would נעמי tell רות about תחום שבת?
4. Finally, we had a bit of a strange line in the דף יומי this week. The גמרא (יומא דף עו) tells us that יהושע had received the מן "כנגד כל ישראל". Rashi on the spot says that יהושע deserved this because he stood at the edge of the mountain when משה רבינו went up the mountain. What is the connection between waiting at the foot of the mountain and the מן?
5. I heard from my friend, Rav Shay Schachter, that the חידושי הרי"ם suggests a most insightful answer to our first question. The truth is, says the חידושי הרי"ם, that Hashem did test us with a מצוה that is antithetical to our very nature. Just before קבלת התורה, Hashem told us אל יהרסו אל ה' לראות – we cannot get too close to the mountain. We had to appreciate our limits and live within those limits, even as we watched another person have the ability to rise to the top of the mountain. Our very nature is to always know more, to be aggressive and ambitious. When there is some sign of trouble, we always run toward it. When somebody is going through a difficult time, we always want to know more about it. Our curiosity often gets the best of us. For the Jewish people to be told to stay behind a certain line, and actually stay there, was the ultimate test of our dedication to תורה. We are naturally inclined not to accept limitations on our access or powers.
6. This explains why נעמי questioned רות about תחום שבת. If you are to become a Jew it is necessary to be able to stay behind certain boundaries.
7. I thought that this might also explain the connection between the מן and יהושע waiting at the foot of the mountain. If there was ever a symbol of God’s approval of the class system within Judaism it was in the way that the מן fell. The מן fell for צדיקים closer to their homes and in a more prepared state than it did for בינונים and for רשעים. When יהושע showed that he understood where to stop – which point was meant for only משה רבינו – he was זוכה to the מן. The משך חכמה explains that the גמרא is not telling us about extra מן that fell for יהושע, but that for forty days after the death of משה רבינו the Jewish people were sustained by the מן that they had in יהושע’s זכות. The זכות that provided מן for forty days, was יהושע standing at the edge of his limits for forty days.
8. If our greatest heroes achieved so much by understanding their place and their roles, some of the worst villians in our history demonstrated the opposite מדה.
9. קרח’s platform for rebellion was that כל העם כולם קדושים – all Jews are equally holy – nobody should have any limits – there is no difference between קרח and משה and any other Jew!
10. Similarly, the גמרא מגילה דף יב. says that already very early in his career, המן exhibited this terrible מדה. When אחשורוש needed advice about what to do with ושתי, Haman, who was the lowest ranking of אחשורוש’s advisors, responded first, as if he were the most authoritative. In the words of the גמרא – "הדיוט קופץ בראש" – the idiot jumps to the front.
11. Rav Shay pointed out that one of the great challenges of the internet generation is that everybody who feels that they are entitled to express an opinion, is given an audience. It used to be that if somebody wanted to offer a halachic opinion he would write a תשובה that would be subject to peer review. Those who weren’t capable of writing a coherent תשובה were never given an audience. Today, everybody with an internet connection feels entitled to express a halachic opinion. Some feel qualified to make halachic declarations and shift communal practices that have been in place for centuries. It is natural to want to do this – we are Jews – we are aggressive – we are forward thinking and growth oriented. But this is also our great נסיון. We must appreciate the knowledge and righteousness of those who are far greater than us. For those of us, who are able to understand a little bit about the Jewish hierarchy, it actually is not frustrating or disappointing at all. It is invigorating and exciting to take a step back and appreciate true greatness. It makes us feel very small, but in the most wonderful way. I have heard Rav Schachter describe the awe he felt in front of Rav Soloveitchik and in front of Rav Moshe Feinstein. I have heard Rav Scheinberg express the awe he felt in front of the חפץ חיים. That feeling is part of being a Jew, and may in fact be the ultimate test of our ability to accept the תורה properly.