



Parashat Mishpatim



English version

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THE ART OF APPRECIATING DIFFERENCES

The Talmud (Bava Kama 30a) teaches us a profound lesson about achieving true Chassidut—piety. Rav Yehuda says, "One who wants to be a Chassid should fulfill the laws of damages." Rava says, "He should focus on Pirkei Avot." Others say, "He should fulfill the laws of blessings."

At first glance, the connection between Chassidut and the laws of damages (Nezikin) seems unclear. Why is meticulous observance of nezikin, laws of monetary damage, considered an expression of piety? The Torah contains many financial laws, such as those regarding interest—so why are damages specifically highlighted as making one pious?

The Netivot Shalom explains that on a deeper level, the four Avot, primary categories of damages in Tractate Bava Kama—Shor (ox), Bor (pit), Mav'eh (tooth), and Hever (fire)—represent four inner forces within a person:

Shor (Ox) symbolizes arrogance, as Chazal say, "The proudest of animals is the ox." (Shemot R. 23)

Bor (Pit) represents despair, a feeling of Shiflut (lowliness), being a lost cause, leading a person into a spiral of sin.

Mav'eh (Tooth) reflects uncontrolled physical desires, particularly food indulgence and emotional eating.

Hever (Fire) corresponds to burning, unchecked passions and urges. As we know, when a person

wants to overcome their passions, they should say the passuk: "אֵשׁ תִּמְיֵד תוֹקֵד עַל-הַמִּזְבֵּחַ לֹא תִכְבֶּה" (Shlah).

True Chassidut is not merely about fulfilling obligations—it is about uprooting these four destructive forces. A Chassid is not simply someone who does good; a Chassid is someone who is good, to the core.

This idea leads us to one of the Torah's most mysterious prohibitions—Basar B'chalav (meat and milk). Each, on its own, is perfectly kosher. But what is it about this combination that makes it forbidden?

Harav Shneur Ashkenazi presents a fascinating insight: Mixing fundamental opposites in the wrong way is forbidden. Meat is strong, red, and represents Gevurah—strictness, discipline, and strength. Milk is soft, white, and represents Chesed—nurturing, kindness, and expansion. This is similar to Shaatnez, the forbidden mixture of wool and linen: Wool represents Hevel, as Hevel owned all the livestock. Linen represents Kayin, as he owned all the Earth. The mixture of the two led to destruction, so the Torah forbids them together.

However, there is a key difference between Meat & Milk and Shaatnez: Shaatnez is permissible in holy contexts, like tzitzit and the priestly garments. Meat & Milk remain forbidden in all circumstances—even cooking them together is prohibited. Why? Because when meat and milk are mixed, one of the two is fundamentally changed. Hashem allows opposing natures to coexist—only



when there is a greater spiritual purpose. In tzitzit and the Kohen's garments, these contrasts work together in harmony. But when it comes to Meat and Milk, Hashem created different natures and does not want them to be controlled, contained, or changed.

How do we understand this?

Shalom does not mean sameness. Unity does not mean uniformity. A husband and wife are different. One may be disciplined, while the other is spontaneous. One may be detail-oriented, while the other is visionary. Often, we fall in love with someone because they are our opposite—only to later try to change them into our clone. That is Basar B'chalav! That is the attempt to erase difference instead of embracing it.

A marriage thrives when each person retains their identity while learning from the other and complementing one another. There is a need for a right hand, and there is a need for a left.

Ivana Trump once quipped: "Donald married me because he could not get over my Czechoslovakian accent. 13 years later, he divorced me because he could not stand my Czechoslovakian accent." This reveals an undeniable truth about relationships—the very thing that draws us in at the beginning can later drive us apart. The uniqueness that initially attracts us to a partner—their humor, spontaneity, discipline—can later become a source of frustration.

THE ART OF BALANCING HISHTADLUT

Probably the hardest question in life for the believing Jew is how much Hishtadlut, how much effort, should I invest? If everything is preordained, the future is already known to G-d, הכל צפוי (Avot 3 15) - then what efforts should I put into it all, to achieve the desired outcome?

This is not only when I ask myself the question how hard I should work to make my bread by the sweat of my brow, something that is preordained each Rosh Hashana for the entire year. This is relevant to Shidduchim, how hard one should try to find a spouse for themselves or for their children. This is regarding health, how protective I need to

But this is where the real work of relationships begins. Hashem wants us to learn how to get along with differences because it is in those very differences that love thrives. We don't complete each other by erasing distinctions—we complete each other by embracing them.

To be a Chassid, to be a refined person, means to understand this delicate balance. It means recognizing our own inner Nezikin—the arrogance, despair, indulgence, and unchecked passion that harm our relationships. It means recognizing the innate, natural Nezikin of our spouses—their arrogance, despair, indulgence, and unchecked passion—which may be the flipside of the very reason we married them in the first place: Arrogance can be Classy. Despair can be Humble. Indulgence can mean Knowing how to have a good time. Passion can be Productive. You can learn to appreciate the inseparable package of good and bad in someone's character—or you can choke it by trying to change it.

In a world that pushes for conformity, the Torah calls us to embrace our unique strengths while respecting and harmonizing with the strengths of others. Not the erasure of contrast—but the creation of divine harmony.

Harmony is only created through the blend of differences.

try to make sure that I am healthy. This is even regarding the present Israel-Hamas war, which we just discovered was clearly funded by Iran. Israeli Defense Minister Yoav Galant has just appointed Colonel Eliezer Shkedi this week as Coordinator for Recruiting and Integration of *Chareidim*, to recruit as many *chareidim* as possible for the struggle in Gaza. This, again, is a question, for the Jew with Emunah. Of course, Chareidim do not have a free pass not to join IDF, if they are Israeli citizens. But if they are aiming at Yeshiva Students who actually learn and pray, with a full schedule, this comes back to Emunah, and how much

Hishtadlut, how much effort does one need when they are fighting a war.

One way to know if you are balancing Faith and Effort properly is if you are praying as hard as you are trying. Another way to know what is considered too much effort when it comes to Emunah regarding Paranassah, is when you work during time that you are supposed to learn. Of course, how much you are supposed to learn daily is dependent on many factors, and only a personal Rabbi, who has no agenda other than your spiritual best, can decide that. He needs to be like an angel, in order for you to ask his counsel. (Hagigah 15b) “An angel” means that he needs to have no agenda or gain other than bringing to you the word of G-d. This Rabbi needs to know more Torah than anyone else you know, know you better than any other Rabbi does, and he needs to care about you and your future, about your Olam Haba. As the spirit of Shmuel the prophet told his student King Saul, וַיִּקְרָא אֲתָנָה וַיִּבְרָךְ עָמִי tomorrow Shaul will join Shmuel in Olam Haba, עָמִי בַמַּחֲצִית. (Berachot 12b, Eiruvim 53b)

Every Shabbat, after our day meal, I go to shul to spend a few hours learning *just this subject*. A coach's profession is one of Hishtadlut, so this subject should be something every religious coach should master. There is a Sefer written by a fellow Bayit Vegan resident, the size of a phone book, that is just about this subject... How to know how to balance Hishtadlut, effort, for the believing Jew. In every area of life. I was shocked to see that one of the chapters was regarding war effort.

Why is this an extremely pertinent subject for every life coach? Coaching is about helping someone get from his point A, where he is, to his point B, where he wants to be, in every area of life. Different than psychology or social workers, life coaching is not to focus on how you feel, but rather, how you feel will be a result of the productivity achieved by getting from point A to point B. For example, I am a learning coach. I teach people how to become a genius one on one, and in my Effective learning course, by teaching them to read at 1000 words per minute. I teach how to remember, how to focus, how to think creatively, coming up with questions and answers,

how to take tests, and how to read any passuk and understand what it means without an Artscroll.

I get challenged, sometimes though: Doesn't the Talmud teach that it is determined upon a person's soul, whether he will be wise or dumb; (Niddah 15b) so who does Yosef Farhi think he is? My answer is that it could be that you are a *potential* genius, it is just that G-d wants you to put in the effort to learn the way that the genius learns, and then you will be the genius you were destined to be... You can't know until you try, but with educated effort, knowing how all genius learn, which happens to be the same.

The Talmud in Niddah also states that it is decided upon, from before you were born, if you will be rich or poor, and if you will be strong or weak. Nobody thinks that someone can say that a Jew who goes to the gym is a heretic, or if a Jew goes to business, he does not believe in G-d, if it is all preordained. The question is just, am I doing the appropriate effort, to hide the miracle of change?

The purpose of Hishtadlut is to hide the miracle. G-d does not need your help. He does not need you to work, He does not need you to go to the doctor or dentist, He does not need you to fight in the war and He does not need you to call the Shadchan. He is the G-d who feeds, even if you would just open your mouth, He can get food in there for you, without you raising your arms. He is the G-d who cures, even if the doctors can't. He can bring you the soulmate that is just for you, even if every Shadchan says that what you want does not exist. He can fund your parasha sheets, even if all your donors back out... Do you believe that??? So, why do you work or believe in life-coaching? Why go to the doctor? Why not close down the army, Hatzalah, Zaka, Yedidim, or any Hessed organization, or any Shidduch system?

All Hishtadlut is to minimize the miracle! Extra efforts, though, are as silly and useless as the one who, while standing in a moving train, tries to push the front wall of the train to help it move faster! (Mashal of the Chafetz Chaim) But of course, you need to do the minimal effort of getting on the train! As I write this, I am reminded that so many people say this is all simple stuff for anyone who

learns about Emunah. It is not!!!! There is a whole Sefer, the size of a phone book, called השתדלות האמין, that goes into this in great detail!!!! (by Rabbi Zeev Maor)

The amount of Hishtadlut that a person is supposed to do is very individual. It all depends on how much you believe that nature is all miracle. Once you realize that everything, all positive results of your efforts is miracle, you need much less Hishtadlut. As the passuk says, יְהִי־חֶסֶדְךָ יְיָ יְיָ עִלֵּינוּ כַּאֲשֶׁר יִתְּלֵנוּ לָךְ: *Your kindness, YKVK, should be upon us, as we hoped and relied on You!* (Tehillim 33 22) The Metzudat David writes, כפי התקוה כן יהיה, According to the amount of hope, that is the amount of kindness G-d will give you!

In this week's parasha, that is exactly what it says. G-d does not need us to fight our wars for us. He can fight them, יְיָ יִקְרָא אִישׁ מִלְחָמָה, as He has done at the Splitting of the Sea. He can send His angel Michael, הַיְהוָה אֲנֹכִי שְׁלַח מִלְאָךְ לְפָנָי לְשַׁמְרֵךְ בְּדַרְךָ וְלִהְבִּיאָךְ, אֶל־הַמְּקוֹם אֲשֶׁר הִכַּנְתִּי אֶת־אֵימַתִּי אֲשֶׁלַּח לְפָנָי וְהַמַּתִּי אֶת־כָּל־הָעָם אֲשֶׁר תָּבֹא בָהֶם, וְנָתַתִּי אֶת־כָּל־אֵיבֶיךָ אֵלָיךְ לְעָרֹף וְשָׁלַחְתִּי אֶת־הַצְּרָעָה לְפָנֶיךָ וְגָרְשָׁה אֶת־הַחִי וְאֶת־הַכְּנַעֲנִי וְאֶת־הַחִתִּי מִלְּפָנֶיךָ: *I will send My fear before you, ...I will make your enemies flee from you. I will send the Tzirah wasp before you, and I will drive out the Hivi, the Canaani, and the Hiti, from before you.* (Shemot ch. 23)

Why does G-d expect us to do Hishtadlut in line with the amount of how much we believe in Him? If you believe in G-d, that everything is a miracle, even your Hishtadlut, even your efforts; then, G-d will not expect you do to effort to hide the miracle, because there is a miracle, either way!

Some people fake it though. There was once a boy who dated a girl with a rich father. The father

asked the girl that if the boy is going to be in Kollel, how will he pay for the wedding? The girl answered, the boy said "G-d will provide!" The father asked, who will pay for the house? The girl said that the boy said, G-d will provide! The father asked his daughter, if the boy is in Kollel, who will pay the bills and for all the food? The daughter answered, that the boy said, G-d will!!!

The rich father smiled and told his wife, I am happy to hear that the boy my daughter wants to marry thinks I am god!

If you believe in G-d, it means you don't believe in a rich father-in-law, or in your doctor, or in your Shadchan, or in the IDF. G-d may or may not send you your needs through these mediums. But G-d has so, so many ways to take care of you! The same G-d who feeds Musk, Gates, and Bezos, הַיְהוָה הוֹצֵא אֶת־הַיָּם מִבְּרֵיתִי וְהוֹצֵא אֶת־הַיָּם מִבְּרֵיתִי, is the same G-d who feeds me and you! He does not lack anything, and He can give you what He gives them, with no extra effort, if He feels it is good for you. The same G-d who fought the Six-day War, can fight this war for us, as well.

The only one who can decide the right hishtadlut of how many yeshiva students and which ones should go, is not me, not you, and not Galant. It is the Gedolei Hador, the greatest Rabbis of today's generation. Just like no one Jew, no prime minister, no Knesset, has a right to give away any part of Land of Israel, as the Land belongs to the Nation as a whole... So too, the only one who can tell us which yeshiva students should or could fight, is the Torah itself. We need the Gedolim, the greatest Rabbis to decide this one. It is not up for discussion.

THE ART OF AWARENESS

וְהַגִּישׁוּ אֲזָנֵי אֲלֵהֶם אֲלֵהֶם וְהַגִּישׁוּ אֲלֵהֶם לַת אֹר אֲלֵהֶם מְזוּנָה And the Jewish Slave's master shall bring the slave who does not want to go free in the Shemitta year, to the door, or to the doorpost, and he shall pierce his ear with an awl (ear piercer) and he shall be his servant forever (until the Yovel. 49th year).

Why does the servant who does not want to go free have to have his ear pierced out of all the limbs of the body? Rashi explains in accordance with the Mechilta, in the name of r R' Yohanen ben Zakai: This ear that heard on Har Sinai not to steal, and he went and he stole, shall be pierced. And if he sold himself as a slave to pay back what he stole, this

ear that heard G-d saying on Mt. Sinai, כִּי־לִי בְנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל עֲבָדִים The Jewish people are My slaves, and he went and bought himself an owner, shall be pierced!

One second. This slave did not sin with his ear. He heard G-d's commands with his ear, but disobeyed with his whole body! If so, why are we limiting the punishment to the ear that heard the warning and not to the whole body that disobeyed?

There is a rule in life. A good act, means, someone thought before they acted. A bad act, means, that someone was not thinking. If they would think, they would not act this way. רִישׁ לְקִישׁ אָמַר: אֵין אָדָם עוֹבֵר עֲבִירָה אֲא"כ נִכְנַס בּו רֹוּחַ שְׂטוּת, שְׁנֵא': אִישׁ אִישׁ כִּי תִשְׁטָה אִשְׁתּוֹ, (Sotah 3a) A person does not sin unless a foolish spirit enters him. A spirit of non-thinking. The way the Torah describes the Sotah, is that she is a שׂוֹטָה, a person who does not think. If she would think, she would not have sinned. All sin, is a result of unawareness. At the time of the sin, there needs to be a certain amount of heretic thought, thoughts that G-d is not watching, or that this act is ok. Or that there is no reward/punishment. (Drashot Haran Drush 5)

A person does not sin, when he is aware and thinking. When a person sins, the sin is just a revelation of lack of communication. The person did not listen well enough to what was said at Har Sinai, and by Who. This is why we pierce the ear

of the slave! Because the sin is just an outcome of lack of listening!

Most of the time, bad people are not as bad as they are unaware. It is a lack of awareness that cause people to say the worst things, or do the worst things. If people were more aware that G-d is waiting for them in Shul, they would come earlier. If people were more aware that G-d is listening to every single word, and focused on your every thought, they would invest more into their prayer. If people were more aware about how important learning Torah is, every day, whenever you can, they would learn more. If a woman would have thought the outcomes of her behavior, she would not have been so provocative.

How do we get the people we love to listen better? To be more aware? The answer is, by first listening to them!!! An amazing study has shown, that ADD and ADHD in children have grown throughout the last century at the same rate that mothers became more career oriented, and lost the ability to listen to and be present with their children! And the speed of technology did not make things better, to say the least! A child needs a mother to hear him/her out, for the child to hear its own internal voice!

If you want to improve any relationship, listen, so that you will be listened to. Focus on them, so that they will focus on you.

THE ART OF SENSITIVITY

I can never forget how, when I learnt a year in Mikdash Melech, we visited Hacham Ovadia Yosef zt"l before Pesach. A lot of the boys in the yeshiva were on a spiritual high from a winter of learning, and many looked at themselves as fanatical, as they perceived themselves more religious than their parents and their families. We all sat there with pens and papers in Hacham Ovadia's office, waiting for him to tell us the importance of learning Halacha, and giving us a Halacha class. Instead, he shocked us. He looked up from his books, and told us, "When you go back home, you have a tremendous Mitzvah to do. When your parent comes into the room, no matter how many times your father or mother enters, no matter what

you are learning or how important your learning is, you get up! You ask them how and if in any way you can help them! You stand up like this!" With that, Hacham Ovadia jumped out of his chair. That is all he told us. We all looked at him, not knowing what to write. What to think. This is what we came for? Every child knows that the Torah tells us to stand up for our parents!

The answer is, YES!!! Hacham Ovadia wasn't only teaching the boys who were on a spiritual high the mitzvah of standing up for a parent. He was telling us that the more spiritual you become, the more sensitive you need to be of your parent's respect. If you did not learn sensitivity when you learned

Torah, your Torah is not worth much. If you become more religious than your parents, learn how to use that to respect them more, to give them back more, to love them more. Because the more religious you are, the more sensitive you are. The less sensitive you are, the less religious you are.

Parashat Mishpatim, the laws between man and his fellow, are mentioned immediately after the law of building a Mizbeach in the Bet Hamikdash, to teach you that the Sanhedrin court should be next to the Mizbeach. Why? Because being spiritually strong, bringing sacrifices as a service of Ben Adam LeMakom, is not worth anything, if you are not sensitively strong and careful with Ben Adam LeHebero. If you learn till late and wake people up when you come back from learning by turning on the light or talking loudly, something is seriously wrong. What made Avraham Avinu a spiritual giant was not only his passing his tests of faith in G-d. It was his sensitivity to muzzle his cattle, a value he stood up against Lot for, and something he trained Eliezer to do as well, to muzzle the camels. He was sensitive to the passersby and to his family members, when he needed to put his foot down. What made Rachel great was her sensitivity to her sister Leah, and what made Yosef great was not only his holiness of standing strong against his temptation with Potiphar's wife, but his sensitivity to support and sustain the very family who betrayed him.

The passuk before Mishpatim is a great introduction to the parasha of how to be sensitive with slaves, maidservants, neighbors, your wife, widows, orphans, converts and even with those who are not keeping the religion. The Mizbeach structure needs specifically a ramp and not stairs so that the Kohanim should never step over the stones in a way that would show the stone their private places. What does this come to teach us? If you shouldn't show disgrace to a stone, how much more so, should you not show disgrace to your friend, who is created in G-d's Image! You should treat your friend with more respect than you treat the Mizbeach! (See Rashi)

At home, people feel that they don't have to be so sensitive. If a spouse would treat his partner in marriage the way they treated the other during

dating, marriage counselors would be bored. If a husband would only treat his wife *at least* like the Torah says to treat a stranger, they would never get into a fight, in a million years. The Torah says that when you see a stranger crumbling under his load, you've got to help him. Why is your wife less than a stranger?!?! Why take advantage of those who love you? Why take for granted those who accept you? And if you are not sensitive to your wife and make her cry, you are in for real trouble! G-d can't stand tears. Not only the tears of the widow and the orphan, but anybody's tears. From the time the Bet Hamikdash was destroyed, the gates of prayer have been closed, but the gates of tears are always open! Something scary, and something we learn from R' Rechumi, the Amora that was the top student of Abeye and Rava. He was extremely studious; he would come home to his wife, with her consent, of course, once a year, on Erev Yom Kippur. One Erev Yom Kippur, he was so involved in his learning, he delayed coming home. His wife was expecting him, though; she kept looking to see if he was coming, but he wasn't showing. She felt worried and sad, and a tear rolled down her cheek. R' Rehumi was sitting learning in the attic of the yeshiva, and the attic fell out from under him, and he died. (Ketubot 62b) Now, of course, that is not what his wife would have wanted. But playing with someone else's feelings, causing another emotional pain, is playing with fire. R' Akiva's 24,000 students all died because of insensitivity, and the high level students' Torah was not able to save them. They did not learn from their mentor Rabbi Akiva that, if his wife wanted him home after 12 years and having acquired 12,000 students, he would have been willing to give up on *another* 12 years of learning, and on another 12,000 students. The Torah was given only to a unified nation, כְּאִישׁ אֶחָד בְּלִבּוֹ אֶחָד. A nation who can feel one another's pain, and a nation who could rejoice for one another. And this is why we learn Avot and character development before Shavuot and as a prerequisite to accepting the Torah. Sensitivity is also a prerequisite to prayer, as one is supposed to accept upon himself to love every Jew as himself, before prayer, (Sha'ar Hakavanot Shaar 6) and to give some Tzeddaka. אֲנִי בְּצִדְקַת אֲחֵיהֶם פָּנִיחַ (Tehillim 17;15)

The thing about sensitivity, about ben Adam LeHabero, is that for good and for bad, the Heavenly response is immediate, not only in the next world, but in this world, as well. אלו דברים שאדם אוכל מפירותיהם בעולם הזה והקרן קיימת לעולם הבא כיבוד אב ואם וגמילות חסדים והבאת שלום בין אדם לחבירו (Yerushalmi Peah 1;1) Why is sensitivity so important to G-d? Because there is no one more sensitive than G-d, and we are commanded to emulate Him!! He revealed Himself to Moshe at Har Sinai in a thornbush, to show that He is in pain, along with the Jews in slavery. And when He revealed Himself to the Jews at Har Sinai, He showed that He was sensitive as well: וַיֵּרְאוּ אֶת אֱלֹהֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וַתַּחַת רַגְלָיו כְּמַעֲשֵׂה לִבְנֵת הַסַּפִּיר וּכְעֶצֶם הַשָּׁמַיִם לְטָהָר: *And they had a vision of the G-d of Israel; beneath G-d's feet, there was the likeness of a brick of sapphire, an appearance like the clearness of the heavens.* G-d showed those who wanted to get a glimpse of Him at Har Sinai when the Heavens were open that beneath His Legs there was a brick of sapphire. What? Why? To show the Jews that **He** was carrying bricks, along with them, during their time of slavery in Egypt. How does G-d carrying a brick along with the Jewish Slaves help them in any way, shape or form? G-d, Himself, is sensitive, and He shares in our pain and rejoices in our joy. When the Jews were redeemed, there was great joy in Heaven, as well, וּכְעֶצֶם הַשָּׁמַיִם לְטָהָר. (See Rashi 24;10)

G-d feels the pain and the suffering even of those who sin against Him. Even the thief, G-d is sensitive to his pain and embarrassment, and G-d takes the feelings of the thief into consideration.

THE ART OF MEANING (2020)

On February 10th, 2020, I boarded a United Airlines flight at Ben Gurion, flying to Newark. The two Israelis sitting next to me came on the plane with KN95 masks and gloves. [I did not yet know that Covid could actually be something serious.] The first thing they did was wipe down their seat handles, tray and screen with alcohol wipes. They asked me if I wanted them to do the same for me. Totally confused, I said “No, Thank you.” They asked me if I was suffering from any disease. I said “yes.” They jumped out of their

Determining whether the thief must be fined 4 or 5 times the value of his theft is decided by the amount of shame he experienced. The thief feels more embarrassed and ashamed when he is stealing a sheep that he has to carry on his shoulder, than when stealing a cow or a bull. Even the sinners that we are allowed to hate, we are not allowed to hate the sinner himself. We are only allowed to hate the actions of the sinner. G-d hates hate so much, that on Purim, we have to try to hate only Haman's actions and Amalek's actions, not Haman himself. This is why we have to get drunk on Purim, till we can't differentiate between Arur Haman and Baruch Mordechai. The only time you are allowed to hate someone is if the person is a Rasha, and even then, you are only allowed to hate his actions, not him, himself. The Torah even asks us to go out of our way, to help those whose evil acts we hate, and be sensitive to them. To show that there is never ever an excuse to be insensitive, or to hate, anyone.

The tablets were split into two. The first, dealing with mitzvot between Man and G-d; the second, between Man and Man. If you count the words, the number of letters on the first tablet was greater than the letters that were on the second tablet. It turns out that the five commandments not to kill, commit adultery, steal, testify falsely, or covet, must have been *at least double the size* of the first five commandments, to fit the tablet. This is to show the importance of the relationship between man and his fellow, and of being sensitive to others.

seats and asked me what it was. I told them. “Athlete's foot.” They laughed so hard at my joke, and with a sigh of relief, sat back down. I have become addicted to the news since then, and I am trying to detox. It is not that being updated with the news is not important. But it is the *meaning* that we give to world events that is important.

The meaning we give to everything is important. The meaning of a cough, a sneeze, a mask. The meaning of school teachers, systems, structure, and

the meaning of normal. How things have changed in one year, and how the meaning of things changed in one year... I had this crazy observation. The difference between the *tzaddik* and the *rasha* is, literally, experiencing something and giving it a meaning different from what our *yetzer* gives it. This is the lesson of 'צ,פ,ע,ס The letter 'ס is closed. The letter צ means *tzaddik*. If you want to be a *tzaddik*, you need to **close** your *ayin* and your *peh*. Your eye and your mouth. What does this mean?

The reason why a Canaanite slave goes free when his master knocks out his tooth or eye is his Grandpa Ham. Ham, son of Noach, saw his father's nakedness and let his brothers know about it, using his tooth to express **his** meaning of what he saw. This is why the Canaanite slave, the descendent of Ham, is released when his eye or tooth is knocked out, because the “eye” and “tooth” of his grandfather are what got him into the curse of slavery in the first place. (Lekach Tov) I believe this is a great lesson. Your life, your productivity, is always dependent on two things: what you focus on and the meaning you give it. The words you use in your inner lexicon (Tooth) to describe what you experience (*Ayin*). A new meaning to the *passuk* וְלֹא־תָתְרוּר אַחֲרַי לְבַבְכֶם וְאַחֲרַי עֵינֵיכֶם. *Do not stray after your heart and eyes.*

Happiness comes to those who find the truer meaning, and Judaism is about finding the truest meaning in everything. Everything that happens to us, can help us understand better who we are and who we are not, what is important, and vice versa. לִיהוּדִים הָיְתָה אוֹרָה וְשִׂמְחָה וְשֵׁשׁ וּיְקָר The Jews realized after the Purim story, that the light in life is the Torah, for Torah reveals to us the real meaning in the “dark” world we find ourselves in each day. They realized that true happiness in life is *Yom Tov*, the commemorations in our calendar of times we reached a higher plateau of meaning and contemplation, and we are to refrain from work so that we can contemplate again. Joy is *Brit Milah*, self-restraint, purity, the joy of missing out, and trusting that if G-d did not give me something or allow me something, there is a meaning behind it, and it is the very best thing for me. Preciousness is *Tefillin*; there is nothing more precious than having an opportunity to be G-d's servant, G-d's knight, in this world. (Megillah 16b) How ironic that the man

who was named after happiness, Yitzhak, (צִיָּחָק עֵשָׂה, (יצחק ירנן, לִי אֱלֹקִים) was the man known for his self-sacrifice, for giving up everything in life for its greater meaning, and the first “*Charedi*” (פחד יצחק). Really serving G-d, is happily serving Him. עֲבָדוּ פַּחַת אֲשֶׁר לֹא עֲבָדְתָּ אֵת ה' אֱלֹקֶיךָ בְּשִׂמְחָה; אֵת־יִקְנֶה בְּשִׂמְחָה. Because contrary to popular belief, happiness is found in living with the deepest meaning in life and in everything we do.

When we serve G-d, when we pray to Him, the only true way is with happiness, because if you are not happy while praying, if you are not happy when serving Him, you are not *really* praying to Him or serving Him. Finding meaning in life, in the world around us, is an עבודה, a practice. And the rule of life is, whatever you practice every day, you get good at, and by default, you are always practicing *something*. If you practice finding meaning in life, if you practice joy in your life, if you practice happiness in your life, you will become very good at it. On the other hand, if you practice complaining, if you practice living life without meaning and self-reflection, if you practice worrying, if you practice anger, you will be very good at complaining, at getting angry, at worrying, even when no one else sees anything to get angry, worry, or complain about... which brings people to addictions. All addictions are simply relationships with **things**, abusing the meaning or purpose those “things” were intended for. Addiction to alcohol, food, drugs, to looking where we are not supposed to, occupation with beauty, checking the news, making money, or getting “likes” and “views.” Man's search for meaning is why, according to Judaism, everything in life is a “test.” Poverty “means” a test from G-d to see if you can accept Him, and wealth “means” a test to see how you are going to spend it. And the test of wealth, respect, and power, is a much greater test than the test of the lack of it.

It is amazing. Haman's power, wealth, children, and connections all meant nothing to him, if he could not be in total control over his world. If there was one little old Mordecai, who did not bend the knee to him, he was outraged. This is a great lesson for all of us. What do power, connections, and wealth all mean to you? So many people want to succeed in business, want to make it big. I ask

them - how much money do you need? What is the purpose of your desire for wealth? If your drive for wealth is to see how much *you* are worth, you will never have enough. Because there is always going to be someone who won't care about how much you have, or respect you for who you think you are.

This takes us to a whole new meaning behind the Purim story. Whenever we want to understand the meaning of something, we need to learn about its past, and its future. Learning the past and future of the Megillah story, will give us a new dimension of understanding it. Ever wonder how Achashverosh became so rich? Nevuchadnetzar, King of Babylon, who destroyed the first *Bet Hamikdash*, took all the 5,400 gold, silver and precious stone utensils and 180 treasure houses. Miser that he was, he made a copper boat and loaded it with copper containers, and he sunk this boat to the bottom of the Euphrates River. Korash, the king two years before Achashverosh, originally allowed the Jews to rebuild the Temple. In that merit, G-d revealed to Korash where to dig near the Euphrates and uncover the treasures. Achashverosh rose to power two years later, inherited this great wealth, (Y. Shimoni- Tanchuma) and his Queen Vashti persuaded him to stop the Jews from being able to return home and rebuild the *Bet Hamikdash*. On his third year in power, the year he believed that the 70-year prophesy that the Jews would return and rebuild the Temple were up, Achashverosh and Vashti believed that if G-d had not yet brought the Jews home, He must have given up on them, and the booty was all his for keeps. So, to flaunt his "control over the world," that the Jews would forever be under his rule, Achashverosh made his feast to show off his wealth - 180 days, so he could exhibit, each day, another one of the 180 treasure houses of the Temple, while both Achashverosh and Vashti donning the clothes of the Kohen Gadol. But G-d showed Achashverosh at his own party that he does not even have control over his own wife, Vashti.

We know that Achashverosh was wicked from his beginning until his end, *הוּא אָשְׁרָיָוּשׁ*. He wanted to get rid of the Jews, as much as Haman did. Haman was doing Achashverosh a favor. So, how did Achashverosh have change of heart, when Esther

told him that she was a Jewess? Originally, Achashverosh saw in the constellations that the one to take the throne after him would be a Jewish boy, so he therefore, wanted to get rid of the Jews. But when he learned that Esther was Jewish, it meant that their son would be Jewish, and his *own son* would merit the throne. Now, Achashverosh wanted to kill all anti-Semites! Three years after Haman's death, Achashverosh died and left everything he owned, including the Temple treasures, to Daryavesh II, the 7-year-old son he had from Esther. At the age of 9, King Daryavesh allowed the Jews to rebuild the Temple, exactly 70 years from the time of its Destruction, and the Treasures were sent to where they were supposed to go. Esther's fear of "marrying" Achashverosh was exactly what was needed for the Jewish people to have a Jew in power, to allow us to rebuild our Temple. G-d put the vessels of His Temple in Achashverosh's hands, so that he would boast about having them and have Vashti killed, and so that Achashverosh and Esther's son would be in the position to rebuild the Temple. Achashverosh saw the superficial ownership of the Temple's vessels as "great" for him, and throughout the Megillah, he was struggling to keep control. But, as it becomes clear at the end, G-d was just using Achashverosh all along, for a plot much greater than himself.

Question of the week:

Q: Rabbi Farhi, I always wanted to know, how I can improve in my learning. I am not focused. I tend to procrastinate, and I can't keep up with the learning that is expected of me. I don't seem to find the underlying meaning of the text in front of me, and I wish I could be like those who find learning and reading a breeze. Do you have any good tips, or do I need to just accept that I am not good at learning?

Thanks, David

A: David, it is so nice to hear your voice. I hear in your words that you are not sure if you have a learning issue. I am not sure either, but I wonder if

you are using all the tools available for effective learning. There are many books on the subject of effective learning. If you do not know the tools that those who are learning effectively are using, then you probably will not be getting the results of those high academic achievers. I, myself was a slow reader, until I learned the tools of effective reading and studying. I used to read at 100 wpm (words per minute) but after implementing the tools I learned, I read at 900 wpm. Anyone can do this, if they learn the tools available and take the time to implement them.

Regarding your question on focusing, I believe that focusing is dependent on asking questions and answering them. For example, whenever I learn or read, or whenever I am coaching in effective learning, I have three questions I ask. KWL: what did you Know about this subject until now? What do you Want to know about this subject? And what have you Learned from this subject, after reading this text?

Often times the reason why people can't understand something, is because they don't yet know enough about the subject to understand the current text. We have a rule in effective thinking, study, and performance. If there is ever something that is too hard for you to figure out, or to achieve, there is usually something that is easier for you to

achieve, master or understand, that you have not yet done. First tackle the easier task, and then the harder task becomes so much easier to tackle. This will make it much easier for you to focus as well.

Regarding procrastination, it is important to understand the difference between procrastinating and plain laziness. Procrastination is commonly confused with laziness, or thought of as being a result of laziness. In fact, they are not at all connected. Laziness is defined as being "disinclined to activity or exertion." Procrastinators don't put things off because they don't want to work. Instead, procrastinators tend to postpone tasks they don't want to do, in favor of tasks that they perceive as either more "light" or fun. The reason why people procrastinate, is because an emotion like fear, frustration, or failure, causes them to behave in a way that they postpone the most important task, and they choose instead to be busy with tasks that they are less afraid of.

There are so many facets of effective learning, that you can learn on your own, take courses on, or book sessions with an effective learning coach.

I hope this was helpful.

Yosef

THE DESIRE TO ACQUIRE

The Civil War was one of the greatest tragedies in the history of the United States. Roughly **1,264,000** American soldiers died in United States wars - **620,000** in the Civil War and **644,000** in all other conflicts. What was the Civil War about? The war was over slavery: *is it ethical?* The North and South, a.k.a. the Unions and Confederates, fought over their understanding of the first law G-d commanded us at Mt. Sinai, in this week's *parasha*. As Abraham Lincoln put it in his second inaugural address: "Both read the same Bible and pray to the same God, and each invokes His aid against the other. It may seem strange that any men should dare to ask a just God's assistance in wringing their bread from the sweat of other men's faces..."

We do not find a clear definition of "slavery" in the written Torah, as to its being with or without the consent of the slave. The oral Torah is crystal clear that any concept of slavery that the Torah accepts as moral is consensual.

1. Contrary to the interpretation of the Confederates, in Jewish Law, if a Jewish master kills his slave, the master is given the death penalty.
2. If a Jew hurts his slave, even by knocking out just one tooth, the slave is automatically freed, even if the slave is a gentile.
3. In certain circumstances, if a slave runs away from his master, it is forbidden for anyone to return him to his master, or to even let the master know

the slave's whereabouts, as his escape is a sign that this slave was mistreated by his master. (See Devarim 23;16)

4. The slave gets every Shabbat off.

5. A Jew who owns a Jewish slave needs to be sure that the slave has food, shelter and clothing, all of the highest quality. And if the master has only one bed, he needs to give it to his Jewish slave and sleep on the floor!

It is almost impossible for us to understand the amount of sensitivity the Torah expects from the master of a slave. The laws make it almost not even worthwhile to own a slave. *As if the master did not even buy a slave, but rather bought a master for himself!* (see Kiddushin 20a) (See Me'am Loez on this.)

The whole concept of consensual slavery is foreign to us. We are familiar with the forms of African American slavery and Egyptian slavery, both of which are non-consensual, i.e., without the consent of the slave. What lesson can possibly be learned from this commandment of consensual slavery that is relevant to our everyday lives?

How did it happen that this Jew was sold into slavery? The Torah tells us a few *pesukim* later **אם אָן לֹא יִנְכַפֵּר בְּגַנְבּוֹתָיו**, *if he stole and could not afford to make restitution for his theft, Beit Din sells this fellow as a slave, to pay back the person he stole from.* Now we see the logical connection between placing our treatment of a slave immediately after the last of the Ten Commandments, *Thou shalt not covet.* Because this person, who could not afford the standard he desired, who could not afford what he coveted, succumbed to stealing to realize his dreams! The Me'am Loez explains that this is why this Jewish slave is given by the master a *Shifcha Canaanit*, and the Jewish slave's wife needs to suffer with a co-wife: it is because his wife was not careful to live within her means, causing her husband the stress that brought him to do what he did. As she shared in his transgression, so does she share in the "tikkun."

The Torah's version of slavery of a Jew is that it is limited; 7 years, or maximum 49 years. Why? *For*

the Jews are My slaves, and not slaves to slaves. (Vayikra 25; 95) Of course, we are consensual slaves to G-d; we *want* to serve Him. Although striving to be a slave is something that is hard for us to understand, this type of "service" is more like being a knight than being a slave. What is the lesson here?

A person is always a slave. The question is - just who and what he is a slave to. הללו עבדי ה' ולא עבדי פרעה *Let the servants of Hashem praise him- and not the servants of Pharaoh.* (Megillah 14a) The Talmud teaches us that we are either a slave of Pharaoh, a slave of Achashverosh, or a slave of G-d. This means that a person has, built into his psyche, a mechanism to serve something. If we are serving a lifestyle that is above our means, we cannot be serving G-d. This Jew needed to be sold as a slave, for he was not serving G-d.

You cannot serve G-d, if you are serving your desire to acquire, not willing to live within your means. In order to really serve G-d, we need to be content with what He gives us. עבד, slave, is an acronym that stands for ענווה: ע'נווה, ב'טחון, ד'יבור, Humility. To accept that whatever you have, you do not deserve more. To be grateful for everything you have. Moshe Rabbenu and David Hamelech were known to be the Servants of G-d, and they were also known for their humility. Trust. Things are going to be okay; G-d knows exactly what we really need, and He provides us with everything with immeasurable precision. The need to live up to the standard of the Hiltons, to keep up with the Jones', comes from not accepting that what is good for them is not necessarily good for me, and G-d knows exactly what He is doing. דיבור Speaking to G-d. When you have G-d to talk to, you are not alone in this World.

According to Alcoholics Anonymous and the other Twelve Steps Programs, the major impediments that prevent us from freeing ourselves from most emotional eating, emotional spending, emotional digital usage... are two things:

1. Not accepting how powerless we are, and in how many areas.

2. Not accepting how powerful G-d is, in every single area.

Why do we need more stuff? Because we feel something empty. We feel that if we *have* more, we *are* more. And another reason. When you buy, you feel like you have more control in life. Being an א.ב.ג., a servant of G-d, with the humility, the trust, and the relationship, is the first step to freedom.

We must learn to live within the budget He decided is best for us and to be happy about it. If we are always feeling that “the car we have is not cool enough, the house we have is not big enough, the clothes we have are not fancy enough, but it's okay, because it is only temporary. Because soon I will make enough money to be able to get the car/ house/ clothing that I really deserve...” This person is not really content. Temporary contentment is not real contentment. Real contentment equals *real* calmness.

To live comfortably in America, as a religious Jew, to be a father of a family, even a whopping 300 thousand dollars a year is sometimes not

enough!!!! The kosher food, the Jewish education, insurance, taxes, are just too much to handle. I just hear that number and my ankles start shaking! What are the middle class, the 50 percent of the Orthodox community supposed to do??? It is so sad. The stress can make serving G-d a big challenge.

What is the solution to finding tranquility in what we already have? To totally believe that what I have is best for me, and what I do not have is also best for me. The rule of thumb is found in the words we say each day in *Aleinu Leshabeah*: אשר בשמים ממעל ועל הארץ מתחת. For things that are Heavenly - in spiritual matters, to look at those who are above you, and strive for higher. Otherwise, if we look at those who are lower than our spiritual level, we will feel complacent and not attempt to grow. But for things that are worldly and material, to look at those who have less than us, and find the tranquility in what we *do* have. To learn from them how they are able to budget on much less than us, and stay happy.

LAUGHOTHERAPY

Humor is such a powerful tool. It can be used to do the worst things possible, like making a good, kosher, modest woman into a *Sotah*. (Sotah 7a) And it can do the best possible thing, like getting people interested in learning Torah. (Shabbat 30b) The Baal HaTanya (Chapter 7) writes how when we use humor to be more productive in serving G-d, to get us into better spirits to be able to serve G-d properly, that it is like bringing a *Korban*! For it is taking something human and making it holy.

I found that many of the best comedians are or were Jewish. Rav Shimshon R. Hirsch writes that from early on, we see that Jews have the ability to tap into humor. The first time we find humor in the history of the Jewish People is in the satirical comment at *Yam Suf*, when the Jews asked Moshe, *Aren't there any graves in Egypt, that G-d*

needed to take us out to let us die in the desert? Rav Hirsch teaches that humor comes from the purity of the Jews, even when they are in a state of panic. Humor somehow helps us overcome situations of panic. We need to tap into the ability to find humor, if we are to be the best we can be. As parents, as spouses, as siblings, as mentors and as Jews.

Did you ever wonder why Adar is before Nissan? Nissan is the first of months. Adar is the last of months. We even see how Adar has in it the 4 *parashiot* that lead into Nissan, clearly showing that Adar is an introduction to Nissan. What merit does Adar have that it brings about the renewal and freedom of Nissan? It seems that the miracle of Adar is the miracle where things turned around in a split second. And just when it looked as if things



couldn't get any worse, we discovered that things couldn't get any better. Adar is the month of happiness, the month of irony. Nissan is the month of freedom. Of renewal. The only way you can become free in life, is if you are able to find some light in the darkness, some meaning to the suffering, something good in the bad. Only if one is able to find laughter in life, can one celebrate life, and achieve a true renewal.

To find humor in life, to find the irony in life, you have to be looking for it, by being in the present, or it slips right by. Last week I got into a car accident. I was on my way to teach at 9 am in "stop and go" traffic, and a car on the side of the road had a leak. I turned my head for a *split second* to see how he was fairing, and the car in front of me hit the brakes. I did not see it. BAM, BAM! I hit the next car, and that driver hit the car in front of him. BH everyone is OK, and my insurance will be covering the 40,000+ shekels in damage. But all that was a split second. I told my friend how this accident happened, in a blink of an eye, and that it really left me in somewhat of a trauma, setting me off schedule. I am still shaking from flashbacks.

And then he told me the most beautiful concept. There is a cliché that is used amongst the Jewish people. ישועת ה' כהרהף עין, *G-d's salvation comes in a wink*. The origin of this cliché is the Midrash Lekach Tov (אסתר פרק ד) on *Megillat Esther*, when Achashverosh couldn't sleep the night before the second party, and it was the beginning of the

salvation for the Jewish People. Why is the metaphor a wink? Why not like the "snap of a finger?" Because when we need a *yeshuah*, when we need salvation, sometimes we need to close our eyes and see things from our mind's eye. Conceptually. If we want to deal with the painful and hard parts of life, we need to stop over-imposing, using our eyes and others senses; we need to stop exaggerating the hardships in life, and instead perceive things as is, without exaggeration, in almost an abstract way, as if we were looking at the hardships with our eyes closed. My friend told me that if I wanted to get over the trauma, I needed to close my eyes on the accident, and "conceptualize" it. Make the experience distant. (This idea was originally said by Rav Tzvi Hersh of Liska)

It looked like things were horrible, at that moment. But I said, I have got to find G-d in the scene, somewhere. I rolled into Toyota in Givat Shaul, to see how much the damage amounted to in my car, and to see if I was still under the VIP coverage that I had with them. The VIP in that Toyota plan is that you pay 320 shekels and you get all different types of benefits for a year. One of them is in case of an accident, they cover more than half of the deductible (1,600 shekels from 3,000 shekels) if the damage is over 7,000 shekels. The fellow who received me looked up my account, and he almost dropped his iPad. The last day of the VIP was the day of the accident!!!

SECRETS BEHIND A SMILE

משוכנס אדר מרבנים בשמחה – From the beginning of the month of Adar, one should increase his happiness (Ta'anit 29). Happiness is an emotional state or a state of mind. In this month, we are commanded to "get there" and be happy. If we are commanded, it is our choice to be happy or not: to be very happy or just a little happy. How do we accomplish this?

First, we must define our terms – what is happiness? Many mistakenly equate pleasure with

happiness. Let us take ice cream for example. Ice cream makes people happy. Still, the happiness the world's greatest ice cream brings is measurable. It is only 3-4 inches long! That is the distance from the lips to the throat. Happiness that is not physical pleasure alone, but rather an emotion or a state of mind, is much greater range than those three to four inches.

The Orchot Tzadikim helps us understand the makeup of such happiness and how to get there. In



Sha'ar Hasimcha, he lists the four ingredients of happiness: Emunah (faith in G-d), Bitachon (trust in G-d), Histapkut (contentment) and Sechel (intellect) make one happy. When someone is not happy, it is because one of these components is non-existent in his state of mind. When someone is not happy – it is not because his wallet is empty, or because he or a family member is ill. There are those who have empty wallets, and still have a smile on their face. There are those who have family members who are ill, and still remain happy. Happiness is dependent on how we think and not on the circumstances in which we find ourselves.

Let us take contentment for example. There are a few irrational thoughts that cause us to feel a lack of contentment. “If someone else I know, or I am close to, has (a certain item or situation that I would like to have), I should also have it. I should have more, because that is what I want.” Alexander the Great was actually not so great when it came to being content. During his quest to conquer the world, Alexander the Great found the gate to Gan Eden. He begged to enter but was refused. He begged to be given at least *something* from Paradise. Suddenly, an eye socket was thrown to his feet. He looked at the bone, the encasement of the eye, and was puzzled. What kind of heavenly gift was this? This bothered him no end. None of his advisors was able to explain the riddle. Alexander asked the Jewish Sages to interpret the meaning of this “gift”, and they told him to bring a scale, a kernel of wheat and a bag of heavy, gold coins. They weighed the eye socket against a single grain of wheat, and the kernel was heavier. Then they weighed the eye bone against the gold coins, and the bone was heavier. No matter how many gold coins were added to the scale, the eye socket outweighed them all. Alexander, disturbed, asked for an explanation. The Jewish Sages explained “The message from Gan Eden was: when the eyes are always coveting more, they will never be satisfied, no matter how much they get. Alexander, you will never feel content with the amount you conquer. Paradise is reserved for those who feel content with what they have.” (Tamid 32a).

It seems that the more we have, the more we want. The Talmud teaches that “מי שיש בידו מאה רוצה מי מאתיים” – *someone who has one hundred of something wants two hundred*. Rav Moshe Aaron Stern, the former Mashgiach of Kaminitz Yeshiva, points out that in the Telze Yeshiva, they contemplated this: does this Gemara mean that he wants another 100 (for a total of 200), or that he wants an additional 200, for a total of 300? They answered the question based on another passage in the Talmud: “אין אדם מת והצוי תאוותו בידו” – *when one dies, he does not even possess half of what he had desired*. Thus, the Talmud must mean that a person who has 100 wants an additional 200, since if he wanted only a total of 200, he would already have achieved half of his desires.

Let us move on to Sechel. What is meant by sechel, and how does it bring one to happiness? We find throughout the Chovot Halevovot that the sechel is the adversary to the nefesh behemit. The Sechel, Yetzer Hatov and the Neshama are all one. The way this makes one happy is that the Sechel enlightens and reframes things. It looks at things in different perspectives. The Yetzer Hatov and the Neshama bring one to see things in this world as they really are – or, in other words, represent reality from G-d's point of view. This is the ability to reframe constantly, to be able to look at things from the perspective of the underlying meaning of their existence – to recognize the purpose of *our* existence. This change of outlook is the idea behind Mussar. It constantly puts things back into place exactly the way they are supposed to be. It helps us understand that many things that we thought were problems are actually solutions. Conversely, what we thought could have been a solution that we did not achieve was actually the problem.

The Talmud (Berachot 60) writes a story about Yehuda bar Natan, who was walking behind R' Hamnuna. Yehuda bar Natan sighed. R' Hamnuna said that this person wants to bring suffering upon himself. When someone looks at life in a bleak way, that is the way life will be: it is a self-fulfilling prophecy.

R' Nachman from Breslov is quoted as having said that happiness nullifies and prevents decrees from being enacted upon a person. This is seen in the Megilla. After having invited King Achashverosh and Haman to a special, festive meal, Esther was particular to make a second party, and only then did she make her accusation against Haman. Why should she not have spoken out against him in the first instance? Why was it necessary to have a second party?

At the first party, Haman was happy, and when someone is happy, suffering and evil decrees do not fall upon him. This is true even in regard to a Rasha. *Once Haman became depressed* for having suffered the disgrace of leading Mordechai around the city on the King's horse, while Mordechai was wearing the Kings clothes – *this put Haman in a position that made him vulnerable to his fall.*

Striving to Serve

So many Mitzvot are Zecher Leyitziat Mizrayim. Kiddush, Sukkot, Pesach, Tefillin, Bechor, Petter Chamor, Kriat Shema, etc. The list of reminders doesn't end. Why do we keep reminding ourselves of the Exodus from Mizrayim? And why is it so important?

The Sifri writes why so many Mitzvot of the Torah are reminders of the Exodus. אֲנִי יְקִיֵּן אֶלְהֵיכֶם אֲשֶׁר הוֹצֵאתִי אֶתְכֶם מִמִּצְרַיִם מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם *I am Hashem, your G-d, Who took you out of Egypt from your being their Slaves.* (Bamidbar 15; 41) It is similar to a king whose beloved son was captured. When he took him out of captivity, he did not free him to be his son again. Instead, he made him a royal slave. So that when the son would not want to listen to his father the King, the King would take out the contract showing that he had bought this son as a slave, and say, "You are my slave". That is why Hashem took us out of Egypt, so that we would serve Him, even when we are not in the mood. Even when it is hard. This is the reason why we have so many Mitzvoth to remind us of the Exodus. Because the Exodus was part of the plan to make us G-d's servants.) Sifri Shlach on the passuk)

In his master work Sichot Mussar, R Chaim Shmulevitz has not one essay written on being an Eved Hashem – but three!!! In the first edition, R Chaim summed it up as following: If a person can say, "I really love to eat pork, but what can I do – G-d said no!", that is the

Evildoers can also be happy. They can be happy only temporarily, when it looks as if things are going their way. However, this happiness is limited to the time that the sun shines for them. The way of the Torah is for a person to be happy even when things *look* bleak. This was the power of Mordechai: he was able to stay in a positive state of mind despite the decree and throughout it. Had he succumbed to depression, he would not have been able to receive Ruach Hakodesh and know what was going on behind the scenes with Achashverosh and Haman.

By reframing or changing our perspective, with the help of emunah or bitachon, we will be able to find happiness in all of life's many different situations.

ultimate servant of G-d. When a person puts his passion on pause, when a person downplays his desires in order to listen to G-d and His 613, that person is the quintessential Servant of G-d. (עבד ה' 3) To be G-d's servant means not to have your own opinion, if G-d has one. This is very different from being a son. A son can "not be in the mood". But a servant must always be in the mood. G-d reminds you of the Exodus in order to remind you that you need to always be in the mood for the 613. A son has choice. A servant has no choice.

These weeks from Shemot until Terumah – Tetzaveh, that were given the acronym of Shovavim, the "wild" weeks, have a special power hidden in them. These are the weeks when G-d calls you His son, His Firstborn. בני בכורי ישראל. These are the weeks when you become an G-d's servant. כי לי בני-ישראל עבדים. (Vayikra 25; 55) Becoming G-d's servant, serving G-d, is the recurring message. G-d told Pharaoh שלח את עמי ויעבדוני. *Send My nation and they will serve Me.*

We say in the Shema every day, that if we listen to G-d and His Mitzvoth, to love Him and to serve Him, with all of our hearts and all of our souls, we will merit all the blessings of the Torah. On the flip side, the biggest punishments we get are not because we misbehaved. But because we were not *happy servants*. תחת אשר לא עבדת את ה' אלוהיך בשמחה ובטוב לבב The first words in



Mishpatim that G-d told Moshe to tell the People at Har Sinai are – that you guys are My slaves, and not slaves to slaves! The Zohar teaches that the passuk that says כִּי לִי בְנֵי-יִשְׂרָאֵל עֲבָדִים, Your being G-d's servant, is not just a revelation. It is a Mitzvah. There is a Mitzvah to be a servant of Hashem, specifically in prayer. According to the Rambam, we have a Mitzvah to pray from the words וועבדתם את ה' אלוקים, and we learn this from the words we say in Shema (Rambam Tefillah1;1).

The Mishna in Avot teaches that a servant of G-d is the most free person in the world. “המכתב מכתב אלוקים חרות” על הלווחות” (שמות ל"ב) “אל תקרא חרות אלא חרות שאין לך בן חורין, אלא מי שעוסק בתורה” The only person who is truly free is the one who lives a life of Torah (Avot 6:2). Only by following the חרות of the Tablets can one become a free man. This is what King David said in his Psalms, and something we chant along with him, in Hallel. אֲנִי וְקִנּוֹלִי כִּי־אֲנִי עֲבָדְךָ אֲנִי־עַבְדְּךָ בְּוַאֲמֵתְךָ פָּתַחְתָּ לְמוֹסְרִי: *Please G-d, because I am your servant, I am your servant the son of your maidservant. You have released my bonds.*

How does this make any sense? Isn't the person who is free to do whatever he wants more “free” than the person who is confined to a lifestyle of 613? How can it be that the way to freedom is through slavery?

The truth is that serving G-d, being G-d's slave, is different from slavery. A free life without a moral compass is a life of misery, for G-d is inside you. וַיְבָרֵךְ אֱלֹהִים יְקִנּוֹלִי אֶת־הָאָדָם בְּצַלְמוֹ בְּצַלְמֵ אֱלֹהִים בָּרָא אֹתוֹ (Bereshit 1:27). When you serve G-d, when you follow His Torah, you live with moral conscience; you live with your goals. You have inner peace, between the opposing drives inside you, between your basic instincts and the standards you wish you were on. The 613 is this sort of map, with a lot of restrictions, rules and regulation, that will take you to your life's purpose, in the most direct and the fastest way possible. And then, you are free to become who you really can become.

The first man to become G-d's servant was Moshe. Then, Yehoshua and Kalev. We needed to go through Egypt to become G-d's servant. Going through difficulties is the fundamental element in the whole process.

Whenever you have a hard time in life serving G-d, it is part of G-d's plan to remind you that you are just His servant. Our Rabbis teach that one should make no interruption between Redemption to Prayers. (Berachot 4b) Our prayers, our Avodah, our service, is connected to our redemption. Both the Redemption of Exodus גאֵל יִשְׂרָאֵל, and the Redemption that each and every one of us go through in the present גואֵל יִשְׂרָאֵל. When G-d frees you from your troubles, you owe Him so much, you feel such gratitude, that you are willing to be his slave.

Why is prayer the pinnacle of serving G-d? There are three parts to prayer. 1. Praise. 2. Requesting. 3. Thanks. I could understand how the first and last part of prayer are serving G-d. But what about the requesting part? Is that also serving? When we pray for health, financial assistance, wisdom, that G-d answer our prayers... is all this asking also serving?

The Maharal (Netiv HaAvoda1) says that asking is a tremendous form of serving. There is no greater serving G-d than showing Him how you recognize that you are dependent upon Him. That he holds the keys. He has the medicine. He controls all of the markets and exactly how many cents you have or don't have in your bank account. He is your doctor, and He is your “hard drive”. When you recognize that He is the boss, you are ready to give up all for the Boss. And once we become G-d's servant, once we accept Him as the Ultimate Power in the Universe, He answers all of our prayers. If your prayers have not been answered yet, it is probably because you are not ready to be called G-d's Servant (See Berachot 34b).

So, this morning, I woke up and asked myself – Yosef! Are you ready to serve? It was a different morning. I put on my Tefillin, to display that all of our senses are subservient to G-d. Four boxes on the head, for the four senses up there, Sight, Sound, Smell and Taste. One box on the arm, for the sense of Feeling. Just as we say in the Leshem Yichud, wearing Tefillin is proclaiming that we are making all of our senses subservient to G-d. And although the Tefillin of the head has four compartments, we put on the Tefillin of the arm first, to proclaim the ultimate subservience, נעשה ונשמע. We will do, and then we will listen. Even if we have no idea why G-d wants us to serve Him in the way He chooses, we don't ask any questions.

WHEN MINORITY WINS



The Grammar laws of the Hebrew Language are so important. אהרי רבים להטות (23:2) Does not mean *Follow the majority*. Rather it means “*Incline* toward the majority.” What is the difference? Why does the Torah use the word incline and not הרוב קובע, the majority wins? Because the majority does not always win. Although the majority is extremely powerful, it depends on who the majority is and what they are saying. Majority wins only when it is one of two truths.

You see, majority is just a proof of something. But it is not the truth itself. It can only serve as a proof to a truth. If the proof is to nothing, the majority cannot win. Let me give an example to demonstrate. One of my students asked me something about the fundamental principles of Judaism. The reason why we know that Judaism is true is because a father will not lie to his son about something like religion. And even if one father will lie, a whole nation of fathers will not lie. The question my student asked is that the other religions also are passed from father to son, and there are more Muslim and Christian fathers telling their sons that their religion is true than there are Jewish fathers who are telling their sons that Judaism is the only truth!!

The answer is obvious. It depends on what they are saying and what we are saying. We are saying that our forefathers, *600,000 men, and a nation of 3 million people*, witnessed G-d at Mt. Sinai giving the Torah to us and telling us that we are His Chosen People. If there were to be a change in that fact, G-d would need another revelation of that sort to correct it. *Christianity tells a story about one man. Islam tells a story about one man.* A chain can only be as strong as its weakest link. A religion based on one man has an extremely weak link at the very top of the chain – the link between G-d and people.

If there is a proof of something that is not true, then the proof is meaningless. If the majority stands behind a truth that is not true, it means nothing. We only *lean* toward the majority when there are two legitimate sides. But the majority does not necessarily have to always win. The majority does not win when it is a congregation against the rabbi who is honest and G-d fearing. It does not win when it is the Nefesh and Ruach against the Neshama. It does not win when it is the classroom against the teacher, or the yeshiva against the Rosh Yeshiva.

The problem with “the majority” is a much greater one. Allow me to explain. Dr. Robert Cialdini, is famous for

his **Six Principles of Effective Influence**. The sixth principle of persuasion is Social Proof: People often decide what to do by looking at what other, like-minded people have done. So many of our decisions are made just because we follow what “most” people seem to be doing. Picture this. You enter a town in which you have never been before. The town has two kosher restaurants, both selling Chinese food, and one across the street from the other. One of them has a long line waiting outside the door, and all the tables are full of people that seem to be enjoying the food. The restaurant across the street is empty. Which one do you go to, if you cannot ask anyone’s opinion? Social Proof, the sixth of the elements of persuasion, will persuade you, at least to a certain extent, to go to the restaurant where you will need to wait in line for your food.

We Jews are the minority. 15 to 20 million Jews in the world, out of total world population of 7.5 billion people. According to the Pew Research Center in Washington D.C., Orthodox Jews are in the minority. Reform Judaism remains the largest American Jewish movement, at **35 percent**. Conservative Jews are **18 percent**, Orthodox **10 percent**, and groups such as Reconstructionist and Jewish Renewal make up 6 percent combined. **Thirty percent** of Jews do not identify with any denomination. Ultra-Orthodox is the minority of the Orthodox sector. And Bnei Torah are the minority of the Ultra-Orthodox. There may only be 2.3 million Orthodox Jews in the entire world. And only a minority are Bnei Torah. No wonder why it is so hard to stay strong as a Ben Torah.

So, what do we have to offer our children in order for them to choose to stay “Frum”? The whole world screams not to be religious. Not religious is the norm. So, how can we persuade our children to stay apart from the majority? What if all the disciplinary techniques are not working?

We only have one power left. That we become very clear, ourselves, about the truthfulness of the Torah. When we become so clear that our religion is the only truth, and that we love that truth, then we can love the life as Frum Jews and our children will be effected by that, no doubt. If we show them that our Neshama (mindful soul) is not persuaded by the Nefesh (materialistic drive) and the Ruach (ego), our children will be proud to be our children and offspring of such a minority. The majority of people in the world are not happy. And we are proud to be the minority in such a world.



Never be afraid to stand with the minority when the minority is right, for the minority which is right will one

day be the majority. Let us not forget that one man with courage is a majority. One and G-d makes a majority.

AVALANCHE OF HATE

How many people can you count that you just “do not get along with”? (Try and count.) You feel tense when you picture them in your mind. Thoughts of distrust, no openness start to flood your thinking about these people. Some relationships that we are not happy with cause us to lose out on big opportunities, stress us out, and can occupy most of our emotions and thoughts. This happens between close friends. Between brothers and sisters. Between parents and their children. And, between husband and wife. In this article I would like to stop the “train of thoughts”, and not let it run over our life.

In our parasha, we are taught something important about hatred. כי תראה חמור שנאך רבץ תחת משאו והדלת מעוז לו עזב תעזב עמו. *When you see your enemy's donkey collapsing under his burden, and you refrain from helping him unload (the heavy weight), you must help him.* – The Talmud explains this passuk. (Pesachim 113b) We are not allowed to hate someone for no reason, לא תשנא את אהיך בלבבך (Vayikra 19). What enemy, then, are we talking about? The Talmud teaches that this passuk is talking about a person that you, and you alone, know has committed an immoral sin and has not yet repented. He is referred to as “your enemy” and, according to the Torah, this person (a sinner), is the only person you are permitted to hate. The Talmud writes (Baba Metzia 32b) that this passuk is telling us that there is a greater mitzvah to help not just anybody but specifically this person that you hate! If you have two people you can help, one that you know sinned and one that you get along with, the mitzvah is to help the one that sinned. Tosefot (in Pesachim) asks, why is there a Mitzvah to **help** this guy that there is a Mitzvah to **hate**?

Tosefot answers that if you start snubbing him, then *he* will begin to hate you, which he is not permitted to do, for *you* did not sin. You are now causing him to sin. He is going to hate you because that is human nature, as King Solomon explains, כמים פנים אל פנים כן לב *like water (that reflects the expression of someone who peers into it) are faces one to another, and so is the heart of man (in reflecting the feelings).* (Mishlei 27). So this guy will stop smiling at you, stop being friendly to you, and then you will begin to *really* hate him, now, and not for sin alone. At this point you start finding other things to hate about him.

So, in order to avoid this downward spiral of hate, one must make sure to show love and care whenever possible, so that the hatred does not exceed the permitted boundaries. That is the pshat, the explanation of this passuk.

An observant Jew does not have a choice – *do you want your relationship to improve, or not?* The Torah does not give us an option to hate someone, except in the event that he sinned. And even then, the permitted boundary of that hatred is that it be limited to the action of the sin committed and not extended to the person himself. If we do not grow in relationships that have the potential for growth, we must ask ourselves if the underlying cause can be that we hate the person in ways that we are not allowed to.

King David, who had valid reason to hate said, יתמו מן הארץ *may the sins be terminated from the land* and not, יתמו חוטאים מן הארץ *may the sinners be terminated from the land*. The sinners are not to be cursed or hated; *their sins are to be hated*. (Berachot 10 a, Tehillim 104) There is a significant distinction between the two, and the Torah makes a point of bringing it to our attention. The Torah requires us to go out of our way to show that we have nothing against the fellow himself, but only against his actions.

In hatred, little things become big things. The reason for this is that hatred is self-propelling. Once there is just one reason to get upset with someone, justified or not, a person can make a sour face. Then, the recipient of the sour face will return it *to its source*, like a reflection in water, which leads to strife. Although the original cause that ignited the friction may have been minute, as it rolls from feeling to feeling, and from grudge to grudge, before you know it the “hate avalanche” of animosity has picked up so much velocity that nothing can stand in its way to save the relationship. We must ask ourselves how much of our hatred is due to the “hatred avalanche” and how much is actually a result of “sin” or the reason that initiated the hatred. (Many times, that original reason is not really basis for hatred, either). We must ask ourselves if there is any stress-free, (real and justified) reason to continue hating the object of our hatred.



People say – *I just want to end this relationship*. Sometimes that is possible. But many, many times, we are not ending the relationship, but building one of hate in its place. This is because when we stopped speaking to a brother or a parent, we did not end the relationship. We just turned our backs.

The root of nearly all hatred in relationships is because we play the “blame game”. In a fight, especially in marriage, we either blame the other person or we blame ourselves, but we insist that *there must be someone to*

blame. Someone has to be right. And someone has to be *guilty* and wrong. Whoever we blame, in the end, ourselves or the other party, the relationship will not be fun. The only way to stop the avalanche and start to get a grip is to stop blaming ourselves or the other party, and start changing the *actions* that are causing the strife. Kind David taught us – יתמו חטאים ולא חוטאים . *May the sins be terminated and not may the sinners be terminated...* It is much easier to get along with people by taking his advice .

3D LISTENING

Early one morning, I sat down next to my study partner, who was acting pretty strangely. He had one eye closed and was looking with his open eye at his hands, as he slowly moved them toward and away from one another. I asked him what on earth he was doing. He told me that someone taught him this cool, 3D trick. “When someone looks with only one eye, he cannot perceive depth clearly. With two eyes open, one can see 3D and notice depth of the different items that are in his field of vision. One eye alone does not give you depth. I closed one eye and am moving my hands to see if I can notice which one is farther away than the other.” Oh. I tried it myself, and I saw that it actually works! Now, there were two weirdoes in the study hall, with one eye closed, moving their hands around!

This was interesting to me. My eyes came across an interesting Midrash this week that gives a new dimension of depth to our everyday lives. The Torah forbids causing pain to the orphan and widow. *If you will cause him pain, then he will cry out to me, and I will surely hear his cry.* שמעו אשמע צעקתו (Shemot 22:22). We are taught that, “*The way of mortals is that they cannot listen to the cries of two people who are crying simultaneously. With the Creator of the World, on the other hand, it is not like that. Even if all the people of the world were to cry out to Him at once, he could and would listen to their cries...*” (Yalkut Tehillim 783)

This, of course, does not mean that human beings cannot hear two sounds at once. Although all the sounds may be *heard*, the meanings behind each sound cannot be interpreted or understood simultaneously. One must listen with his heart in order to hear the true meaning behind a voice, and the underlying message it wishes to convey. We all have only one heart, and if it is divided between two different subjects at once, then neither one

will get our undivided attention. Humans cannot give their attention to two different cries and hear them both with their entire essence, with their whole heart, at the same time. G-d, on the other hand, can listen to all the cries of the universe and contemplate each one’s deeper meaning at the same moment.

We have two eyes instead of one for the purpose of seeing and understanding depth. I believe G-d gave us two ears to teach us a similar lesson. There are many things we hear, but to listen in depth, in a dimension that is somewhat 3D, is an entirely different type of listening. To feel the underlying message in the words and the perspective behind it is different from just hearing sound and understanding it on a superficial level. We have two ears, and we can hear a lot of noises at once; but we can only *listen* to one at a time. Only one sound can be understood in depth. Only one person can be listened to at a time. We have only one heart. And when we are listening to a person when our heart is not exclusively concentrating on him, then that person is not properly listened to, nor is what he really meant to say really understood. He is just “noise”. He will feel that he did not have the heart to heart connection with us which he sought and needed.

At age two, we learn how to talk. At the age five/six, we learnt how to read and write. We are never taught how to listen. We hear sounds. Hearing is basically an involuntary action. When a sound is made, we hear it, whether we choose to or not. In contrast, listening is different: listening enlists the attention, which we voluntarily direct to what can be heard. If done properly, listening can even be tiring. When we are careful not to interrupt or answer a question before the person speaking is finished, we show him respect. We express to him – without words of explanation – that we consider it important to listen to his underlying message.

Most people are too busy to stop and listen: a father to his family members, a friend to his acquaintances. Because we are focused on too many things, we often cannot attune our ears to what is sometimes the most important subject in our lives. The only way to devote the necessary attention to issues that are truly important is by scheduling time for each thing and relating to each question, directing our whole focus to one thing at a time.

We find this in regard to the slave mentioned in the beginning of the parasha. The Jewish slave must have his ear pierced for wanting to remain in slavery under his Jewish master following the Shemitta year. Rashi explains that the ear, specifically, as opposed to any other organ, is pierced, for it heard at Mt. Sinai the words “*You shall not steal*”, and the ear did not heed the injunction. After this thief got caught and could not replace the goods he had stolen, he sold himself into slavery in order to get funds to reimburse the theft. G-d also said at Mt. Sinai “...*because Israel is for Me as slaves*”: instead of recognizing HaShem as his Master, he went and got himself a human master. He did not use his ears properly, listening actively and understanding

the meaning of HaShem’s message. (Rashi from Midrashim)

We can now understand this in a completely new light. The Jewish slave who decided to stay under his master said, in effect, that he wanted two masters. The reason why specifically the ear that did not listen is pierced, and not the hand that stole, *is because this slave can never be a good slave*. He can never listen to his mortal master, because he has another Master. And he can never listen to his Master in heaven, because he has a mortal master, who also gives orders. This is why one ear is pierced: to be a good servant, one has to be a good listener, in order to understand the meaning behind his master’s words. This is the message of two ears. *This servant can never properly listen. He can only hear.*

R’ Moshe Shapiro, shlita, was quoted as saying that a person is either in the state of Ein od Milvado (there is nothing in the world other than Hashem), or in the state of Ein Od Milvadi (there is nothing other than me). *We are always serving – either G-d, others or ourselves. One can be a slave to only one of these masters at a time.*

UNITED I STAND

Hashem commanded Moshe to take the consensus of the Jewish nation by having every Jew – rich and poor– give exactly half a shekel. The reason for this seemingly strange method of counting was because it is forbidden to count Jews directly. We are taught that doing so can bring a plague. Also, by donating half a shekel to the Mishkan, the Jews would achieve atonement. One may wonder why this atonement was necessary.

One explanation is that this atonement was to counterbalance the coins that Haman would, generations later, give to King Achashverosh. The Ba’al Haturim learns this from the last letters of the words in Parashat Shekalim, “מבן עשרים שנה”, which spell “Haman”, backwards. It seems that there is a connection between the half shekel in the time of the Mishkan and the miraculous salvation which took place on Purim, centuries later.

There is another question that is commonly asked: why were the Jewish people commanded to give only a half a shekel, and not a whole one? The Noam Elimelech

explains that the half shekel leads a person to be aware of the fact that he always has plenty of room for further growth – he’s not yet “whole”. The Chida suggests, in the name of Rav Shlomo Alcabetz, that one must realize that he always needs others in order to work toward his own perfection.

We must first understand why counting Jews leads to a plague: *When one counts Jews, each one has to be counted individually, in order to make a total sum*. One standing alone is not a good thing. When we are together, we are considered a unit; all the mitzvoth of all the individuals are accredited to the group as a whole; a person standing by himself has his merit, alone, to speak for him. That was the power of Haman’s words to Achashverosh, “ישנו עם אחד מפוזר ומפורד...” – “*There is one nation, scattered and separate...*” To counteract this, on Purim we do mitzvoth that bring us together – giving Mishloach Manot and Matanot La’evyonim.

A lack of unity is not a problem in its own right: it’s a symptom. Disunity results from individuals being



egocentric and self-centered. Only when a person realizes that he is no more than a half can he consider others as part of his life. Egocentricity is an obstacle not only to unity, but also to happiness. This is the connection between Parashat Shekalim, which stresses our need for others in order to realize our full potential, and the community mitzvot in the month of Adar, on Purim.

In Mishlei, Shlomo Hamelech writes “לתאוה יבקש נפרד” – *Disunity is brought about by physical desires*. This was the case in the beginning of the Megilla, when Jews went to Achashverosh’s elaborate, ostentatious party. By indulging themselves in physical pleasures, they became ready candidates for divisiveness and estrangement from one another. This constituted an invitation for Haman to make such a tragically accurate statement about Jewish disunity. Haman knew all too well that as long as one

focuses on requiting his desires, he can’t see anyone other than himself, and unity becomes unattainable.

When someone has problems in his relationships with others, the cause is, usually, something within himself. By learning to respect others, one can stop focusing on himself. This is why even after the Torah commands everyone to bring half a shekel, it repeats that *even a rich man should not give more than this*. When a rich man gives a big check to charity, he can easily be led to feel that he is “worth” more than those who donate much smaller sums, if anything at all. By requiring each and every person to give precisely the same sum, the Torah teaches us that we have a common denominator, a level at which we are all exactly the same. When a person recognizes that even he is just one number out of the sum total, he will learn to focus on others as much as on himself.

A LESSON FROM HELLEN

Helen Keller once said, “Hearing loss is a worse misfortune than being blind. When you lose your vision, you lose contact with things; but when you lose your hearing, you lose contact with people.” In the words of our Sages, this is true, to a degree. The Talmud (B Kama 85b) discusses the five payments for bodily damages, נזק, צער ריפוי שבת ובושת, with which one must compensate the damaged. Our rabbis tell us how to calculate the value the person lost as result of the damage. The monetary courts figure according to the slave market. If someone were to be blinded, we would figure the value of the person before being blind, and how much he is worth in the market as a slave now, and the difference in value between the two conditions goes to the damaged person. This is just one of the five payments, נזק. The Talmud discusses the evaluation of loss of different parts of the body, losing a hand, losing a leg, etc. Each loss incurs a different decline in the value of a slave; a different factor is involved in each and every limb. This is how devaluation is calculated in regard to all the bodily functions. With one exception. If you make someone deaf, the person’s value as a slave is reduced to nothing, and you need to pay the whole value of the person, according to what it would have been had he been sold as a slave before becoming deaf. No one wants a deaf slave.

Why not? Our rabbis explain (Raavad) that people get revolted from trying to communicate to someone who cannot hear. There seems to be a contradiction.

According to the aforementioned discussion, loss of hearing is the greatest loss possible, even worse than becoming blind. Elsewhere in Talmud, (Nedarim 64b) it seems that being blind is worse than being deaf. The Talmud discusses four people who are considered as dead, and one of them is a blind man. A deaf person is not one of the four. How can this be? Didn’t we learn that being deaf is worse than being blind?

The answer is simple. In regards to the blind man, himself, we consider that he is “dead”, and a deaf man isn’t. (R’ Yosef, a blind Amora, tells us, that a blind man can never really enjoy food, never become satiated.(Yoma 74b) As a slave, however, a deaf man is considered to have the least value! On the communication level, deafness takes away all value from a person, and is worse than blindness.

The Hebrew word for ear is אוזן . The Hebrew word for the handle on a cup or jug is also אוזן. In a way, the ear even looks like a jug handle. This is because the way to get a handle on any relationship is by listening...

I remember that this concept came up when I was learning life coaching in R’ Geizler’s course, in Jerusalem.. I used to think, when teaching yeshiva students (17 and up), that the way to help the boy was by finding and knowing the right thing to say. I used to think that a mentor could motivate the most efficiently by giving just the right speech or saying the right thing



in a one-on-one talk. But, I learnt that giving sparks of inspiration or motivation can be well and good in the mentoring state. But, if the student's "battery" is dead, a spark doesn't help. So, what can you do to help a confused student? You can coach him. Ask him questions .. listen to him... and then ask him again... and then listen again... I would have to speak less and listen more, if I wanted to move from mentoring to coaching. I needed to change from a ratio of 80 percent talking with 20 percent listening, to 20 percent talking and 80 percent listening. And ever since, my success rate of helping students went from 20 percent to more than 80 percent. And, the best part of it all is, I don't have to huff and puff anymore. I leave all that up to the yeshiva student.

So, what has more value, knowing how to talk or knowing how to listen? You may be very valuable as a speaker, but when it comes to your worth in personal relationships, if you don't listen a lot in a conversation, you're still holding at 20 success, even if you are the world's best speaker. You can never serve people properly if you don't listen, and everyone in our lives wants to be served. The better you serve, the greater your worth. In the United States, the one who is the best president, or best in any other leading position, is the one who knows how to listen to the nation best and serve the nation best. The art of serving is the most valuable art you have. And the first element in serving someone is listening, to be attuned to and understand what they really want. Hellen Keller said, "The only thing worse than being blind is having sight, but no vision." She would probably also say that the only thing that is worse than being deaf is being able to hear but incapable of listening.

After reading the next few lines, you will possess tools which will help you to listen. Implementing those tools will result in your becoming a more valuable person, a more effective communicator and a better conversationalist. The rule of thumb is, the more you are listening instead of talking, i.e., the more you shine the spotlight on the other person in your conversation, the more interesting he will find you, and the more valuable you will be as an acquaintance. I will show you how. Just listen. This will help you in dating, marriage, parenting, business, in many different social situations, etc...

After reading this article, approach your conversation with the next person you schmooze with as if you respect them as a Tzelem Elokim, a creation that is in the image of G-d. There is so many interesting things in this person's life, interesting opinions, knowledge you may not know, etc. Without intruding into his or her life,

ask him, in sincere interest, how things are going... Ask how his day was so far, and how he wants it to end. You need time for this, time to listen. When he has finished, and you have more time to improve your relationship, ask for his opinion about anything he may have something to say about. And then listen. Then, ask about interests, (people, places or things,) and just listen. **DO NOT SPEAK ABOUT YOURSELF UNTIL YOU ARE INVITED TO.** According to studies, the most common word people use is the word "I". And the most common word used by people who have lots of friends, people who are good communicators, is "YOU".

If you find silence, don't get nervous. It still doesn't mean that you need to talk about yourself or your interests or opinions. If you ramble on and on, you are going to have a one way conversation. So, what happens when I ask a question, and there is no immediate response, or a response that is short and to the point? Sometimes, you need to wait for an answer, to wait for things to percolate until the other party feels comfortable enough to speak. If they don't answer so fast, respect the silence; they are in middle of thinking what they want to say or how they want to answer you. If you find a question about something that he has interest in, it may open him up for discussion. But I don't know what he is interested in!!! Sometimes, you have to listen well to figure out what people are interested in. Find out how he spends his time. Time and money are of the two most valuable things on earth. If he spends his time or money on something, it means that it has value for him. A big part of listening means asking questions that will cause the other person to talk. It also means that even if you speak a couple of sentences, you do not leave off with a period, but with an open ended question. You know what I mean? ... That is a yes or no, close ended question. They can give a short answer. What is your opinion about what I am saying? ... is an open-ended question.

If the person rambles on and on, there is something you can do that will keep you focused on what he is saying. In your mind, repeat the words as he says them. After he finishes, you can summarize in just a few words what the person said, to show him that you are listening, and he will feel comfortable about continuing to talk, because he has found someone who can understand him.

The next time you are trying to be a conversationalist, remember to look for the other person's OLI. Opinions, Life and Interests. Why is listening so powerful? Why do people love it so much when you listen? When you ask about these subjects, you are showing respect for them, treating them as a tzelem elokim, or properly serving them. And when you do this, you are doing one

of the greatest mitzvot in the Torah. “Love your neighbor as you love yourself.”

THE AVERAGE AMERICAN

ר' חיים שמולביתץ, *And they stood at the foot of the mountain.* (Shemot 19 ;17) Avdimi Bar Chasa said that this passuk teaches you that G-d held the whole mountain, overturned, over their heads. He said, if you accept the Torah, good. But if not, *שם תהא קבורתכם, over there will be your burial.* (Shabbat 88a)

R' Chaim Shmulevitz asked, why does it say *שם תהא קבורתכם, over there will be your burial?* It would be more appropriate to say *באן תהיה קבורתכם, over here will be your burial!?!* They were right under the mountain, and all that G-d needed to do, if they did not accept the Torah, was to let it go and drop it on His People! So why does it say, *שם, “over there”?*

The answer he gives is the key to understanding the greatest weapon in the arsenal of your Evil Inclination. Procrastination. “When I have finished paying off my mortgage, I will free up some time from work, and *then* I will make time to learn Torah.” “When I finish marrying off my kids, *then* I will have some time to attend a Torah class.” “When it works out for me, *then* I will spend time learning with my kids.” *שם - Then!!!* That later date! That is when I will learn. But that later date does not have a date. That later date is always “later”.

Don't say, when I will free up time, I will learn- for you may never have free time! (Avot 2, 4) The Chassidic masters put a twist on that. Don't say when I have free time I will learn, because it could be that G-d wants your learning to be that of “a *busy person* who finds time for learning”! He wants to see if and how much you value Torah, if you make time for it, even though you are so, so, busy!

One night last week, I gave a class on procrastination. As I was preparing the lesson, my wife asked me if I had a few minutes to put the kids to sleep. Bedtime is the time when I practice my storytelling. I try to make up a story that is relevant to the kid's life, and this is how that night's story came out. “*Binyamin, (our 3-and-a-half year old) there was once a fireman called Boonie the Fireman. (Binyamin's nickname is Boonie). Boonie had a biiiig, red fire truck. Boonie's fire truck had a big white ladder that went up high, high, into the sky. And one morning, Boonie, who was upstairs in his Fireman's House, got an emergency call that a house down the block is on fire. “There is a woman three flights up who needs you to come right over!” “No problem. This is a job for Boonie, the fireman!” As quickly as possible,*

Boonie slides down the fireman's pole and dives into his fire truck. He flips on the sirens and starts driving towards the lady down the block. But then, on the way, Boonie smelled, from his favorite bakeshop, freshly baked, delicious, chocolate chip cookies, just like Mommy's! Boonie's favorite! What should Boonie do? Should he go to save the lady, or stop in to get the cookies? If Boonie goes to save the lady, someone else will buy the cookies; they will be gone! Forever and ever! What would you do, Binyamin? (Binyamin LOVES chocolate chip cookies).

Binyamin said, “*I will save the lady!*” “*But Binyamin, how then are you going to get your cookies?*” He responded, “*The lady will make me more cookies!*”

You see, we are all in that position. The “person who we can save”, is none other than that great person that we aspire to become. The life of being the amazing individual that we want to be has a price tag. Those who reach their goals, 1-know what their goal is, 2- they know the price they need to pay to achieve their goal, 3- and they pay the price in full and in advance. They do not waste their money and time on the cookies, no matter how tempting. But what holds us back is all the “cookies”, the things that are not so important, but are very tempting. They are the trivialities we busy ourselves with.

At the end of your life, your greatest regret will be procrastination. The Chafetz Chaim said it. “The greatest *השבון*, accounting, you are going to have to answer up to G-d after your death, is, “Why did you live without a *השבון*, without a plan?” Procrastination is like a credit card: it's a lot of fun until you get the bill.

The *חכמי אומות העולם*, the wise gentiles, say that the greatest procrastination in the world is web browsing and email checking. One study says that the average American checks his phone 110-221 times a day. I hope that I am not an average American. I do not want it to be written on my gravestone that I spent so much of my life checking emails or browsing the web. What a waste of a life, even waste of a tombstone! *שם תהא קבורתכם*, Your biggest “grave”, your biggest value-time-killer, is procrastination. Rabbi Shlomo Ibn Gebirol said it best: *אדם דואג על איבוד דמיו ואינו דואג על איבוד ימיו, דמיו אינם עוזרים, ימיו אינם חוזרים. A man is worried about the loss of his money, but he is not worried about the loss of his days. His money does not help him, and his days won't return!*

WHY LIE?

The Maharsha writes the following powerful story in the name of the Baal HaKrim. There was once a man who was a sinner and a thief who came to a wise man to do Teshuvah. But he could not take on himself all of the laws of the Torah. They were too many. So the wise man said, Are you willing to take on yourself just one thing? The man said yes. So the wise man said, Take upon yourself not to speak any lie. He accepted.

A little while later, he was on his way to steal. A man met him on the way, and asked him where he was going. He remembered his commitment to saying only the truth. So, he told the man where he was headed. Then, he met another man, and the same thing happened. He told him as well, that he was on his way to steal. Then, he started thinking. If these two end up joining together and become witnesses to kill me... the thought was so intense that he refrained from committing his bad action. (Maharsha Sanhedrin 92a)

It is amazing how striving for truth can be the pivot for being the best Jew possible. All of our negative emotions, i.e. anger, depression, guilt, fear, frustration, are a result of not striving for the truth as it is, in reality. Sometimes we do not look for the honest truth, because the truth can be brutal to our ego. And we naturally love the ego too much. Or we love our materialistic desires too much. Only when we strive for truth, can we love the reality G-d has given us. The Sefer Chassidim writes that someone who is careful not to speak falsely is able to bless or decree, and his words will come true.

The Torah cautions us to stay as far away as possible from falsehood; there is no other mitzvah in which we are warned to distance ourselves from something. מדבר שקר תרחק. Although dishonesty is not a sin, unless it is in court or used in trying to gain money through lying, (opinion of Ibn Ezra and some other Poskim, see Kovetz Bais Aron V'Yisroel 59:pages 70-75) it is the only thing the Torah tells us to stay far away from. Why? Because if you strive for truth, you will be the best Jew possible. And if you lie, it is as if you are serving idols (see Sanhedrin 92a).

Why then, didn't the Torah forbid lying, even in everyday matters, or when it clashes with peace? (B Metziah 87a) Why does it say only that we should distance ourselves from falsehood? And, if lying is so bad, why did G-d allow it to exist?

The Ben Ish Chai, in his Mashal VeNimshal (Mashal 73) relates the following story. There was once a young man named Goel. He went to sleep on the night of Rosh

Hashana, but before closing his eyes, he said to himself, 'Oh, the world is so full of lie and deceit! So many people suffer from dishonesty! How I wish that dishonesty would vanish!'

He noticed a small, black creature standing by his bed. "Who are you?!" The creature responded, "I am Sheker!" Goel tried jumping out of bed to catch this creature, but Sheker is very slippery, and Goel could not catch it. Sheker told Goel, 'Without me, people would not be able to survive, even one day!' Goel replied, 'You are such a liar! The world would be a much better place without you!' Sheker said, 'Fine!! I will give you one day, without me! Let us see you manage for just one day without me!' And with that, Sheker vanished, and Goel awoke.

Goel opened his eyes that morning of Rosh Hashana to see his housekeeper coming towards him, bringing a bowl of warm water for him to refresh himself. This woman was elderly, without children, and she lived in Goel's house, cooked his food, and took care of his needs. With a smile, she said to him, 'I bless you, my master, that this coming year be for you a year of serenity, success, good life, wealth and honor!'

Goel looked at her and said, "Your wrinkles disgust me! How I wish I did not have to see you every day, the first thing in the morning!" The elderly woman could not believe what she just heard! She threw the water at Goel's face and left the house, swearing never to return to work for such a rude, obnoxious master...

Goel, still in his wet pajamas, wondered what he had just done. What have I just said?! Why did I talk like this, and lose the woman that has served me with all sincerity for so many years?! Goel got up and quickly went to Shul. On his way back home, he went to visit his childless uncle who had been supporting him, to wish him a good year. Instead of offering best wishes and a good year, Goel said, 'Oh, how nice it would be if this would be your last year! I really need some cash, and when you leave behind your wealth, I will be able to be financially independent!'

"What! I loved you so much, all these years I took care of you! I supported you! And you just wanted my money! You will not get one more dollar from me, as long as I live, and after I die!!"

Goel walked out, confused at his own actions. He met his landlord. "I need to be honest and open with you about my being behind in my rent. Just now, my uncle,

who I was hoping would help, decided he will never give me another dollar, and cut me out of his will.” The landlord said, If that’s the case, pack your bags immediately after Rosh Hashana!!

Broken, Goel decided to go visit his fiancée and tell her about his hard day. She always knew how to cheer him up and look at things in a positive light. But when he met her, he told her that she was not the first girl he dated and promised to marry. She was the fourth! With that, the soon-to-be bride said, “I don’t ever want to see you again.”

Poor Goel walked home a broken man. Alone in the world, without a roof after the holiday, he plopped down onto his bed and wondered what had brought him to such bad luck that day... He then realized, how much he could have used some dishonesty. How it could have come to his advantage. And he blessed Sheker, for being so right.

With that, Goel awoke. He opened his eyes to see the wrinkle-faced mistress, blessing him to have a beautiful year... Goel said to her, 'Oh, how lucky I am to have you as my housekeeper! I love seeing your smile each morning! It really makes my day.'

The beauty of this story is that we can understand how we all need to lie, or manage the truth if not asked for it, for the sake of Shalom. Although the Signature of G-d is Emet, Truth, in the hierarchy of values, Peace is greater than Truth. The Sifri writes that G-d’s Name is Shalom. Peace. So if Peace is G-d, while Emet is just G-d’s signet ring, Peace is a higher value. The Rambam writes

that the whole Torah was given in order to bring peace to the world *דרכיה דרכי נועם וכל נתיבותיה שלום* (Hilchot Hanukah). Even G-d, Himself, changed the truth when speaking to Avraham about Sarah’s words. The brothers of Yosef lied to him, when they said that their father asked him to forgive them (Yevamot 65b).

We live in a world of Sheker. And someone who tries to live with only truth will hurt himself. The world was actually created with this in mind, that it is not a place for total truth. For in a world of only truth, there is no place for man. For man is full of lies. When G-d came to make Man, *חסד ואמת נפגשו*, the angels disapproved, and there was a clash between honesty and kindness. Honesty said, do not create man, for he is full of deceit. Kindness said, create man, for he does kindness... G-d took Honesty and threw it to the ground. The angels asked G-d, Why are you disgracing Your Own Signet Ring? (Bereshit Rabbah 8;5)... What does all this mean?

The Tifferet Tzion (R Yitzchak Zev Yadler) writes that one cannot explain to the angels, who are spiritual, who do not have any concept of material physicality, that Tzaddikim do a Tikun to the trait of Sheker, as our rabbis teach: it is permissible to twist the truth for the sake of peace. That is why G-d threw the Emet to the ground, to give it a physical/material sense, in order to make it possible for Truth to understand the necessity of falsehood, when needed, to bring peace to the life of man.

(Email me to receive pdf of the Halachot when and where one is allowed to lie.)

THE CHICKEN NUGGET PIRATE

מִדְבַר שֶׁקֶר תִּרְחַק *Distance yourself from deceitful words.* The Torah does not warn us to distance ourselves from any sin except this one: lying. What does this mean, to distance yourself from deceit?

The Peleh Yoetz, on the word Sheker, gives us a gem for developing social skills. We will get to the gem soon. First, the Peleh Yoetz tells us the severity of lying: that it is similar to idolatry. (Sanhedrin 92a) A proper Jew is honest. He continues, saying that if a child was accused of doing something wrong and he admits his error, he should not be punished. But, if he denies what he has done and is caught lying, he deserves severe punishment.

The Peleh Yoetz tells the story of the fellow who sinned “all the sins in the Book” and came to a Rabbi, to ask for a way to repent . The Rabbi suggested that he take upon

himself just one law from the Torah : to never, ever lie. By keeping just this one law, he became a complete penitent, for he would refrain from sin, just so that he would not need to lie to prevent himself from embarrassment. (Note that whenever we pray to G-d for forgiveness, we always ask that we be forgiven for one merit. For the merit of honesty, of admitting that we have sinned).

And he continues. It is known that the crime of causing another person to sin is worse than killing him. (Bamidbar Rabbah 21, 4) Therefore, one should not ask his friend to reveal a secret that he may know and would not want to reveal. People will sometimes lie, just to evade embarrassment of saying, “I do not want to reveal the secret.” Also, do not ask a friend to borrow something that he might not want to lend you, for, out of

embarrassment, he may lie and say that he does not have it.

A friend from England once relayed to me an experience that he had when he was in Yeshiva high school. *The Yeshiva cook had been busy preparing for a Kiddush, making chicken nuggets for 100 people, so he offered a skimpy lunch that Thursday. He served a big tub of tuna fish for the whole yeshiva, and heated up the stale left-over bread from breakfast. Our stomachs groaned. One of the boys approached the Yeshiva kitchen, asking the cook for a favor. In an innocent tone of voice, he said, "I love having my tuna fish with red peppers. Can I go into the kitchen to get some?" No problem. He fills his arms with 8 big, red peppers and enters the walk-in refrigerator, the Holy Ark of the Chicken Nuggets. He pulls out a disposable plastic knife from his jacket pocket and does the unthinkable: neatly slicing open the peppers and emptying out the inside, he filled them with chicken nuggets, neatly closing them again. Thanking the cook for his generosity in regards to the peppers, the "hero" walked out of the kitchen towards the dining room with a shining smile to match his 8 shining peppers. As he reached the table, he laid down the precious peppers and uncovered his hidden treasure: plenty for himself and for his fellow pirates!*

Within a few minutes, there was a long queue outside the Yeshiva kitchen. Suddenly, everyone wanted red peppers "for their tuna fish". Within no time, the chicken nuggets were totally devoured, right under the cook's nose!" When the cook entered the walk-in refrigerator and discovered what had happened, he could not keep his dismay to himself. So, he let out his fury to the school administrator.

The administrator announced that whoever had partaken the chicken nuggets was to report to the yeshiva office, immediately, to receive punishment. No one showed up. The administrator then shocked us all. The entire class was to wait outside the office, to undergo interrogation. We had no idea what his lie

detector was. We opened the door a crack, and we saw it. A bottle of milk and twenty two cups. If you did not eat the chicken nuggets, have a glass of milk. If you refuse the milk, you will be accused as the chicken nugget thief, and you will need to accept your punishment.

Quickly, one of the boys ran to the yeshiva pay phones, and "prank called" the office. "Hello, this is Mr. Gold. Can I speak with the school administrator?" The administrator was paged and left his office. One of the classmates ran into the office and pushed the bottle of milk deep inside one of the big desk drawers. The administrator returned to his seat, but the milk was gone. He just let us all go.

Although the method used to find the guilty party was clever, it was certainly damaging to the boys. I can understand the teenage classmates. But I do not understand the yeshiva administrator. How could he put 16- year-olds under such a test, knowing that, out of embarrassment or fear, someone might eat chicken and then milk, a rabbinic prohibition? One thing for sure, this administrator was not popular with his students.

People who have good relationships with others do not ask something that will create an awkward position. They have a certain gentleness that radiates an unspoken trust to their friends and family – a respect that includes never putting others into a compromising position. Never creating a situation in which others will feel tempted to lie, in order to avoid embarrassment.

Sociable people build relationships on trust; it's comfortable when they are around. Trust is the basis for lasting friendships. And this is what is alluded to meant in the Torah, מדבר שקר תרחק, distance yourself from deceitful words. Keep yourself far away from a lie – so far that you do not even put another person in a position that he may consider lying to prevent extreme embarrassment.

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IN LOVING MEMORY OF SONNY AND IRENE GINDI A"H