



Parashat Hukat



English version

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THE ART OF LIVING

This Tuesday, I was asked by my family to speak at the Shloshim of my cousin's son. Yaakov Yisrael Farhi, A"H, was run over by a car, and after his body had fought for months to stay alive, he passed away 30 days ago. The parents, my cousin Refael and his wife Tamar, had so much faith that he would survive. Now that Yaakov has passed away, his parents are still standing strong in their faith. Anyone who gets to know these amazing parents, is instantly zapped with a super-strong dose of Emunah, acceptance, and hope. They are truly an inspiration to the world, how they stay strong, maybe even stronger than before.

Although lately I've been doing a lot of public speaking, putting together this speech was definitely a great challenge. Before putting together any speech, I always ask myself, what is the purpose of the speech, what is the goal? To inspire? Educate? Inform? Entertain? Persuade and convince? Here, none of the above would be appropriate.

Words can never do justice to expressing, to conveying any message that has anything to do with consolation for a tragedy of that magnitude. A month ago, I cried at the funeral like I have never cried before in my life. I hope I never have to cry like that again. Baruch Hashem, after I spoke, people said the ideas communicated went over well. Here was one of the ideas mentioned:

One concept of self-help is to reframe, to change perspectives, and many times, the way to do that is to redefine terms. Your terminology is a big part of

your psychology. Speed, distance divided by time. A straight line, the shortest way between two dots. What does success mean? What does wealth mean? Love? Happiness? Wisdom? Orthodox? Praying? Parenting?

What does the word חיים, life, mean? Does being alive mean to exist, to survive, move, breathe, eat, work, and sleep? To escape from suffering, go to the bathroom, or go to the beach? People go on scary rollercoasters, jump off of planes parachuting, etc., and pay money to feel their heart pumping as if it is about to burst... For what purpose? To feel that they are not dead. Because people feel dead. By almost dying, they feel, for a moment, that they are still alive. But what does it mean, to actually feel alive, not only to not feel dead?

According to the Torah to be alive means to be present. To be connected with your surroundings. To respond correctly to adversity. To grow in character development. To rise above challenge. To live where you can be the best you. To give. To learn Torah. To learn life lessons.

Where did I get these Jewish definitions of "Life" from?

In Avot D' R' Natan, 1;34, it states: there are ten that are called חיים, alive: **G-d, Torah, Yisrael, Tzaddik, Gan Eden, Tree of life, Eretz Yisrael, Kindness, Wise, Water that is coming out of Jerusalem.**



What does all this mean? G-d does not breathe; He causes us to breathe. But His being alive, is His being present, in that He is aware, He cares, and He leads the world. מוֹלִיךְ מִלֵּךְ. Torah is not alive, but it is life itself, in that it is the blueprint and structure of this world. A Yisrael is alive, because life is about rising above nature and becoming G-dly. A tzaddik is alive, because he lives with a greater meaning, and everything he does is in accordance with what G-d wants. Gan Eden is alive, because it is the closest connection to the Source of life. The Tree of Life is alive, because it is the deeper meaning of Torah. Eretz Yisrael is referred to as life, because it is the place where we can be who we are supposed to be, and people feel alive when they feel like they belong. Hessed is life, because giving is life, taking is death. Wisdom, learning from life lessons, and the pursuit of knowledge, is life. Water from Jerusalem is life, because a resurrected Jerusalem, where G-d feels at home with His people, is life. The water coming out of Jerusalem, is symbolic of happiness, as we see on Simhat Bet Hashoeva, and happiness is life.

There are some more meanings to life, according to Judaism. Our Rabbis teach, Nedarim 64b, that there are four that are considered like they are dead. **A rich man who loses his wealth**, because life means “choice”, and when a person loses money, he has lost his choices. **A blind man**, because life means “enjoying the blessings G-d gives you”, and pleasure can only be perceived through sight. Also, because life means, to feel other people empathetically, which a blind man can't do. **A childless man** is considered dead, because life means sharing, giving, and no one can receive like a child can receive from his father. The fourth is **the leper**. The leper is considered lifeless, because he needs to be alone, and life means sharing in experiences and emotions.

The first thing for a “life coach” to explain, before explaining what “coaching” is and what it can do for you, is to explain what “life” is. When you can

understand what life is, you can understand where you are and where you want to be. The life coach then, puts you in the locus of control of your life, to choose your highest values and to express them. For some questions, short answers are better answers. Like, “Why is Mashiach not here yet?” The answer is because not enough people are asking the question. Still, there are questions, that the longer the answer, the better. The question of the meaning of life, is an important one, because that is the why, the motivation behind what we do and the reason we want to live.

Throughout history, there have been different meanings to life in the world, at large, which influenced every single aspect of every single person's life. When G-d created the world, the purpose of life was, לעבדה ולשמרה to serve and protect, to make the world a better place. To care. Over the generations, it took on so many meanings, so many “isms”. Since 1942, the world's view of the meaning of life is something philosophers call “absurdism”. “Stop trying to find a meaning. Just live.” This philosophy came into the world, right after so many sacrifices of WW2. 50,000,000 people, which was a result of misinterpretations of the meaning of life!! The hardest thing for parents to do in the world with the absurdism philosophy, and it only gets harder, is to raise children to care. Why should they? Caring, as a purpose, as a value, was way back in the days of Adam and Eve, when the purpose of life was לעבדה ולשמרה. To serve and protect. But now, why should I make my bed? Why should I pick up my clothes? LET ME JUST LIVE!!!

The Torah tells us what life is about. Messilat Yesharim, Orchot Tzaddikim, Hovot Halevovot, all explain what the meaning of life is. Life is for the purpose of responsibility, of growth, learning, connecting, being present, learning Torah and living by it. Bringing Mashiach and getting the world ready to accept G-d's Kingdom. לתקן עולם במלכות ש-די.

THE POWER OF THE JEWISH NATION

The commentators deal with the puzzling question of why Moshe lost his chance to bring the Jews

into Israel, just because he hit a rock. The Torah says, וַיַּעַן לֹא-הֶאֱמַנְתֶּם בִּי לְהַקְדִּישֵׁנִי לְעַיְנֵי בְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל לְכוֹן לִי.

תביאו את־הקהל הזה אל־הארץ אשר־נתתי להם
*For you have not believed in Me, to sanctify Me to the eyes
of the Sons of Israel; therefore, you will not bring
this Nation to the Land which I have given them.*
(Bamidbar 20;12)

What?! Moshe did not believe in G-d? The Man who spoke to G-d “mouth to mouth” (Bamidbar 12;18), **he** does not believe in G-d? And why does G-d connect Moshe’s punishment to the *nation* entering? And why does G-d stress that Israel is the land that G-d gave to the Jewish Nation, specifically in connection with the punishment of Moshe?

The Ibn Ezra lists a few reasons why Moshe was punished so harshly for hitting the rock to bring out its waters instead of speaking to it. (20;8) The last reason he lists is something from the Kadmonim, the ancient Rabbis according to Sod, the secrets of the Torah. It is because what Moshe told the People *before* hitting the rock. שמעו נא המורים, *Listen now, you rebellious ones.* (Bamidbar 20;10)

The Shem Mishmuel (at the end of Hukat) explains this secret of the Ibn Ezra and the Kadmonim. There is a power that Moshe could have used in order to bring out water from the rock. This power is the unity of Yisrael, Kneset Yisrael. In the merit of Kneset Yisrael, Moshe could have drawn water from the rock, as G-d told Moshe that this was His intention, קח את־המטה וקהל את־העדה, *Take the staff and gather the community.* (Bamidbar 20;8) But Moshe got angry, and he rebuked the Jews by referring to them as rebels. By doing this, Moshe separated himself from Kneset Yisrael. Moshe, being the one who accepted the Torah on behalf of the Nation, was like the soul of Kneset Yisrael, and separating himself from them was removing the soul from Kneset Yisrael. Without the merit of Kneset Yisrael, Moshe needed to use a backup, the miracle of hitting the rock.

This power of Kneset Yisrael is the strongest power G-d created in the world. G-d’s kingship is dependent on it; His monarchy is defined through it. ויהי בישרון מלכה בהתאסף ראשי עם יחד שבטי ישראל. (Devarim 33;5) The last Mishna in Taanit brings

the passuk ויראינה בנות ציון במלכה שלמה בעטרה צאן ביום חתונתו *Go forth, O daughters of Tzion, and behold the King that peace is His, with the crown with which His mother crowned Him on the day of His wedding* (Shir Hashirim 3; 11) In this aspect, out of fondness, G-d refers to Kneset Yisrael as אמו, His Mother, as a nickname for אומתו, His Nation, in that He is dependent on His Nation to bring His Kingdom to the world, to be a place for His Presence in the world. He is dependent on Kneset Yisrael to glorify His Name in the world and to make Him King. (Midrash Zutah; also see Rashi Shir Hashirim)

Being a part of Kneset Yisrael is the power behind our prayers. As the Ariza”l says, we should accept upon ourselves to love each and every Jew, before we start our prayers. This prayer of being a part of Kneset Yisrael is found in many Siddurim before Shacharit prayers. All of our prayers are about praying *for* Kneset Yisrael. All of our prayers are about Kneset Yisrael crowning G-d. Even when we accept G-d’s Oneness on ourselves, we do so by saying ה' אלוקינו – *our* G-d. For a Kneset Yisrael Jew is a much greater Jew than a lone Jew.

When G-d told Moshe that he did something wrong, He was precise in how He said it. *For you have not believed in Me to sanctify Me to the eyes of the Sons of Israel, therefore you will not bring this Nation to the Land which I have given them.* For not utilizing the power of Kneset Yisrael, for not taking the opportunity to sanctify G-d’s Name through it, Moshe could not enter Eretz Yisrael. Moshe missed the opportunity to reveal the power of Kneset Yisrael. That even if, as individuals, they were not worthy, but as Kneset Yisrael, Hashem would give them even what they do not deserve. Moshe missed the opportunity to show, to demonstrate that G-d wants His Name to be sanctified through the unity of Kneset Yisrael, even if they are rebels.

What is Kneset Yisrael, anyway? What makes us so strong? When did we officially come into reality as a united people?



The first time we came together as a united people was on the day G-d married His People by giving them the Torah at Har Sinai as mentioned in Shir Hashirim above, וַיִּתֶּן-יְהוָה אֶת-יִשְׂרָאֵל לְנֶגְדֵי הַהָר, *And Yisrael encamped (singular form) opposite the mountain.* What unifies us is accepting G-d as King, accepting the Torah. This is why Moshe, the one who received the Torah for us, is the soul of Knesset Yisrael. Our oneness is through accepting G-d's monarchy, as we pray on Minha Shabbat, אַתָּה אֶחָד וְשִׁמְךָ אֶחָד וּמִי כַעֲמֵךְ יִשְׂרָאֵל גּוֹי אֶחָד בְּאַרְצֶךָ. *You are one, and Your Name is one, and who is like Your Nation Yisrael, One Nation in the Land.*

We are meant to be a diverse nation of 600,000 souls who all share but one goal: Crowning G-d. The oneness of our nation is not that we do not have individuals, but that the individuals are all to crown G-d as King, through accepting the Torah, through accepting G-d's Will in how to live each and every unique life of our Nation. One of the 48 ways to accept the Torah listed in the Mishna in Avot is, נוֹשֵׂא בַעוֹל עִם חֲבִירוֹ, to carry your friend's "yoke" along with him. Because G-d's Kingdom is dependent on His Nation as a whole crowning Him as king, not on a lone servant.

Although the gentiles have concepts of unity, their brand of unity has nothing to do with the unity of Knesset Yisrael. Parashat Hukat begins with the law, אָדָם כִּי-יָמוּת בְּאֹהֶל, *A person, when he will die in a tent, ...* all those things and people who are under the same roof become impure, as well. (19;14) R Shimon Bar Yochai deducts from this passuk, that the deceased gentile bodies do not cause impurity to those who are under the same roof, for they are not called אָדָם, a person. (Yevamot 61a)

In the notorious trial of the Mendel Beilis blood libel, in year 1913, Mendel was under false accusation that he killed a Christian child, and that he needed its blood to bake Matzot. In one of the claims against Mendel, the prosecutor brought this piece of Talmud as proof to his theory that Jews are racists. That Jews only refer to Jews as אָדָם, as people. This would imply, that gentiles are not even אָדָם, not even considered people.

The defendant Oscar Grozenberg, under the direction of R' Maazeh, countered this racial criticism against our Talmud in the following manner. The word Adam is utterly unique: both "man", in singular form, and "man", in plural form, are referred to as אָדָם. This is very different from the other Hebrew word for man, אִישׁ, which, in its plural form, is אנשים. But the word אָדָם is different. This is the reason why the Torah used specifically the word אָדָם regarding impurity in the tent with the dead... To teach that only the type of people who see themselves not as singular, but as part of a nation, can be called אָדָם. Only the Jews are that nation, as evidenced by the unity at the time among our people during the Beilis blood libel. We are called אָדָם, because we all have inside us a part of Adam Harishon's responsibility to crown G-d as King. That is what makes us one.

So how do we become one? How do we tap into the power of Knesset Yisrael?

Here are the Selfie Steps. The self-help steps that make us one. The self-help steps that will bring Mashiach. Amen.

1. Objectivity, not Subjectivity. Looking at the world and how to make it better, not just how you become better. It is not only about you. It is about G-d, His world, and His being King.
2. Feeling pain of other Jews, no matter their level of observance, where they are in the world or what their background is. Visiting the sick, being there for others in their time of pain, stress or difficulty etc. (Please see Rashi Bamidbar 20;25)
3. Putting G-d's Will before our own will. Spirituality over Physicality. Drive for physicality separates us. Spirituality unites us.
4. Loving Jews for no reason at all.
5. Praying for the nation as a whole.

CALM, CONFIDENT AND CONTENT

Why did the Jews say Shira in the desert only on the Well of Water, and not on the Mannah? Because about the Mannah, they made tasteless remarks, "And now our souls are dry, there is nothing..." (Bamidbar 11) G-d said, "I want neither your complaints nor your praise". That is why G-d did not give them permission to say Shira. But on the Well, G-d allowed them to say Shira, because it was dear to them... (Shemot Rabba 7)

How sad. G-d brought them 40 years of Mannah, and no matter how much they would want to say Shira for Manna, G-d was not interested. To say Shira is a privilege. You need permission. If you complain, G-d is not interested in your Shira. You blew it by looking at the negative and complaining.

Saying Shira is not something we should take lightly. Shira is what keeps every element of the world in existence. It is the powerhouse of every creature. When Yehoshua stopped the sun from setting, he said, *שָׁמַשׁ בְּגִבְעוֹן לֹא תִשָּׁב, Sun in Givon, silence!* (Yehoshua 10) Why 'silence'? Why not 'stop'? Yehoshua commanded the sun to stop saying Shira. Without saying Shira, the sun is powerless, so it froze in its tracks (Chomat Anach (Chida) Tehillim 19). When you feel powerless, when you are not being you, it is because you are not singing Shirah. Shirah is your battery. *יִשְׂרָאֵל לִפְנֵי הַקָּדוֹשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא יוֹתֵר מִמְּלַאכֵי הַשָּׁרָת, שִׁירָאֵל בְּכָל שָׁעָה אֹמְרִים שִׁירָה – בְּכָל שָׁעָה* (Hullin 91b)

A person's prayer is not heard unless it is in the Shul, as it says לְשִׁמְעַת אֶל-הַרְצָה וְאֶל-הַתְּפִלָּה, to hear the praise, and the prayer. Our Rabbis learn from this passuk, במקום רנה שם תהא תפילה, in the place of praise, that is where there should be prayer. Rashi explains that the Shul is special, for that is where the minyan says songs and praises, in a singing, sweet and calm voice (Berachot 6a). The power of prayer is strongest when it is associated with singing G-d's praises.

Why don't we say Shira, why don't we feel like we are singing to G-d His praises when we are in shul? What is stopping our hearts from singing?

Everything that you need to know in life, you were taught in kindergarten. To be a part of a group. To make sure you share your fun with others. To ask yourself, always, what you want to be when you grow up, no matter how old you are. To sing the song when relationships have gone sour, *Let's be friends. Make amends. Now's the time to say I'm sorry.* And most importantly, to learn how to say thank you, even if things did not work out the way you expected. The simplest truisms in life are the most important ones, and, unfortunately, the most forgettable ones. The truths we were taught then keep coming back to us, to remind us what we keep forgetting. Like the lesson of Rick Hanson.

There is a recent study by UC Berkeley-based clinical psychologist Rick Hanson that will help you to "Reprogram your brain to be calm, content, and confident in 10 seconds". It explains why so many people are miserable and how to experience more joy. Here it is, in a Torah-based version.

People have a tendency to pay attention to the negative rather than the positive. This is a response of the Nefesh, the animal-survival part of your soul that is hard wired to a "fight or flight" survival response. *Survival depends upon immediately identifying and quickly reacting to life threats.* According to Hanson, "there is a negativity bias that makes like Velcro for bad experiences, but like Teflon for good ones." Therefore, bad experiences tend to stick with us (because they seem IMPORTANT), while good experiences tend to be quickly forgotten. Over time, we tend to accumulate a long laundry list of easily-recalled bad experiences, which seem vivid and significant, while we tend to forget good experiences.

Hanson cites studies that good relationships require at least a 5-to-1 ratio of positive interactions to



negative ones. *In other words, you'll probably dislike your boss if he doesn't praise you at least five times more than he criticizes you. Unfortunately, it's the bad experience that sticks.* The Nefesh is busy accumulating negative thoughts, experiences, and worries and sticking big, red, "THIS IS IMPORTANT!!!" flags on them.

Fortunately, you can tap into your Neshama and reprogram yourself to be happy, simply by taking 10 to 30 seconds to focus on how happy you feel when you're experiencing a small pleasure. You instruct your brain to stick a "THIS IS IMPORTANT!!!" flag on the little things that make you happy. Over time, your brain becomes acclimatized to being happy. *The happiest people are those who seem to be able to enjoy whatever is going on at the time, not those who have encountered the fewest difficulties in life. Without really knowing what they were doing, those people who seem "naturally happy" have actually been programming their brains to be that way.*

If a person does not see the good in the bad, or if he does not trust G-d that there is a good reason for the bad in the good, then G-d does not want his Shira. Because Shira is recognizing how it was, is and will be all good. That G-d is always there in your life, opposite you. *Anyone who says Shira in This World, will merit to say Shira in the Next World, as it says,* אֲשֶׁרֵי יוֹשְׁבֵי בֵיתְךָ עוֹד יְהַלְלוּךָ סְלָה, Lucky are those who sit in Your House; they will continue to praise You, for eternity (Sanhedrin 91b). This is the connection of the next passuk we say אֲשֶׁרֵי הָעַם שְׂכַנְתָּ לָּו אֲשֶׁרֵי הָעַם שְׂיִקְנֶךָ: *Fortunate is the nation for whom this is so, lucky is the nation that YHVH is His G-d(Elokim).* The only way you can say Shira is if you can see

STOP OVERTHINKING IT!

Overthinking usually starts from something legitimate, but then it loses boundaries. It is so common for people to overthink in so many areas. Was I guilty? Why did I make such a mistake? Why did others act the way they did, or not even apologize when they realized they were wrong? People overthink what others think about them. Or

that G-d's mercy (YHVH) stands behind all the difficulties in life (Elokim).

In life, we have pain, and we have pleasure. There is no such thing as pain without pleasure. And there is no such thing as pleasure without pain. G-d gives pain and suffering only so that we can see through it to its purpose, and actually love it. הַבֵּינָן יִסוּרֵיךָ (Berachot 5b). Shirah is not about thanking G-d for giving you a good life, as much as it is about being thankful to G-d that He used you as a vessel to bring awareness of His G-dliness into the world, that He is running the world at every moment, and He can change reality at any moment (Beit Halevi Beshalach; R Tzadok Sichot Malachei Hasharet 2).

We are here for a purpose, ה' לְהִתְעַנֵּג עָלָי. *To enjoy and appreciate the goodness that G-d gives us and to recognize that it is He who is giving us what we have. ה' שִׁפְכֵי כַמִּים לְבַרְךָ נֶכַח פְּנֵי ה'.* *Pour out your heart like water, opposite the Face of G-d.* You can pour your heart like water, out of thankfulness and gratitude, only if G-d is *opposite* you. That is the only way there is meaning in pain and suffering. ה' לִנְגוּדֵי תַמִּיד, *I place G-d opposite me, always.* Only if you are conscious of the fact that G-d is right there in front of you, always, can you praise G-d, because only then is it possible for pain to have a rhyme and reason.

This is the main goal in this world, to become a נֶכַח פְּנֵי ה' Jew, a לִנְגוּדֵי תַמִּיד Jew.(End of Alei Shur 2)To be aware that G-d is right here in front of us, at all times, waiting for us to sing.

overthink if something, or someone, or myself, is normal.

In so many problems in life, the real problem is not as great as the problem of overthinking it. Nothing can help us like our own thinking, and nothing can hurt us like our own thinking. Focusing has



become a hot topic in self-help. But the main problem is not focusing; it is the lack of tools to stop overthinking.

The Torah tells us about the Mitzvah of the Red Heifer, a cow that is completely red, one that never bore a yoke – to slaughter it, burn it, take its ashes and sprinkle them with water on people who became impure because of their contact with dead. Rashi tells us that this Mitzvah is a Hok, a mitzvah that has no logic to it. Then, ironically, Rashi brings R Moshe Hadarshan to explain that the idea behind the Red Heifer is for it to atone for the sin of the Golden Calf. The Red Cow is the mother that needs to clean up after the mess made by its child, the Golden Calf.

Why does Rashi say that this is a Hok, and then, he brings an explanation for it from R Moshe Hadarshan? And, how does the Heifer clean up after the Golden Calf? (See Beit Halevi on Ki Tisa)

The Talmud tells us that in the merit of Avraham having said, humbly, ואנכי עפר ואפר, And I am dust and ashes, he earned for his children the mitzvah of the Red Heifer and its ashes.(Hullin 88b) What is the connection between Avraham's humility and the Red Heifer? Ashes for ashes? Also, the Midrash tells us that because of Avraham's "being simple" להתהלך לפני ה' תמים, when he got water to wash the feet of his guests, he merited the waters of the Red Heifer, ... (Pesikta 14 Parah) What is the connection between being simple, not questioning G-d, and the Mitzvah of the Red Heifer?

Let us first focus on the sin of the Golden Calf. At Har Sinai, when our ancestors said נעשה ונשמע, We will do, and then we will listen, we will accept whatever G-d says without asking questions, they went up to the level of Adam before the sin, pre "death" zone. When the Jews sinned with the Golden Calf, they went back to the level of Adam "after" sin. Adam's sin was that he wanted to be like G-d, והייתם כאלהים, to be in control, to know things he might otherwise not be able to know, so that he can serve G-d on a higher level than what he was on. He had only one mitzvah, the mitzvah of not knowing, and he blew it.

The sin of the Golden Calf came about because the Jews of that time *wanted to know* how they were to serve G-d, without a Moshe. Aharon tried to stop this overthinking by buying time, by pushing things off, but Micha, threw the piece of paper with G-d's Name on it into the burning gold, which turned the gold into a walking, talking golden calf. Where did Micha come from? He was a product of Moshe's overthinking! In Egypt, Moshe asked why G-d was allowing Jewish children to be brutally killed, so G-d allowed Moshe to let one of them live. He saved a child who became Micha (See Hadar Zekenim Ki Tisa, Alshich Mishlei 24).

Now, we can understand the Rashi. The Red Heifer, which we merited due to Avraham's humility, due to his accepting G-d without knowing, is a Tikun for the sin of the Golden Calf. This Red Heifer is a Hok, and therefore, it can rectify the sin of the Golden Calf and clean up the mess of our overthinking.

You see, the reason why we sinned with the Golden Calf, Moshe told us on his last day, is not because we had a question that had no answer. "Where is Moshe? How do we serve G-d now?" It is because we had too much gold. והי זהב. (Devarim 1;1) When you don't have to work hard, when you have extra time or money on your plate, you overthink. And when you overthink, even if it is coming from a good source, it can turn into a catastrophe. (This is the danger of Bein Hazmanim. Too much spare time. Too much overthinking.)

People suffer from overthinking on all levels. How will I make enough money to marry off my children? How will I retire? When you *overthink* these, it can take over your life. It can ruin your life. Because the life you live is made up of three things. Your actions. Your conversations. And your thoughts. מעשה דיבור מחשבה. These three are all that you can actually manage. As nice as time management sounds, it is just wishful thinking. You can never control or manage time. You can only manage your actions, conversations and thoughts, by making them measurable through time. You can decide how long or how short a time you can spend on each of them, and you can decide



when and where you want to do any one of the three.

Overthinking is only destructive when you think off the clock. When you do not set aside a time and a place for it. When you don't limit it. We must decide, in advance, how much time to devote to a subject – when and where to think about it. And leave the rest for G-d. It is amazing how our most effective and creative thinking is done when we give it an allotted time. Because the brain works like a muscle: you can't make it think the whole day. It will wear out. When we schedule our thinking time, our thinking becomes super productive.

In almost everything in life, we need a healthy balance. Not too much and not too little. And just like we need to eat with a healthy balance, we need

to think with a balance. Not too much, and not too little. Some people underthink things, out of laziness. And some people overthink things, because they feel they can control the world outside of their actions, conversations, or thoughts. You need to think hard, but not when it is not helping you live a more functioning or successful life. When you are aware that it is hurting you more than helping you, you need to stop. To have the humility to leave it up to G-d. You need to take the “Simplistic mindset” of Avraham, our Forefather. And when you take this lesson of the Red Heifer, you will be ready for Nissan, for your own, personal redemption.

WHEN G-D KNOCKS

Opportunities knock gently on our doors. If we are not listening closely, we don't take advantage of the opportunity, and it slips away. Temptations in life don't knock. They lean on the doorbell and are hard to ignore. People who succeed in life are good at noticing the gentle knocking of opportunity. Likewise, they are good at ignoring the constant buzzing of temptation. The greater the person, the greater he is at noticing opportunities and taking advantage of them. And the better he is at ignoring the temptation, till it just gives up and goes away.

There are business opportunities and relationship opportunities. There are opportunities in self-improvement and opportunities to express our gratitude to G-d. Listen closely, so you don't miss the knock, so the opportunity doesn't go away. I find that the summer is one of those opportunities that life occasionally brings. Opportunity to change scenery and to spend quality time with the people who bring quality to our lives. Opportunity to rekindle old friendships in new ways. When we take advantage of life's opportunities, we get more of them. When we disregard them, they disregard us. This is a lesson from our Parasha.

Moshe hit the rock. G-d told Moshe to take the staff, gather the congregation, and speak to the rock so that it would give forth water. But Moshe hit it, instead. For this mistake, for not sanctifying G-d's Name in the proper way, G-d decreed that Moshe was not to enter the Land of Israel. Moshe would die in the desert. And, our Rabbis tell us, if Moshe had brought us into the Land of Israel, the Holy Temple would never have been destroyed, and there would have been no exile.

For Moshe, this was a severe punishment. Moshe wanted to enter the land not to taste its luscious fruits, but to fulfill the mitzvot that can be performed only in Israel. Why was he to be given such a harsh punishment? What was so grave about the act of hitting the rock that Moshe lost the opportunity of entering Israel?

The answer is that hitting the rock was not the sin. The sin was missing another opportunity to sanctify G-d's Name. Because he missed the opportunity to sanctify G-d's Name, he lost the next opportunity to enter the Holy Land. As much as he prayed, and he prayed a lot, G-d did not knock again with opportunity. It was not a



punishment; it was cause and effect. You miss the knocking, and opportunities slip away. You can't get them back.

Hellen Keller once said, "Life is a daring adventure, or it is nothing at all." Some people know how to make a living, but don't know how to live. They go from temptation to temptation, with no meaning in life. There is no better way to live

HAPPY IN THE HOLOCAUST

Everybody wants to be happy. Very few people are.

One fellow says, "All I need is to get married, and then I can be happy". His friend says back to him, "All I need is to get divorced, and then I can find happiness in life." A third fellow says, "All I need is to buy my dream house, and then I can be happy." His friend answered back, "And all I need is to pay off my mortgage, and then happiness can begin."

On one man's grave, it was inscribed, "Here lies the man whose happy life was about to begin."

The reason why unhappy people are unhappy is not because something they have or do not have in life. A man living in the lap of luxury can be wretched, and a man in the depths of poverty can be overflowing with joy. I will share with you the wisdom of one refrigerator magnet, "*I had the blues because I had no shoes, Until upon the street I met a happy man who had no feet*".

What is the secret ingredient of the happy people that is lacking in the unhappy? Happiness is an "*all - weather*"/ "*all - terrain*" decision, and not everyone realizes this. And many who actually do realize this are not willing to make this decision, daily. The secret of genuine happiness is, the ability to say, "No matter what happens, I decide to remain happy." And one needs to make the decision a few times a day, or as many times as something unhappy comes into his life schedule.

As long as someone is looking for or depending on something outside himself for happiness, he is missing the happiness boat. Because the port to the

than to listen for opportunity to knock and to make the best of it. Life is one big opportunity. It is an opportunity to sanctify G-d's Name in this world through praying and learning Torah, to better our relationships. Take advantage of the opportunity. Take advantage of life, before it slips away!

happiness journey is internal, not external. All external causes for happiness dim with time. Only internal happiness is an everlasting flame, one that no one can extinguish. Victor Frankel wrote in *Man's Search for Meaning*, *We who lived in the concentration camps can remember the men who walked through the huts comforting others, giving away their last piece of bread. They may have been few in number, but they offer sufficient proof that everything can be taken away from a man but one thing: the last of the human freedoms - to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one's way.* Happiness is one of those choices. It is one of those freedoms.

All those unhappy people out there - and too many times in life I mistakenly join them - are looking for an external element of happiness or pleasure. Even if that external element is something somewhat internal, like a good feeling of accomplishment, it is still external. It is not the real thing. Even depending on successful childrearing for happiness, success at learning Torah, success at making a livelihood, success at enjoying your family, or success at self development for happiness, although these are all more internal expressions of happiness than worldly desires, they are still not the inner happiness that is eternal, rather, they are all dependant.

This wise piece of advice, that happiness is internal not external, is found in the Orhot Tzaddikim on happiness. "The four fundamentals of happiness are, "Emunah, Bitachon, Common Sense, and Contentment" (Orhot Tzaddikim). Internal things, such as appreciation, bring happiness. Depending



on anything that is more external than that is not deep enough, and only risks missing out on the internal, eternal happiness that we are all capable of having. This is a lesson that my mentor, Rabbi N. Geisler, taught me this week.

This is one of the principles of Judaism and coaching. G-d equips Man with all the resourcefulness he needs to manage for 120 years. He is self sufficient. The coach's job is not to offer resources of information, not to come with the approach that 'I am wiser than thou', but to help the client find wisdom on his own, from the inside. To help him realize that happiness is a choice that you can make. The Swedish saying goes, *Those who wish to sing, always find a song.* Internal.

The difference between a "Real Jew" and the Jew who is just going through the motions is this internal concept. It is not how much a person knows, but how deeply they understand. The Real Jew internalizes the basics of religion, actively, daily, or a few times a day. He decides, every day, that he is happy that he has another day to live, even if he is living in the Holocaust. While the tagging along Jew is passive about his beliefs and fundamental principles of Judaism. That is the whole difference. The Real Jew works from the inside out, constantly finding in himself the inner cause for the problems that the Universe sends him.

Every year that I learn this Parasha, I have a question. The Jews sinned again by complaining. They were so disgusted with the Manna, that they wished they had never left Egypt. G-d punished them with a plague of snakes, that bit many of the Jewish Nation. Many died. And they came to Moshe with regret, asking from him to pray to G-d to rid them of the snakes. G-d told Moshe what to do. Moshe made a copper snake and put it on high. Whoever got bitten by a snake would stare at this copper snake, and live. (This is why many symbols of medical treatment, on ambulances,

insurance logos, etc., display a snake in their design.)

How long did this snake last, curing people from lethal bites? It was operative until King Hizkyahu saw that people were relating to it as an object of idol worship. He said, 'From now on, people who are sick are going to go after the Snake and leave G-d?' Hizkyahu crushed the snake. People of that time started saying, "What do you think you are doing? How can you destroy something that Moshe made for us??" He answered, "Anyone who needs a cure can look to G-d and become cured." And the rabbis agreed with him.

So many people could have been saved from rabies, if we would have had that Snake. After all, Moshe did make it. Moshe, also, was aware of the fact that people could make this mistake, and worship it. And still, Moshe made it. Why ruin it for everyone, just because of some idol worshippers?

Rashi mentions, here, that the Snake did not really cure anyone. And no one dies from the bite of the snake. Rather, as the Midrash Aggadah teaches, the snake was meant to remind people what the original Snake did to Adam and Chava, and how he was punished. And then, the reminder would bring them to Teshuvah. Hizkiyahu did not take away the magical cure. The magical cure was Teshuvah and prayer. (It is a fact that has been proven, again and again, that sick people who pray and sick people who are prayed for have better chance for recovery than those unaided by prayer. Internal shifts of belief can be more powerful than medicine.)The snake was just a reminder that the answer to the snake bite is something internal. And if we would realize this and would worship G-d, we could be cured.

THE SECRET INGREDIENTS OF AHARON'S PEACEMAKING METHOD



I can't stop listening to Avraham Fried's new song. "There's a place, in your heart, deep within, known as the Kodesh Hakodoshim. There's an altar there, with a Heavenly fire burning; that's why we're always yearning, that's why we're all returning."

I always had a hard time answering the question what business I am in. Not anymore. I am in the Kodesh Hakedoshim business. I don't expect anything from other people; I have expectations only from myself. But, I believe in everyone and try to help rekindle that fire on their innermost altar, to keep the Jewish soul returning and yearning. I call it Frum-world Kiruv. Rekindling that fire, finding that place, in the heart, deep within. Something I learnt from Aharon.

In the Mishna in Avot, Hillel taught us to be one of Aharon's disciples. In this week's parasha, Aharon died, and *all the people* wept. Women included. Our Rabbis derive from this that Aharon was the master peacemaker. He had the secret recipe of making peace between man and woman. And this is Aharon's secret recipe, consisting of four ingredients: אהבה שלום, רודף שלום, אהבה את הבריות, ומקרבתן לתורה. Love peace, run after peace, love people, and bring them close to Torah.

Secret no. 1. "Love peace". Defining terms is important. Speed = distance divided by time. Art = making something out of "nothing". What is peace? The art of respecting and valuing people and their differences. To make peace, you need to value and respect the different opinions and lifestyles of the people in your life. Not necessarily because you accept their opinion, but because you value and accept the *person* who has the different opinion. Every fight has an element of sensitive self-esteem in it. People who love peace are people who love supporting the sensitive self-esteem in others. To get over a fight, one needs to put aside all of his own "self" and "ego" in difficult conversations, dealing with diversity objectively, and with ultimate respect to those with whom he disagrees. This is alluded to in the Mishna in Avot, for it says, 'Be one of the students of Aharon' ... not Aharon *Hakohen*. This is because humility is a prerequisite for peace, and Aharon would hide his

High Priesthood, behaving with humility while making peace. "My Kehuna does not mean I am in any way one-up from you."

Opinions don't need to pop egos. When a disagreement turns into a fight, it is because there is an inner need for one of the two parties to defend his/her existence and intrinsic value. Subconsciously, the disagreement caused the person who now faces opposition to feel as if not only his opinion is being opposed, but he himself, or she herself, is the object of opposition. Most people who are suffering in their Shalom Bayit suffer because of a double edged sword. Lack of communication skills and lack of mutual respect. These two are the greatest causes for all divorce cases. Just by communicating mutual respect, it is possible to diffuse most disagreements. Most differences can be solved just with the love for peace.

Secret 2. Run after Peace. To be one who makes peace, you need to go out of your comfort zone, and chase it. You need to run after it. You need to sweat for it. You need to chase after opportunities to support people's egos, to look at a person's strong points and praiseworthy characteristics. My wife heard from her Rebbetzin that parents mistakenly make reward chart systems in the areas where a child has weaknesses. Why not make reward systems where the child has strengths, and boost his ego by making it easy for him to succeed? Why not chase after a person's self esteem, boosting up his ego, before it is weak and chases after you? If you are passive about making peace, it won't last. Shalom "Bayit" means, if you want Shalom, you have to "buy it". You need to pay the price, whatever it is, to boost the egos of those who are important to you.

Secret 3. Love people. We are in a generation the likes of which has never been before. The Millennials. A generation that prefers digital people over real people. I remember, years back, feeling insulted when I waited in line to speak to the manager of a store, but the manager was, instead, talking to a customer on the phone. People give higher importance to a person on the phone



than to those who troubled themselves to come to speak in person. The person on the phone gets more attention than the important people in our lives waiting for us to address them, live. And now, in our generation, with the emails, WhatsApps, etc., obsession with digital media is just dizzying, bringing this disrespect to a new, much higher level.

We live in a generation that loves the people of the world as a whole; our generation is a very positive one, where, in general, we all want the world to be a better place and care about it. We believe in that goal, but the level of communication on a personal level, has become mostly digital, with a lot of “digital or virtual relationships”, and very few genuine, real-life relationships. This love for ‘digital people’ has taken over love for real people.

It is hard to love people when you do not love yourself. It is hard to take out time for people, when you do not take out time for yourself. It is hard to respect people, when you do not respect yourself. Loving yourself and loving people is the only way you can really make peace. To have a relationship, you need to want a relationship. If you are too busy being busy, you may not be ready for a relationship. If your Shalom Bayit is down the tubes, it may be because you have lost your interest in loving people... and very possibly, because you have fallen in love with digital people, if that makes any sense.

Secret 4. Bring them close to Torah. Making peace, Shalom Bayit , diffusing arguments, does not

ALLOWING G-D TO DO HIS THING

לעושה נפלאות גדולות לבדו כי לעולם חסדו *To the One Who does great wonders alone, for His kindness is everlasting.* (Tehillim 136) The Zohar asks, Why does it say that G-d does His miracles alone? Of course He does everything alone!

The answer is that G-d does miracles that we are not even aware of. (Midrash Tehillim 36)The Zohar explains... Imagine a snake, under someone’s bed, waiting for the person to get up, so that he can bite him and inject venom into his

necessarily need to be addressed as an intellectual problem, a problem in the mind; it can be seen as a problem of the emotions, the heart. I have a friend who has helped many couples. I asked him what his trick is. He said it is simple. Before asking how things are, he learns with the fighting or abused spouse the Sefer ‘Lev Eliyahu’, by Rabbi Eliyahu Lopian, a sefer that speaks to the heart. After learning for twenty- thirty minutes, he opens the discussion and addresses the issue. The heart is open, and it is much easier to change the way a person feels when the heart is open.

Torah gives purpose in life, restructures value systems, clears thoughts, and brings people closer to G-d. All of the above are of massive importance in a long-lasting marriage. A lot of disagreements can be solved by learning G-d’s ultimate view and having a Rabbi that gives direction and structure to life.

And there is a spin-off to the Mishnah. Learning Torah is not only an element in peacemaking. It is the ultimate cause. The only way to bring someone close to Torah is through loving him. אהב את התורה *Aharon loved people and brought them close to Torah.* If you are trying to get someone to learn with techniques, but without love, you are barking up the wrong tree. By making someone feel good, by making someone feel loved, you rekindle his fire to want to learn Torah.

veins. The man gets up and puts his foot down, directly on the head of the snake, not having the slightest idea that he has just killed the snake that wanted to kill him. One of G-d’s Ways, is that He performs miracles that only He knows about for us. (Zohar 3 Balak page 200b)

This is something we see in our Parasha. The Emorai set up a trap at the Arnon Valley. They knew the Jews would be passing by. The two sides of the valley were about seven miles apart. On one



side, there were protruding boulders; opposite them, there were caves. The Emori waited in ambush in the caves, prepared for attack: G-d brought the two sides of the valley together, the protruding rocks fitting perfectly into the caves. Legions of Emorai warriors were crushed as the two sides came together. No one knew about this. **לעושה נפלאות גדולות לבדו** – G-d sometimes does His thing, when no one has any clue as to the great miracle that has been performed.

I thought about this for a while. I told it to my wife, when I went to visit her in the hospital after her having given birth. She liked it, and then told me a Dvar Torah she heard from her Rebbetzin about child birth. The pain of child birth is one of the greatest pains humans go through. The Rebbetzin explained that the pain of childbirth is so intense – the feeling is that the body is unable to contain such complete loss of control. Why do women need to go through this? It is to rectify the sin of Chava, the sin of the Forbidden Fruit. Chava wanted the Fruit of the Tree of Knowledge, so that she could be G-d-like. Being G-d-like means being in control. In total control. The pain a woman goes through at childbirth is a pain that makes a woman feel, “G-d! I can’t do this!! This is too painful for me!! Please! Help me!” – I am totally out of control- and You are totally in control! – and then the baby is born.

I realized that there could be another explanation of the word **לבדו** here. That for G-d to bring about your Geulah, He sometimes waits for you to realize that He does not need you to try so hard – to stress, to lose yourself. Sometimes, for G-d to do His thing, He waits for you to stop doing YOUR thing... so that you can realize that He is doing it alone.

If only men would have the same intensity of insight and understanding of their curse of **בזעה** **אפיך תאכל לחם**, *by the sweat of your brow you will eat bread* – their need to work hard for their parnassah – as the understanding that women have, in childbirth! Allow me to explain.

One of the best books on marketing is a book called *Swimming with the Sharks... without getting eaten alive*. It is a great book, and it really gives you witty business advice. Just the name of the book represents the business world. If you want to be in business, you need to realize that business is war. Because any profitable area in business has competition, and you are always in some sort of war with your competitors over the customers. Your competition stays up at night, praying, wishing, dreaming how he can put you out of business. Going out to work is sometimes necessary, if you can’t stay in learning; but it is what it is. It’s war. It’s swimming with sharks.

R’ Dessler gives a vivid description of this: He once saw a pack of wolves fighting over a dead animal – fresh flesh. They were all biting and clawing one another, inflicting bleeding wounds on each other...until finally, one wolf came out of the skirmish with the prize: the piece of meat. The victor is wounded, bleeding – but, still, he has won. Rabbi Dessler recognized the parallel to the business world: the wounded winner takes the big prize, the business that has wiped out all competition. But, he is left without gratifying relationships, left with failing health and continuous worry as to how to keep hold of his gains, forever. The competitors are left to lick their wounds. This is the way of the world.

But the Torah’s way of making Parnassah, of being in business with competition, is first of all asking yourself the question: Do I REALLY believe that the amount of money I am supposed to have this year was decided on Rosh Hashana? Do I really believe that all G-d wants from me is to work, with the smartest plan I can come up with, and work reasonable hours, and then G-d can do the rest for me? When it comes to business, why can’t *Man* realize, **לעושה נפלאות גדולות לבדו**, that G-d sometimes waits for you to stop trying so hard... as if He needs your help? Sometimes G-d is waiting for you to let Him do His thing! Alone!

I got to be close with a very successful business man. He is an observant Jew. I told him about some excellent books on business that I read, like



the **Twenty-one Secrets of the Self-Made Millionaire**. He said to me, Yosef! There is no one secret to becoming a millionaire! Of course, the things you told me from the book are all true; but I have friends who are smarter than me, worked harder than me, had more capital than me and never made any money! Yosef, to become rich,

you need Mazal!! I told him, yeah, Mazal is an acronym. It stands for Makom – to be in the right place. Zman – at the right time. Limud – with the right amount of experience, or Lashon – knowing the right thing to say. He said, Yosef, call it whatever you want. If G-d wants you to make the money, He does not need you to help Him!

THE ART OF IMAGINATION

The Jews spoke badly about G-d and Moshe: Why did they take us out of Egypt, to die in the desert? There is no bread, no water, and our soul is repulsed by the disgusting bread (the Mannah). G-d sent in the people poisonous snakes, and they bit the people and many Jews died. And the nation came to speak to Moshe, and they said, we sinned, because we spoke about G-d and about you. Pray to G-d, and He will remove the snakes from upon us. And Moshe prayed for the nation. And G-d told Moshe, Make for yourself a serpent, put it on high, and all that are bitten will see it and live. And Moshe made a copper snake; he put it on high, and if a snake bit a person, he would gaze at the copper snake and live.

When Moshe made the snake, he said: I will make a copper snake, so that all the Jews will see it and remember what the First Snake did, and what happened to him, and they will do Teshuva. (Midrash Aggadah)

Why did Moshe make the snake out of copper? And what is the connection from the Jews complaining about the Mannah to the sin of Snake? And what was the connection to how Snake was punished? Also, we know that the Nachash is called the Nachash Hakadmoni, the primordial snake, the first snake. Why?

The fourth of the 13 principles of faith, is the belief that G-d was the first, and He will be the last. Nothing existed before G-d. He is not limited by nature or the four elements. The four elements exist each one with its own, specific characteristics, and all of nature exists, because that is G-d's Will. One must believe each of the 13 Principles in order to

have a portion in Olam Haba. Why is G-d being first before the elements so important?

The Midrash tells us something amazing. *A Rasha, in his lifetime, is called dead. A Rasha is someone who does not make a blessing. He sees the sun coming up, and does not bless G-d over it יצר המאורות. He sees the sun set, and he does not bless over it המעריב ערבים. He eats and drinks and does not bless. (Tanchuma Vzot Habracha 7)* Why is someone who does not make a blessing called a Rasha? And why is his life not a life?

The Rasha believes that the world has a nature that is independent of G-d. The sun *has to* rise and set. Food *has to* exist. G-d did not choose this, so, I do not have to bless Him for it. When a person lives in a world where he feels that nature was not chosen by G-d, a world that he feels is ruled by nature, he is not conscious of having received anything from G-d. There is no life, where there is no choice. *I just happen to be here, and the sun just happens to rise and set, and food just happens to be in the supermarket.*

What a Chutzpa! There is no bigger chutzpa, no greater audacity, than when someone does something for you, and you show them that you do not care for them or about them. There is no bigger audacity toward G-d, than showing him that you do not care that He cared and is caring for you. Not caring about his Torah and Mitzvoth is much worse than not keeping the Torah and Mitzvoth. This is why Moshe made the snake from copper because copper is iconic to audacity and brazenness. (See Rashi Shemot 27) Snake had the Chutzpa to convince Chava that if she would eat from the fruit,



she would become G-dlike and independent. How so?

The Nachash Hakadmoni, the Snake, was saying to Chava, there was matter, *before* G-d; G-d was not first. Nature was first, and just as G-d was able to form the nature that existed prior to Him, if you would eat from this fruit, you will be G-dlike. G-d is afraid that if you eat from this tree, you will not need Him anymore, for you will be limitless, like Him. This forbidden fruit is independent of G-d's control. Chava believed that if she would not need G-d anymore, if she was independent from Him, she could serve Him better. G-d therefore punished Snake that its food shall be dirt. There is no shortage of dirt, and that was precisely the punishment. This way, Snake will never have to worry for parnessah, and never have to speak to G-d. This was the sin of the Jews. They did not want the Mannah, because they did not want to be dependent on G-d. The Jews complained about the Mannah, because they did not want a miracle-bread. They wanted nature, normal food. G-d said, you do not want My miracles? You do not want a connection with Me? You want to manage on your own, you want to live a "natural life"? You think that nature is not miracles, nature is not Me? I will stop the miracles of protection in the desert. Now, deal with the poisonous snakes! Deal with nature!

This is why Moshe was to put the snake on high. The snake represents the bad and the impurity in the world. We tend to think that the bad and holiness have two, independent sources. We tend to believe that bad and holy are two unrelated entities, and that each has a nature of its own. But when Moshe lifted the Snake on high, and we looked upwards to the Snake and we saw Heaven behind it, we realized that even the snake, even the bad, pain, sickness, are all messengers and messages are from Above. Once we recognize that the bad is from Heaven, once we get the message, we justify the purpose for which the bad was created, and G-d takes the bad away.

The source of the first sin of mankind is the source of all our sins. All sin is rooted in imagination, in a lie. Adam and Chava sinned, because they both

believed Snake that they would be like G-d, and not dependent on Him. How was Snake able to persuade them? With the power of imagination that – heaven forbid – the sin will give you such a good time in life, you won't even need G-d nor will you ever have to deal with Him! הנחש השיאני ואוכל . This means that Snake convinced me, persuaded me, אטעיני. Not only did that not happen, Adam and Chava became mortal, driven away from G-d, needing to work and toil to survive... and deal with mosquitos! The antithesis of being G-dly! This imagination, that I am not dependent on G-d, nor will I have to deal with Him, is the *zuhama* that the Snake put into Chava and all humanity. It is the root of all haughtiness, and we all live a lifelong battle fighting it.

People forget G-d, because they are busy running after happiness and success, as if once they reach those goals, they will reach eternal bliss, and they will then be able to manage without G-d. "If I take care of my finances first, my retirement, marrying off the kids, then, I will be able to focus on my relationship with G-d". When I will have financial independence, I will have the headspace to serve Him.

It is so interesting. When people reach that happiness or success that they gave up so much to achieve, they feel that they need much more of it to be happy again! It was just a mirage! It was just an imagination! You have a million, you want two. You have two, you want four. As long as you do not have the million, you want it. Once you have it, you realize that happiness is not defined by the amount you have in your bank account. Everyone on the planet is running after their version of success and happiness, something that is just an imagination.

Imagination can be your greatest weakness and can be your greatest asset. The greatest men of our nation used imagination to become who they became. They would imagine Gan Eden, they would imagine G-d talking to them when they would learn His Torah, and His Presence above their heads, as they learn. They would imagine that their Shacharit has the power of Abraham. Mincha



has the power of Yitzhak. Arvit has the power of Yaakov. And reciting Tehillim has the power of King David.

The Yetzer Hara, the Snake, knows the power of imagination, so he uses it against us. He makes me think that I can live a life independent of G-d. You want to fight your Yetzer Hara? Imagine what the Torah tells us to imagine! Imagine the inevitable future, the reactions to your actions. Imagine the loss of Gan Eden and relationship with G-d for not

doing His Mitzvah, and the great reward and relationship for keeping His Mitzvot! *Imagine the punishment for sin, and the great reward for refraining from sin! Imagine a video camera watching your every action and thought, a microphone recording your every word, and an undeletable memory card that has on it everything you have ever said or done!* (Avot 2;1)

B+

There are people who wake up in the morning looking to be , hoping to be that day 100% successful in what their view of success happens to be. It may be about being a perfect parent, a perfect spouse, a perfect breadwinner, housekeeper, a perfect servant of G-d ,or perfect at school and studies... But 100 % success, being perfect, is most likely an unattainable goal. When they fail the expected mark, the word FAILED blinks in their subconscious, as they go through the day. These people rarely make it to success. That FAILED blinking sign saps one's energy, self confidence, and whatever else one needs to be successful. At the end of the day, these people settle with a sigh and stay at 70 % success of whatever success means to them. Perfectionists. "All or nothing" thinking. If it is not "all", then it's nothing.

Then, there are people who, when they wake up, go for a bit above their own average. There are less chances to fail at that. When they see themselves meeting their expectations in their daily lives, the sign SUCCESS blinks in their brain. That sign gives them energy, self confidence, and whatever else one needs to be successful. Without hesitation or thinking, they continue whatever it is that is bringing them success, because they felt that it was attainable,

and they are happy to see that they are getting somewhere "successful". This gives them more motivation to invest more effort. At the end of the day, these people settle with a smile and see themselves 85-90 percent successful at whatever success means to them. Each day, their average goes up, and they obviously live successful lives. The funny thing is that the first group of people will never believe that it may be more effective for them to start their day aiming for above average, attainable success. Every day, they aim toward and go for the "perfect". And every day they fail, because "perfect" is humanly unattainable. This is one of the secrets that lies underneath all motivation and depression.

Let us take this a step deeper. The cause for this "all or nothing" type of thinking is first cousins with pervasive thinking, which is an explanatory style, or a way of a explaining life's events. Pervasive is a word that I have started using lately. This word is used when we make, verbally or mentally, an all-encompassing statement or judgment, although it is not at all precise. It is not at all true if I say to myself or to others, "I did not do well on the test", when I scored an 85. "I was 85% successful" is more accurate. When someone is learning difficult text, they might say "I do not



understand”, although they understood 35 percent. A person who had kavvana when he prayed, but had kavanna in only 30% of his prayers – that 35 percent has merit. If it does not, there will not be motivation to advance further, “getting into it” while praying. If we were to make our comments more precise and specific, instead of using sweeping generalities in our appraisals, we would conceivably be better at managing our emotions and our effectiveness.

In this week’s parasha, The Midrash notes that Moshe was rather nervous about fighting Og, King of Bashan. Og must have had a merit that granted him longevity. He was alive even before the days of Noach, and lived until the end of Moshe’s life. Og’s name is derived from the Hebrew word Ugah, round cake, for when he ran from the war of the five kings to tell Abraham that Lot was in trouble, in Sedom, it was Pesach, when Avraham was eating Matzot (round cakes). There were two possible motives for this act of Og. It could have been that Og’s plan was that Avraham go to war and die, and this way, Og could marry Sarah. The other option was that he wanted to inform Avraham vital information about his nephew. Og’s longevity made Moshe nervous.

It seemed that Og *must have had proper intentions* if he was rewarded so greatly. But, Hashem told Moshe not to worry about Og. *For I have put him in your hands...* In other words, Hashem was telling Moshe, along with Og’s good intention to help out Lot and pass this information to Avraham, he also had the bad intention of wanting to lead Avraham to his death, so that he, Og, could take Sarah for a wife. *Moshe, you do not have to worry about Og’s merit.* (See Klei Yakar)

I found this to be a big lesson about recognizing and validating the good, no matter how small, that we did accomplish. Here, Og, who ran from the war to tell Avraham to come fight and save Lot, was rewarded with over five hundred years of life, even though he also harbored an evil intention! The same act for which he was to be killed by Moshe did not take away from his merit. The reward one can get from even a percentage of goodness or positive intentions is amazing. There is no “pervasive” judgment in Heaven. Every thought is considered and accounted for. Everything has value. Even small percentages have precisely *that* amount of value.

FOCUSED DEAD

There was once a businessman who was very dedicated. Dedicated to his business, to his wife and kids, etc. He was so busy at work, he could not find the time to pray in shul with a minyan. He could not find the time to make a daily Torah study session. This went on for many years. It bothered him, but what could he do? Work did not let him get away. Life went on; he was getting old, his hairs turned white, and the following question could not escape his head. *How can I go to Heaven without*

learning Torah, without praying in a minyan? What am I going to answer them in Heaven when they ask me the first question in that Final Judgement, קבעת עתים לתורה - Did you set aside time for Torah study?... This thought would give him no rest.

He needed to make some type of change in schedule. So he did. He went first thing in the morning to shul to pray with the minyan. Then,



he stayed in the shul to learn for two hours. Only after that did he go to work.

When he got to his store, his wife was waiting for him there. The store was full of customers, and his wife was full of anxiety, running the store all by herself. She gave him a look, with her hands on her hips, and she asked, “Don’t you realize that these are our busiest hours? Where were you?” The husband somehow got out of it. He told her that he had gotten busy with some important and urgent matters.

This happened for a few more days. His wife lost her patience, and she went out to search the town for him. What was he busy with every morning? Where was he disappearing to?

She was more than shocked to find her husband in shul, sitting with a study partner, surrounded by books. She let out a yell. “What is wrong with you? Have you gone crazy? The store is full of customers that we worked so hard to build trust in. Aren’t you worried we will lose our faithful customers, if each morning we open the shop two hours after our competitors?”

Our dedicated, hard working fellow answered his wife. “Tell me, my dear wife. What would you do if one morning I would not wake up? Or if one morning the Angel of Death took me with him? Would you be able to tell him that he can’t take me, because the store is full of customers? From now on, make it as if the Angel of Death has taken me with him for two hours. After two hours, if I come to the store, pretend as if I have undergone resurrection, תחיית המתים.

This is the parable that the Chafetz Chaim would give to explain the first passuk in the parasha . זאת התורה אדם כי ימות באוהל . *This is the Torah, (the laws,) of a man who dies in a*

tent... Our Rabbis (Berachot 63b) teach, אין דברי תורה מתקיימים אלא במי שממית את עצמו עליהן. *The words of the Torah are only found in a person who is willing to die for them.* The Chafetz Chaim would bring from the above parable that the only way one can learn Torah and transcend daily, worldly matters, is to perceive one’s self as if he were dead, with nothing in his mind. N/A – not available. There is no cell phone, and there are no emails. No need for food, no one needs me. Imagine, theoretically, the thoughts that would be going on in the mind of a buried person, one hundred years after he is dead. Quiet. This is the only way to learn. If our cell phones are on, our focus is off. If we are connected to our emails, then we are disconnected from our learning. There are no cell phones in the grave. There are no emails. Just quiet.

One of my favorite hobbies is to help yeshiva students read faster, learn better, focus more. One serious yeshiva boy, 20 years old, who was told all his life that he needed to take medicine to focus, tried everything, but nothing worked for him. I shut the lights in the room. I asked him to imagine that he was dead, 200 years from now, buried. I asked him to think like this for five minutes, and to have no other thoughts except imagining himself, two hundred years from now, six feet under. I left him in the room alone. I came back, and he said he never had such a peaceful five minutes for as long as he can remember. We opened the Gemara and started learning. He said that this was the first time in his life that he knew what “focused” feels like. He was able to pick up on that focused zone, of that session I had with him, and duplicate that state of mind. He rose to the top of his Yeshiva, and is now learning way above what people had expected of his capabilities!



This is what happens when we apply a d'var Torah from the parasha. When we live by it...

CHOOSING G-D'S CHOICE

There is a strange scene in this week's parasha that we must not overlook. G-d assigned Moshe a difficult job – to be the one to tell his older brother, Aharon, that on that very day he was to die and not enter the Land of Canaan. Understandably, Moshe had a hard time coming to terms with this. So, the last day that Aharon was to spend among the living, Moshe behaved toward him in a peculiar fashion. Aharon noticed this, and he said to his younger brother: Moshe, tell me. What do you need from me? Moshe responded – “Could it be that G-d entrusted something to you, (a soul) and now He wants it back?” Aharon answered that all the utensils of the Mishkan were still intact, and nothing was missing. This went on for a quite a while without Aharon having a clue as to what Moshe was hinting at, until Moshe finally asked Aharon to ascend the mountain Hor HaHar, together with his son Elazar... Moshe finally asked Aharon, “If G-d would tell you to die in a hundred years from now, would you accept what He said? Aharon answered, “Tzaddik Hadayan” – the Judge is all-Righteous, and I have faith in Him and would accept! Then Moshe asked Aharon- And if G-d were to ask you to die today, would you accept willingly? Aharon answered in the affirmative. Moshe then said, “Follow me to the top of the mountain, for that is precisely what G-d asked me to tell you!”

Aharon walked behind Moshe like a sheep going to slaughter. G-d then said to the Angels – *At the Akeidat Yitzchak, you stood in shock as you stood by and watched. Come, now, and see how the older brother is walking behind his younger brother to accept death upon himself.*(Midrash Yilmedenu)

The Sifri in Haazinu (and Rashi here) describes Aharon's last few minutes in detail. Moshe told Aharon, “*Enter the cave.*” Aharon entered. *Get up onto the bed.* And Aharon did. *Stretch out your hands, stretch out your arms, close your mouth, close your eyes...* Aharon obeyed every direction he was given. At that moment, Moshe said, “*Fortunate is the man who has such a death.*” Moshe, too, wanted to die in such a way, and G-d granted him his wish.

R' Chechik, zt”l, asks two very obvious questions in relation to this. How can we understand the comparison that G-d makes between the self sacrifice of our Forefather Yitzchak, at the age 38 on the Altar, to Aharon's acceptance of death at the age of 123? And what exactly did Moshe mean, asking to die like his older brother?

The answer here is powerful and applicable to every turn we take in life. When Aharon chose to obey the will of G-d, accepting G-d's will that he die, *that acceptance was no less significant in the eyes of G-d than Yitschak's stretching out his neck under his father's knife*

There are things in life that G-d chooses for us. It is for us to choose if His choice is what we (think we) want, or if we do not want what G-d has chosen for us. When we pick option two, we are in for misery. The moment we feel with the greatest clarity that our choice is being taken away from us is in the face of death. This may be why subconsciously people are so afraid of death. For in the grave, there is no choice. It's “game over.” When Aharon faced death, he accepted it. No complaints. This is



called *choosing what is*. This is a great level for a human to achieve. When G-d chooses things that may not be our preference, like death, or any other situation in life where G-d puts up a road block for us, if we can choose to recognize that the decision G-d has made is good, and that this is what *I* want to happen, then G-d will accord us the credit He accorded Yitzchak on the Altar. Although Yitzchak was a mere 38 years old, his willingness and passion to accept G-d's decree for his self sacrifice *was in some way equal to that of someone at the age 123*, and in his last breaths, he says, *G-d if you want me to die, I want it, too*. As much as we may not think so, our job, income, family, health, can change from one day to the next. Suddenly, a family member may be gone. We must accept this, if G-d chose it, and we cannot do anything about it. It is the best for the deceased, and,

somehow, the best for us. *Because that is what G-d chose*.

Of course, when someone is sick, he must not choose to stay sick. The Torah shows us that one should make every possible effort to attain a cure (ורפא ירפא). If one is fired from a job, he should not choose to stay out of a job. But he *should* choose to recognize that the place where he was working must not have been the right place for him. The place for his success, financially, ethically or in growing as a person must be somewhere else. If one loses all his money, then he is to choose the realization that he was meant to lose his money, and there could not have been anything better for him. What's left is to go figure out how to make the best of what is at hand. Why? Because that's the only rational choice that is left.

And this is what Moshe wished for. To accept and choose what G-d chooses.

The Limits of Human Understanding

The gentiles...single out the Mitzvah of the פרה אדומה Red Heifer פרה אדומה to scoff at. They ask the Jews: "What is this mitzvah and what is the meaning behind it?" It is therefore called a חוק, a law that has no obvious or natural explanation – a decree that you do not have permission to question. (Rashi citing the Midrash)

This week's parashah specifically labels the law of the Red Heifer as a chok (Divine decree), but there are other laws that also fit in this same category, such as שילוח הקן (sending away the mother bird) and כלאיים (not wearing shaatnez, a blend of wool and linen). But the truth is that all mitzvot are ultimately chukim (Divine decrees) as well. Consider, for example, the mitzvot of eating Matzah and Maror on Passover, which are generally not

thought of as unfathomable Divine decrees, but rather as mitzvot that we perform in order to remember our liberation from Egyptian slavery and the Exodus. If, however, we look more closely at the way the Torah presents the mitzvah, we will see that this perception is less than accurate: בעבור זה עשה ה' לי בצאתי ממצרים (שמות יג:). The words actually communicate that the reason HaShem redeemed us from Egypt was in order that we would eat Matzah and Maror! Only to fulfill these mitzvah were we redeemed! Clearly, the "reason" for Matzah and Maror is not merely to remind us of the Exodus.

And so it is with all the Mitzvot. The reasons given for the Commandments are mainly to satisfy our minds, but are not necessarily the ultimate rationale for the Commandments. We



can see this clearly regarding many other mitzvot as well. The mitzvah that a child must obey and respect his parents is seemingly a comprehensible concept of appreciation. However, G-d did not need to create a system where human reproduction occurs through the union of male and female, as with the other creatures. It is more correct to say that G-d “created” parents and parenting in order to facilitate the mitzvah of respecting and honoring parents. The list goes on and on.

Even when we do the mitzvot that appeal to our reason, we must fulfill these Commandments for the sake of obeying G-d’s will, not because they appeal to us and make sense to us. If we do not approach the mitzvot this way, the greatest calamity can occur – as happened to King Solomon. The wisest of men erred when he based his conduct on the Torah’s explanation of the prohibition against a king marrying many wives. The Torah says that many wives could sway the king’s heart from doing the will of G-d. King Solomon mistakenly believed that he could rely on his great wisdom to prevent this from happening to him.

Even when the reason seems obvious to us, we must comply with G-d’s Commandments because “He commanded us.” This explains the seemingly bewildering fact that the only time the Torah tells us **קחזק**” (Be strong!) with

regard to obeying prohibitions is in connection with the prohibition against consuming blood. Even though consuming blood is repulsive, G-d found it appropriate to say: **רק חזק לבלתי לאכול את הדם** – Be strong and do not eat blood (Devarim 12:23). The point here is that the mitzvot of the Torah are not to be done out of our understanding alone, but rather out of a willingness to fulfill G-d’s decree. It turns out, then, that strengthening ourselves (“Be strong!”) is necessary to enable us to refrain from eating blood for the sake of adhering to G-d’s commandments, and not because it is repulsive. Hence, Rabbi Elazar Ben Azarya teaches that a person should not say that he does not eat pork because he dislikes the taste, nor that he does not wear shaatnez because he dislikes the way it feels. Rather he should say: “I greatly desire eating pig,” or “I greatly desire the softness that only shaatnez can offer,” but I refrain because G-d said “No!” (ילקוט שמעוני קדושים רמז תרכו)

This approach of accepting the mitzvot as reflecting G-d’s ultimate “understanding” rather than our own must be applied in the realm of Jewish medical ethics as well. To take one well-known example: Although a patient is suffering tremendously, we are commanded not to “pull the cord.” A gentile doctor might not perceive euthanasia or early-stage abortion as murder, but our Torah does.

Parental Decrees

We can draw an analogy between G-d’s approach to us and the approach parents must often take towards their children. When a younger child asks his parents to explain a certain decision, or even a certain cherished value, they may choose to respond simply: “This is the way things are supposed to be.” The child’s request for an explanation may

concern anything from the type of clothing we wear to how wrong we perceive cigarette smoking to what type of shul we pray in. The parents’ unwillingness to give an explanation or full account of their considerations often has nothing to do with “closed-mindedness,” but rather with their conviction that the child is too young or immature to understand or appreciate



the issues at hand. Of course they would like their children to know all about whatever they are interested in, but parents realize that some things are better left unsaid to a child, and not openly dealt with.

Our Father in Heaven has a similar way of dealing with His children. Many things that we do not know and cannot understand at this moment might later become clear to us, if we have patience, when the time is ripe. Sometimes that time is only in Olam Haba (the World-to-Come). Until then, it might not even be beneficial for us to know the “explanations.”

This concept is particularly important when we are confronted with tragedy. Some people’s first reaction upon hearing tragic news (or talking with mourners at a shiva) is: “Why did it happen?” They may even attempt explanations of the Holocaust. But the fact is that the way G-d runs His world will sometimes seem to us to be a חק similar to the Mitzvah of the Red Heifer – a “decree” that we are unable to understand. Just as in the realm of physics, scientists cannot explain why fire burns and heat rises, we cannot explain the ways of G-d. We would do better to stand back and say with King Solomon: אמרתי אהכמה והיא ממני רחוקה ממני (I tried to achieve greater wisdom, but it is beyond my grasp).

So many people cannot come to terms with their lives after tragedies because they want to understand “why.” Human beings find it difficult to relinquish the belief that man has to understand everything. Understanding the reason and purpose behind occurrences provide a sense of pleasure. But a servant of G-d can feel pleasure and a sense of accomplishment by carrying out G-d’s will even though he does not understand because this proves his dedication to his Master. Our

responsibility as servants of G-d is carry out His will even through the dark periods in our lives without asking “Why?” Of course there are answers to every question, but not always can we understand them. Faith (emunah) starts where our understanding ends.

I found the following Ben Ish uniquely insightful and relevant to this subject. The Talmud (Kidushin 39b) states that in this world there is no room for reward of doing a mitzvah and we receive the true reward in the World to Come. The Ben Ish Chai asks on this the following interesting question .We know that G-d keeps the whole Torah. One of the Mitzvoth of the Torah is ביומו תתן שכרו one must pay a worker the same day that the worker finishes the job. If so, why does g-d wait to give the righteous their reward only in the next world and not in this world which is seemingly the same day of having the job finished?

The answer given is that this law that one should pay his worker the same day the job is done only applies when he was hired to do the job by the recipient of service himself and not through his messenger. Since the Torah was given through Moshe as messenger of g-d to the Jews He is not required to hand over payment before “dawn”. However, says the Ben Ish Chai, that concerning the mitzvah of faith and not questioning G-d, G-d is required by the Torah to pay us in this world. The first two of the Ten Commandments were given directly from G-d to the Nation without involvement of Moshe – אנכי ה' אלקיך – I am Hashem your G-d and לא יהיה לך אלקים אחרים על פני you shall not have other g-ds . For the mitzvah of faith – for not asking why – for that there is reward in this world as well. It can only be so ironic that the one who is asking the question is the one who might never know “why”.



Pursuing Peace Wisely

ויבכו את אהרון שלושים יום כל בית ישראל - במדבר כ:כ"ט

The Jewish People cried for Aharon for thirty days. (BeMidbar 20:29)

As Rashi notes, the word כל (all) tells us that everyone wept for Aharon – women as well as men. Aharon was eulogized as an אוהב שלום (a lover of peace and one who pursued peace) because he would constantly make peace between rivals and between husband and wife.

Hillel's famous teaching was inspired by Aharon's example. Be a disciple of Aharon: love peace and pursue peace; love people and bring them close to Torah (Avot 1:12). The Bartenurah describes how Aharon would go about making peace. He would first approach one of the two feuding parties, and tell him (or her) just how much the other party wholeheartedly regrets his offensive actions and the friction this caused. He is terribly embarrassed that the matter has gotten out of hand, and thus sent me to seek your forgiveness. This same approach would be taken by Aharon in confronting the other party to the dispute. All this was done by Aharon without witnessing regret by either person. Ultimately, when the two met up with one another, they quickly made peace.

The commentators take note of the title given to Aharon: רוֹדֵף שְׁלוֹם – pursuer of peace (see Rabbi Chaim Volozhiner's Ruach Chaim and The Ben Ish Chai's Ben Yehoyada on Sanhedrin 10b). The word רוֹדֵף, which means pursuer or chaser, commonly has negative connotations. Indeed, this is the term the Torah uses to describe someone who is chasing another person with intent to kill or cause serious harm. How, then, could this word be

applied to the efforts of the great peacemaker, Aharon?

The answer given is that in order to attain peace, one must sometimes even take a step towards siding with one party in a dispute, and only then step forward towards peace. For example, imagine that in the time of Aharon, Reuven heard that Shimon has been spreading vicious rumors about him or even plotting against him. If Aharon would try to make peace by saying that he heard Shimon express regret, and was sent by Shimon to ask Reuven's forgiveness, this tactic might easily fail due to Reuven's suspicions about Shimon's true motives. Rather, Aharon would first win Shimon's trust by "chasing peace" and almost take sides in the dispute. He would say to Reuven that if the report about Shimon's plotting is actually true, then you should forcefully set things straight and not forgive him. Only then, after showing Reuven how important his feelings are in Aharon's eyes, and validating them, could Aharon find some way to resolve the conflict: maybe the rumors are false, maybe there is a misunderstanding that can be dealt with and clarified by talking openly. Once Reuven's negative feelings towards Shimon have been validated, he becomes capable of dealing with his anger and overcoming it.

*

The Mishnah about Aharon and his "life motto" continues: אוהב את הבריות ומקרבתן לתורה (He loved people and brought them closer to Torah). Let us explore for a few moments the connection between this aspect of Aharon's life and his technique of validating people's feelings and perspectives. Many people have a passion to engage in קירוב רחוקים (Jewish outreach), and offer our brethren better lives



through the observance of Torah and Mitzvot. The approach to Kiruv that I have adopted and have found effective might be called “the osmosis approach.” Judaism is so beautiful that it does not need to be forced on anyone. Those who are non-religious usually have never gotten the right taste or feeling for it. People’s values are always affected by their surroundings. By building a relationship of friendship and love, even without forcing the discussion towards religious matters, we can help the non-religious pick up many things from Judaism that they can relate to on their level.

There are, of course, those who use the approach of “Join us,” or “Change to our lifestyle.” This approach is usually more effective in outlying areas where becoming religious does not mean having to leave one’s current circle of friends or social group. In big cities, however, where the non-religious often

live on the same block as the religious community, they frequently cannot see themselves leaving their circle and connecting themselves with a circle they always shied away from. Aharon’s method of “playing on their court by their rules” can be effective even in a situation like this. In our terms, this involves our perceiving what Judaism could mean to our non-religious neighbors and talking about aspects of Torah they can relate to. It might even involve just inviting them for a good Shabbat meal. Just by showing care and love, and validating the good values of the irreligious neighbor, one can build a bridge to the most distant of hearts.

If we understand what Aharon was all about, we will realize that we do not need to look too hard for ignorant or alienated fellow Jews into whose lives we can bring Judaism. And if we have proper אהבת ישראל, it may even be the neighbor next door.

A Jewish Jew

וישמע הכנעני מלך ערד ישב הנגב כי בא ישראל דרך האתרים וילהם בישראל וישב ממנו שביץ (במדבר כא:א)
When the Canaanite king of Arad, who lived in the Negev, heard that the Jews were traveling on the Atarim route, he attacked them and took some captives. (BeMidbar 21:1)
Who exactly were these “Canannites” attackers? Rashi explains (following the Midrash) that they were actually Amalekites! They attacked the Jews only after changing their language to that of the Canaanites in an attempt to confuse their would-be victims. They hoped that the Jews would be fooled, and would pray that G-d deliver the Canaanites into their hands. Their prayers would then be of no value. But, fortunately, the Jews noticed that despite their enemies’ language being that

of Canaan, their clothes were those of Amalek. The Jews therefore prayed that G-d redeem them from whomever they were fighting. And G-d answered their prayers.

Now, we might well ask: If the Amalekites were really trying to disguise their identity and pass as Canaanites, why didn’t they adopt Canaanite clothes as well?

The answer should make us stop and think: If the Amalekites would have adopted Canaanite clothing along with the Canaanite language, they would have lost their identity and become Canaanites themselves! Then, when the Jews would pray to G-d for victory against the Canaanites, their prayers would be effective.



The fact is that if a person changes how he speaks together with how he dresses, then his entire identity changes as well. This concept is of great importance in a number of areas, especially in parenting. A well-adjusted child must have a sense of identity, a sense of which group he belongs to. When parents are not happy with their own traditions or surrounding environment, this identity crisis will usually be passed on to their offspring as well. The child falls between the cracks, coming to feel that having no identity is better than having a double identity. Dismayed parents wonder how the child they put so much love into is still not able to find himself. But how can fruits flourish when the stem is so flimsy?

Let's face it: The way we present ourselves to the world is not only the way we are identified by others, but also the way we come to identify ourselves. Just by looking in the mirror for a few moments, we can see what kind of self-identity we are creating. Everyday clothing affects the mindset no less than a Black Tie does at an elegant affair. This is all the more true for us Jews. If, for example, we present ourselves without a head-covering or with a gentile name, then our Jewish identity is put at a very low level on our hierarchy of values.

This will adversely impact on our own Jewish identity as well as that of our children.

It is no accident that we say at the Brit Milah: “כשם שנכנס לברית כן יכנס לתורה לחופה ולמעשים טובים” – Just as he entered the covenant of the Jewish Nation with G-d, so may he merit to learn Torah, marry at the chupah, and live a life of good deeds (Shabbat 137b). Notice that the word used here is כשם rather than כמו, a more commonly used Hebrew word for just as/like. One way of explaining this is that the Jewish name given at the Brit Milah endows the child with a Jewish identity right from the start. As the boy reaches and faces future stages of life, however, it sometimes happens, unfortunately, that Mordechai becomes Max, Chaim changes to Victor, and Shmuel turns into Sam. The name change may herald – and certainly reinforces – a change in identity. For this reason, we say כשם..., not כמו.... We mean not only just as, but also: just like the name. We pray that the little Mordechai, Chaim, or Shmuel should be able to proudly keep his Jewish identity throughout all the stages of life. We pray that G-d give him the courage to face his future maintaining the identity that meant so much to his ancestors throughout Jewish history.

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IN LOVING MEMORY OF SONNY AND IRENE GINDI A”H

And in memory of Reuven ben Sarah A”H



