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The Art of Hearing What You Already Know

Two non-Jewish figures merited having entire Torah portions named after them. Yitro. And Balak. Both were exposed to the greatness of the Jewish people. Both witnessed the miracles, the signs, the unmistakable hand of Hashem guiding and protecting Am Yisrael. And both responded with action. But pay close attention to the difference between the two. Yitro draws conclusions, and comes to convert, coming close to the Shechinah. Balak also draws conclusions, and what are his conclusions? "Come, curse this nation for me. Perhaps I can fight them and drive them out." Same information. Same exposure. Opposite reactions. Why? Because by Yitro it says: "Vayishma Yitro" Yitro heard. And by Balak it says: "Vayar Balak" Balak saw. Yitro hears. Balak sees. And that difference changes everything.

Seeing can be done from a distance. In fact, the farther you are, the wider the view, the more panoramic the scene feels. But hearing? Hearing is internalized when it is personal, the closer you are, the more meaning it has. Hearing, when it is personal, it has more meaning, and that meaning demands a response. Hearing from close means, this involves me. Allow me to explain.

Hearing something that means nothing to you, means you did not really hear it. We encounter this exact idea at the end of Tractate Nedarim. The Mishnah teaches that a father has the power to annul his daughter's vows. When? On the day he hears about them. That day, until sunset, is his window of opportunity. But, if a father hears that his daughter made a vow, and he does not know

that halacha grants him the authority to annul it, so he does nothing... The day passes, days go by. Maybe months. One evening, he attends a Mishnah class between Mincha and Arvit, and suddenly he discovers, to his shock, that the Torah did give him veto power over his daughter's vows. But it's too late, right? The day of hearing has long passed. Chazal teach something astonishing: He can annul the vow now. How is that possible? Didn't he already hear about the vow back then? The answer is: No! He didn't! If a person hears information but does not understand that it is relevant to him, that it demands action from him, it is not called hearing. Only now, when he realizes that the vow concerns him, that he has responsibility and power of veto, now it is called "the day he heard."

What does this tell us? You can absorb information from morning until night. You can know everything. But if you don't grasp that it applies to you, if you don't realize that you are being addressed, then you haven't heard anything at all. If growth feels like "general advice," it won't move you. If it feels like "this is on me," it will. And this is precisely the story of Yitro. Yitro heard, and he came. When Yitro heard about the splitting of the sea, he understood that this information was speaking to him. If the sea split, then there is a Creator. If there is a Creator, if Hashem reveals such love and faithfulness to His chosen nation, then I, too, can choose to belong. If I heard this news, that means, G-d is calling upon me.

Yitro wasn't the only one who knew about the miracles. Everyone knew. "Then the chiefs of



Edom were terrified, the leaders of Moab were seized with trembling; all the inhabitants of Canaan melted away." They were updated. They were informed. They were shaken. But none of them "heard". No one internalized that this knowledge required something of them. Balak saw, but he did not hear. He witnessed miracles that should have driven him to conversion. Instead, he tried to fight reality. That means he didn't hear what he was supposed to hear.

Let me give you a painfully familiar example of what it means to see without hearing. Have you ever attended a funeral? Have you ever stood near a deceased person? Tell me, did you hear anything? Nothing? Are you sure? Because the Gemara says that when a soul leaves the body, its voice pierces from one end of the world to the other. Not a quiet sound. A sound that's deafening. So how is it that no one hears anything? Who hears that voice?

A body lying in the funeral home, the simple fact that a person who was alive a few hours ago is no longer here, that reality itself is a proclamation that screams across the universe. What is it declaring? "Hello, shoppers at the mall. What are you buying? It won't come with you." "Hello, you who takes everything personally... Don't. None of this lasts." "Don't over-upgrade. Don't over-invest. Don't exhaust yourself." Everyone ends up in the same place. No luggage. Not even socks.

Does anyone argue with the message announced by every funeral? And yet, does that stop even one person from rushing back to life to upgrade their lifestyle? No. Why don't we hear this silent booming voice? Because we are only seeing, without hearing. We all see. We all know. We are fully aware that no one leaves this world alive. But does it change how we live? That is the sound that pierces the world, and no one hears it.

Yitro teaches us: Seeing is not enough. Balak, you saw, but you didn't hear. Hearing means internalizing. Hearing means drawing conclusions. Hearing means realizing: this demands something from me. As Messilat Yesharim begins his book of how to live like a Jew, there are no new ideas that you don't know, that you haven't yet heard, that can change your life. Nothing in his book is novel.

We already know everything. The only question is: do we hear this in a personal way, in a way that obligates us?

We all know, from kindergarten: There is a Creator. There is accountability. Hashem listens to prayers. Hashem loves you. These phrases are familiar. Almost worn out. But maybe, it's time we actually hear them. To let them enter, not just our ears, but our hearts. To stand up and do something with them. Because as research has proven: repetition of ideas, without action leads to desensitization, not motivation.

People often mistake watching growth content for doing growth. But you can remain a spectator forever. Watching change feels like change, but it isn't. A University of Pennsylvania study found that passive consumption of reading, watching, or listening, creates a false sense of progress, reducing the likelihood of action by up to 30%. Information changes minds, not lives. People who take action within 24 hours of insight are five times more likely to follow through long-term. Insight that waits becomes entertainment.

Research in behavioral psychology shows that over 90% of people already know what would improve their lives: sleep, exercise, boundaries, focus, and proper diet. Yet fewer than 10–15% act consistently. Roughly 80% of New Year's resolutions fail by February. After major events, accidents, illness, loss, people often promise change, but revert back. Within six to twelve weeks, over 70% of people return to original habits.

Why?

Shock, New Years, pain, etc... wakes people up. But only "meaning" and "owning" keeps them awake. The event was seen, felt even, but not personalized, so it was not integrated into daily identity. Once a person stopped "listening", the person stops changing. The question isn't whether you know. The question is: do you hear? Are you listening with the intention to act, to own, to see what this means to you? Because if you hear, really hear, you won't be able to stay the same.

So, let me ask you: What is just one idea the

inspired you, but then quietly expired?

THE ART OF LEARNING TORAH EVERY SECOND YOU CAN

King David desired to build the Beit HaMikdash, but Hashem did not allow him to do so because his hands were stained with blood from the many wars he fought. Hashem told him: **כִּי ذֶם רַב שְׁפְּכַת וּמְלֹתָמֹת** **גָּדוֹלָת עֲשִׂית, לֹא תָבִנָה בֵּית לְשָׁמֵי כִּי ذֶם רַב שְׁפְּכַת אֶרֶץ לְפָנֵי** For you have shed much blood, and you have waged great wars; you shall not build a house for My Name because you have shed much blood upon the earth before Me." (Divrei HaYamim I 22:8)

The Beit HaMikdash is a place of peace—peace between man and Hashem and peace between man and his fellow. Since King David was a warrior and had engaged in bloodshed, Hashem decreed that it would be inappropriate for him to be the one to build it. Instead, this task was left to his son, King Solomon, whose name itself is derived from the root *Shalom*, meaning peace. The people, understanding that King David could not build the Beit HaMikdash, eagerly anticipated the reign of King Solomon, for they believed that only under his rule could the Temple be completed. This anticipation led some to express a desire for King David's passing so that the next stage could begin. However, King David rebuked them, saying that he had heard directly from Hashem that even one day of Torah study in the Beit Midrash was more precious than a thousand offerings brought by King Solomon. **כִּי טֹב יוֹם בְּחַצְרִיךְ מְאֻלָּף בַּחֲרוֹת הַסּוֹפֶר בְּבֵית אֱלֹקי**. Our Rabbis explain: "טֹב לִי יוֹם אָמַר לָהֶם קֹד: אָמַר לָהֶם עֹזֶם עַזְקִים בְּתוֹרָה אָחֵד שְׁאַזְמָם עַזְקִים בְּתוֹרָה בְּמִזְבֵּחַ מְאֻלָּף עַזְלָוֹת שִׁיקְרָב אָחֵד שְׁלָמָה בְּבֵרֶר הַבַּיִת" "David said to them: One day of your Torah study in the Beit Midrash is more precious to G-d than a thousand Olot, burnt offerings, that King Solomon will offer on Har HaBayit." (Pesachim 68b) King Solomon was known for offering a thousand Korbanot Olah(burnt offerings) daily. A Korban Olah is the highest level of sacrifice, as the entire animal is consumed by fire, with only the skin remaining. Given that the Beit HaMikdash functioned approximately twelve hours a day, this means King Solomon offered more than 1 sacrifice a minute. 1,000 sacrifices per 12 hours, from morning to night = 80 sacrifices per hour = More than 1 sacrifice per minute.

This teaches us a profound lesson: every minute of Torah learning is worth more than a full korban olah. Even one single moment of Torah learning surpasses the value, of an entire sacrifice, even a korban olah, an act of supreme devotion to Hashem, In the year 5731 (1971), Rabbi Ovadia Yosef, together with Rabbi Yissachar Meir, the Rosh Yeshiva of Yeshivat HaNegev, visited the home of the Baba Sali. The Baba Sali told Rabbi Ovadia that even back in Morocco, he had studied his sefer *Yabia Omer*. The Baba Sali then told Rabbi Ovadia that this was an auspicious time and requested that he stay with him for an important meal, during which they would work together to bring about the redemption, Mashiach, and the Beit Hamikdash. However, Rabbi Ovadia apologized to the Baba Sali, explaining that many people were waiting for him at a Torah lecture in Bnei Brak. He added, "*The study of Torah is even greater than the building of the Beit HaMikdash.*"

אֲלֹו דְּבָרִים שָׁאֵין "These are the things that have no measure to small, for which a person enjoys the dividends in this world while the principal remains for him in the World to Come... and the study of Torah is equal to them all." Every word of Torah, no matter how small, is worth 613 Mitzvot. There is no amount of how small, how short, the learning you do, that has the greatest reward. Even if one can only learn a single chapter in the morning and another at night, they still fulfill the mitzvah of **לֹא יִמּוֹשׁ סְפִּיר הַתּוֹרָה כַּאֲמֵר וְגַת בַּז** **לֹא יִמּוֹשׁ סְפִּיר הַתּוֹרָה כַּאֲמֵר וְגַת בַּז** This book of the Torah shall not depart from your mouth, and you shall meditate on it day and night." (Yehoshua 1:8) Even reciting *Shema* in the morning and evening, fulfills this mitzvah!

The Shulhan Aruch rules that a person should only interrupt Torah learning for a mitzvah that cannot be performed by someone else. This is because learning Torah encompasses all 613 mitzvot. Being that the mitzvah Torah learning is so great, even greater than saving peoples' lives, you can only stop learning, if no one else can do the Mitzvah, except you. (Yoreh De'ah 246:18): **תְּלִמוד תּוֹרָה שְׁקֹול כְּנָגֵד כָּל הַמְצֻוֹת** "The study of Torah is

equivalent to all other mitzvot." Therefore, a person should only pause their learning for mitzvot that only he can do, eating and sleeping, since no one else can fulfill those on his behalf.

The Nervoni, one of the commentators of the Guide of the Perplexed of the Rambam, wrote 700 years ago: *Know about Har Sinai, that each one of its rocks has the shape of the Thornbush on it. That is why it is called ייִשׁוּרִין because of the סִנְהָה, the thornbush design on its rocks.* (See Pirkei D'RE 41) *One of the Noblemen of Barcelona brought one of the stones back from the Mt. with him. He showed it to his family, and when I saw the thornbush on the rock, I broke the rock into half, and there was a thornbush again, on the inside of the crack, on the two halves! I broke it again, now into four, and again, on each side of each of the four stones, was a thornbush! I broke it until it was the size of peanuts, and there was always a thornbush shape, on each stone!*

That testimony was 700 years ago. In our century, Israel's Department of Geology crushed these stones thin. On every stone, not matter how small the stones were crushed, the sign of a thornbush was seen from a microscope! What is the message hidden in the stones? G-d doesn't make miracles

THE ART OF BEING A LIGHT TO ALL THE NATIONS

The Zionist dream of Ben Gurion was that the State of Israel would be "a light to the nations". "History did not spoil us with strength, wealth, spacious lands, or a large nation. But it gave us a unique ethical and intellectual structure and nature, which obliges us to be a light unto the nations." (Ben Gurion) The principal for being a light unto the nations is sourced in Tanach. קָרְבָּן וְגַזְּבָן (Yeshayah 49 :6) In three places, Yeshayah tells us to be a light to the nations. When Netanyahu [Bibi] speaks at the UN, he justifies our right to exist, as this is ultimately our agenda: to be a light to the Nations.

Christians, Americans, and many others have tried to rob us of being the light to nations. Donald Trump's dream was that United States of America, would be "the light to all the nations". (Feb 2018, at the Christian National Prayer Breakfast.)

for fun, but for the message. What's the message to us?

Every moment that a person learns Torah is comparable to the stone of Mount Sinai. No matter how small the fragment, it still will infuse you with connection to the divine experience of G-d giving you the Torah on Har Sinai. We bless over the Torah, that G-d is *Melamed* Torah, that He is teaching Torah, not *Limed* Torah, that He taught Torah. Because every single moment, G-d is teaching. Every second you open a book or hear a Torah class, G-d is teaching you.

No matter how busy our lives are, even a single chapter, a single pasuk, or a single word of Torah study holds infinite worth. The Noda B'Yehuda was once asked by a wealthy man how much he should give a talmid chacham for learning Torah. He replied: *"You cannot pay enough for even one minute of Torah—it is worth more than all the money in the world!"* (based on Mishlei 3:15, קָרְבָּה הִיא מְפִנִּים—"It is more precious than pearls").

Take the words, *I am bored*, out of your lexicon. Rav Moshe Feinstein would remind his talmidim that even waiting in line, sitting on a bus, or in between tasks, a person can learn Torah. One minute of learning isn't "extra"—it's life-changing.

When the State of Israel was looking for an emblem, they were not sure what to choose. Maybe the Dove with the Olive Branch, which inspires hope, independence, peace, and the natural draw to come back to Israel, as in the natural GPS that pigeons have? Or maybe it should be the Tablets of the Ten Commandments? Or maybe the Deer, which is a sign of the Nation coming back and filling the borders of Israel... Or maybe the burning bush, that is aflame and is not consumed, to communicate the Nation's ability to survive all the Exiles? Or maybe a lion, as the sign of Judea was - אָרוֹן הַבְּרִית ? Finally, they agreed on the Menorah. Because the purpose of our People is to be a light to the Nations. One of the reasons why they agreed upon this is because the Menorah needs to be made, in entirety, from one unified piece of original material, שְׂמִינִית מִקְשָׁתָה זָהָב טְהָרָתָה מִקְשָׁתָה הַנּוֹתָרָה in order to spread light to the Nations.

We need a unified nation, to spread the light to the other nations.

What does it even mean, to be a light to the nations, practically, and what does it have to do with me?

R' Shimshon R. Hirsch wrote what it means that we are to be a light to the Nations: *The Land of Israel, is the meeting place between three continents: Europe, Asia, and Africa. All the biggest wars of history hit Israel hard. And that is why G-d chose it as the Chosen Land! If the Jews would merit and live a holy life in this land, no one will dare to come capture it, or come close to its borders! Three times a year, at the Jewish Festivals, all the Jews of the Land would come to the Temple and leave the borders with no guards! And no one even tried to capture it! Even in times when Israel was full with blessing and plenty, no one would even try and infiltrate it! All the kings of the world would fight one with another and just pass over our land, and no sword would pass through our Land!* **ונמהמי שלום בארץ ושכבותם ואין מתריד** **בארצם**: **וְהַשְׁבָּתִי מִתְּהִלָּה רְשָׁה מִזְרָחָה וְתָרָב לְאַתְּעָלָר בָּאָרֶצָם**: (Vayikra 26;6) *And all the Nations of the world, would see with their own eyes, THAT G-D IS IN ISRAEL!! As the passuk states, **אֶלְקָנִים בָּאָמָרְנוּתָךְ נָזַע** לְמַשְׁבֵּב*: (Tehillim 48) *And in this way, Tzion (Jerusalem) will be a light to the Gentiles, and the Nations will say, "Let us join this Nation for G-d is with them!"* (R Shimshon R Hirsch Bereshit 14;1) To become a light unto the nations, it is not about getting more Nobel prizes. It is not about being the Start-Up Nation, or the Silicon Valley of the Middle East. It is much more than that. It is being a nation who lives with miracles!!!!

In this week's parasha the Torah tells us that the whole Jewish nation are Kohanim to the world. The Seforno in this week's Parasha tells us that this is how G-d looks at His People. **וְאַתֶּם תָּהִיו לִי** **מַמְלָכֶת כָּהֲנִים**. *ובזה תהי סגולה מכלם כי תהיו מלככת כהנים להבין ולהזרות לכל המין האנושי לקרוא כלם בשם ה', ולעבדו שכם אחד, כמו שيهיה עניין ישראל לעתיד לבא, כאמור ואתם כהני ה' תקראו* (ישעיהו ס"א, ו) *וכאמרו כי מצינו תצא תורה שם ב(ג): We are to be G-d's Kohanim to the world, to teach Mankind how to connect to G-d, and to serve G-d together, as will be in in the Future. This is the true way to be a light to the nations.*

Jews all over the world are scratching their heads, trying to figure out why so many people are siding with Hamas, who have our hostages and raped our women and broke every war crime if there ever was one! It all makes no sense!!

The answer is so obvious, if you look in the words of our Sages! The gentiles hate us because we are the Chosen Nation, that G-d gave us the Torah at Har Sinai, which caused the Sinah- the hatred to the nations of the world. They naturally hate us, because G-d spoke to us, and never spoke to them. We will be hated. Until... we become the Kohanim of the world! How do we become the Kohanim of the World?

When we learn Torah, keep G-d's Mitzvoth, with love, G-d turns that hate of the Gentiles into love! The only way for us to have the gentiles respect us is not something we can do directly, but indirectly. **וְהָהָה אֶמְשָׁמָע בְּקוֹל יְלֻגָּק אַלְקִיק לְשָׁמָר לְעַשּׂוֹת אֶת-כָּל-מִצְוֹתָיו אֲשֶׁר אֲנֹכִי מְצֻוָּה כָּיוֹם וּנוֹתָר יְלֻגָּק אַלְקִיק עַל-יוֹן עַל-פָּלָגּוּיִה הָאָרֶץ**: When we learn G-d's Torah, then G-d will put us above all the Nations of the World. It is something that only G-d can do for us, not something we can achieve directly, ourselves! We can't fight the Muslims' social media strength with social media, through showing how we fight or how socially just we are. Because that is not what the world wants to see, that we are morally and politically correct! They want to see that G-d is with us!

The Radak explains this concept of being a Light to the Nations to mean that from Tzion, from Jerusalem, Torah will spread to the world. When Mashiach comes, he will teach peace to the Nations, and they will destroy their own weapons. He will teach them to keep the Seven Noahide Laws. The Netziv, though, learns that to be a Light to the Nations is referring to the times of the Jews going through Exile, spread all over the globe. That was what G-d revealed to Avraham: that his descendants will be a light to the nations, as they are spread all over the globe, through the exiles. (Netziv Bereshit 47 28)

We have to ask ourselves what type of message we are giving to the Gentiles, and in what way we are guiding them to connect to G-d? What are we

known for? For doing well in business and driving nicer cars, living in fancier houses? That we are the winning team?? That is not something that they look up to us for and want to learn from us! If anything, that just makes them jealous of us and mad! What they want to see in us is that G-d is amongst us, either through miracles, or through our behavior. *We are content with what we have, a happy people, a balanced people, kind people, people who don't fight. People who pay on time, who don't over-eat and don't indulge, who don't laugh in a light-headed manner and greet other people with a smile. Who don't answer back or take things personally; people who are honest in business and know how to get along with others and relate to them. People who study G-d's word,*

A LESSON FROM A HAR SINAI STONE

The exact place of Har Sinai, is still unknown. But the mountain we know, seems to have the following signs:

The Nervoni, one of the commentators of the Guide of the Perplexed of the Rambam, wrote 700 years ago: Know about Har Sinai, that each one of its rocks has the shape of the Thornbush on it. That is why it is called **הר סיני** because of the **סנה**, the thornbush design on its rocks. (See Pirkei D'RE 41) One of the Noblemen of Barcelona brought one of the stones back from the Mt. with him. He showed it to his family, and when I saw the thornbush on the rock, I broke the rock into half, and there was a thornbush again, on the inside of the crack, on the two halves! I broke it again, now into four, and again, on each side of each of the four stones, was a thornbush! I broke it until it was the size of peanuts, and there was always a thornbush shape, on each stone!

That testimony was 700 years ago. In our century, Israel's Department of Geology crushed these stones thin. On every stone, not matter how small the stones were crushed, the sign of a thornbush was seen, even from a microscope!

The stones are reddish, as if they went through a fire! Well, in our Parasha the Torah teaches that over 2000 years ago, they did go through a fire, when G-d came to the mountain, to give His Torah!! **וְהַר סִינֵי עָשָׂו כֹּלֹן מִפְנֵי אֲשֶׁר יָבֹد עַלְיוֹ יָקֻלָּק בָּאָשׁ**

who are proud of their Tzizit and Tefillin and live by what they learn. When we live this way, G-d prides Himself in us. **וַיֹּאמֶר לְיַעֲבֹר יְהֹוָה יְשָׁרָאֵל אֲשֶׁר-בָּךְ אָתָּפָאָר** (Rambam Yesodei Hatorah 5 11)

Most of all, this can be displayed in our living with a proper balance between Emunah and Hishtadlut. When you believe that all your business efforts, are just “effort”, but the success is in G-d's Hands, then you are much calmer in all your dealings. You don't have to be tough; you don't have to overwork. With everything you do as a Jew is supposed to do, you are representing the Ribbono shel Olam, His Torah and His people in the best light possible.

וַיַּעֲלֶה עָשָׂו כָּעֵשׂוּ כְּכָלָשׁ And the mountain of Sinai was entirely in smoke, because the Fire of G-d descended upon it, and the smoke went up like the smoke of a furnace! But wait there is more! The Or Hachaim writes on these words: **בָּגּוּפּוּ שֶׁל הָר וַיָּנַשְׁרַפּוּ אֶבְנָיו כִּמְשֻׁפְטֵת הַכְּבָשֵׁן אֲשֶׁר יְשָׁרָפּוּ בּוּ** **הַאֲבָנִים לְעַשְׂוֹת סִיד,** **וּמְעַתָּה אֶבְנֵי סִינֵי נָעַשׂ סִיד** The fire took over the entire “body” of the mountain, and its stones were burnt, like when you burn stones in an oven! The stones were actually burnt with the fire of the Shechina!

We don't know what the fire of the Shechina looks like, but we know that when G-d appeared to Moshe in fire, he appeared to Moshe on Har Sinai in a fire in a thornbush. The purpose of G-d first revealing Himself to Moshe in a thornbush, was so that, when Moshe will come back to Har Sinai to receive the Torah, he would be ready for a much greater revelation of G-d in fire when G-d would reveal Himself! (See Meam Loez Shemot) And probably that fire was also in the shape of a thornbush!

A geologist once checked the thornbush designs on the rocks, to see what element the thornbush marking on the rocks actually are. His findings were amazing! The element is magnesium! This was some sort of electric shock! What are the properties of magnesium?

This is what Wikipedia says about magnesium: When burning in air, magnesium produces a brilliant-white light that includes strong ultraviolet wavelengths. Magnesium powder was used for subject illumination in the early days of photography. Magnesium filament was used in electrically ignited single-use photography flashbulbs. Magnesium powder is used in fireworks, and marine flares where a brilliant white light is required. It was also used for various theatrical effects, such as lightning, pistol flashes, and supernatural appearances.

In the Song of Devorah, the passuk says, הַרְיִם נָזְלָה מְפִנִי יְקֻנָּךְ זֶה סִינֵי Mountains, dripped from in front of YVKV, This is Sinai! Rashi explains, that this dripping was the fire that went through the stones, some sort of lava!

There is no such mountain that has such a phenomenon in its stones! All these physical signs of revelation of G-d on this mountain, and the fire that was there! But what is the message hidden in the stones? G-d doesn't make miracles for fun, but for the message. What's the message to us?

One message is that no matter how many times the Jewish people are broken, and how separated a Jew is from his community, the fire of G-d's Word is in his heart. We say, a few times a day, in the first words of the Amida, אֱלֹקֶינוּ וְאֱלֹקֵי אֲבוֹתֵינוּ Our G-d and the G-d of our Fathers. We only say G-d of Abraham, Yitzhak and Yaakov, because they proved till their last days of their lives, that they were devoted to G-d and servicing Him, and that they were above their Yetzer Hara, with no connection to sin. How then, can we say, Our G-d, if not all of us proved our loyalty to G-d? (See Rashi Bereshi 28, 13)

On the most simplistic level, we can say, that no matter how much the Gentiles break the Jewish nation, pogroms, inquisitions, exiles, the Jew, still remains. No matter how separated a Jew is from His nation, He still has a spiritual spark that cannot be extinguished! No matter how you slice the Jew, there is a part of G-dliness that is above sin. This holy place inside the Neshama, is like the black box in the plane cockpit. The black box is indestructible, and made to withstand high impact

velocity and high temperatures. There is a part of every Neshama, that is part of Klal Yisrael, that is indestructible, and can survive the greatest spiritual dangers, and contamination. That part always has in it a piece of G-dliness. The Jewish spark, the "Pinteles Yid", is the point deep within, that is waiting to be ignited. On that spark, we say, אֱלֹקֶינוּ וְאֱלֹקֵינוּ Our G-d!

Only after Yitzhak smelled with his Ruach Hakodesh the Jewish evildoers of the generations that do Teshuvah did he bless him. וַיַּרְא אֶת רִיחַ בְּגָדָיו He smelled the scent of Yaakov's clothes, hints to וַיַּרְא אֶת רִיחַ בְּגָדָיו, He scented the scent of Gan Eden that emanated from the rebels, the evildoers, who repented. And only then, Yitzhak blessed Yaakov. And he said, וַיֹּאמֶר לְךָ אֱלֹקִים... And may He give you, the Elokim,... The blessing hints to the source from which the Jewish People got this superhuman strength. Listen closely. And may He give you the Elokim, ... May G-d give us the G-dliness we need to stand up strong for a higher purpose. We all have this G-dliness, this צְלָם אֱלֹקִים inside us. It is the ability to exercise self-discipline; it is the ability to have self-sacrifice. No matter how low a Jew has fallen, there is a point of self-sacrifice he can find from within.

Here is another lesson. G-d appearing in a thornbush is His icon of empathy, that G-d is in pain when we are in pain. בְּכָל־אָרֶתֶם לֹא אָנֹכִי יְלֹעַג אֱלֹקֵיךְ אֲשֶׁר In all their pain, He is in pain. (Yesahaya 63:9) This means, that G-d feels every Jews pain, and is with the Jew in his/her pain. G-d first has empathy, and only then does He communicate! When G-d communicated with the Jews, He spoke to each one separately, not as a whole, אֲנֹכִי יְלֹעַג אֱלֹקֵיךְ אֲשֶׁר . הַוְאָתָּה מִדְרָצֵךְ מִצְרָיִם מִבֵּית עֲבָדָיו אֲנֹכִי I am YVKV your G-d, that I took you out of the Land of Egypt, from the house of slaves. The your, and you, here is in singular form, not in plural form. Before communicating with us, G-d tells us, that He has empathy on each and every one of us, because only after empathy, is there communication. And that is why, He puts a thornbush on every single particle of the mountain!

The way for us to educate each and every Jew, is only through empathy. Understanding the point of view of each and every Jew, and from that point, to

teach them Torah. Parents and educators, rabbis of communities, have difficulty with making impact on their children, students or members. It is not that the message is not clear, it is not that the disciple does not know what the right thing to do is, or needs to be reminded. The disciple simply does not have the energy to do what he/she knows, is the right thing to do.

The way to help that disciple, is only through empathy. The best parents and teachers, are the ones who know how to relate best to the place of that disciple! G-d knows that it is hard for us to keep His Torah. So He tells you, "I am with you, I understand you and where you are coming from,

and I am speaking to YOU. I know you could do My 613, and I believe you can rise to the challenge, to become the most G-dly you can become. I WILL NEVER GIVE UP ON YOU!"

The most powerful human regulator is empathy. We can control another person's heartrate and blood pressure with our words. We have to understand our disciples, their concerns, perspectives, and what is hard about their situation. We need many more interactions with our children, that are showing them, that we just want to understand them, than interactions where we are communicating with them disappointment, disproval or discipline.

THE ART OF COMMUNICATING STRUCTURE

Humans in general, and children in particular, need structure and routine in order to thrive. A home with no structure, a house without written rules and clear expectations is a house that is destined to become chaotic, destined for power struggles. Without rules and expectations, there is fear of lack of control and predictability. Generally, home rules need to be all inclusive, rules that apply to all ages. Rules need to be specific to your family's needs and values, and that list needs to be revised, from time to time. There are rules of respect, (not to hurt anyone physically or emotionally, not to use someone's items without permission, not to ignore each other) and rules of problem solving (everyone must take their equal share in household chores).

One of the hardest parts of rules and structure is to enforce these rules without punishing or threatening. How are we supposed to get people interested in accepting obligation to following house rules or structure, without the deterrent of punishment for disobeying? When structure fails, when rules are broken, some parents become aggressive/offensive, and start screaming. The greatest problem of enforcing structure through punishment and yelling is that the parent/mentor loses the most important part of structure: open, and eye to eye communication. Because many parents fear to get to that place, they take the other extreme, the passive one, and just ignore the fact that they and the family rules and expectations are

being ignored. But there is always the beautiful balance between the extremes of aggressive and passive. The middle space is called assertive.

Assertive means to be honest and direct about your points, but not hurt anyone's feelings in the process. Assertive means knowing how to initiate a conversation, end a conversation, make requests, ask for favors; it means being able to say no, to be firm, expressing both positive and negative emotions, addressing issues that bother you. In short, assertive means open communication. To master assertiveness, one needs to learn and practice the tools of effective communication.

Yitro gave an example of speaking assertively to his son in law Moshe, when he relayed to Moshe the message that he is standing outside of the camp, waiting for Moshe to acknowledge that he came.

Just because, sometimes, you can't ask for respect, it does not mean you can't ask for basic human dignity, not to be stepped on. *אַנְתָּה֙ מֹשֶׁה יְתָרוּ בָּא אַלְיָקְה וְשָׁנְנִי כָּבֵן יְחִינָה עַמּוֹת I, your father in law, Yitro, came to you, and your wife and her two sons, with her.* Moshe, at this point of his life, was the most popular and powerful person on earth. Yitro said to him, if you are not going to come out to accept me, your father-in-law, come out for my daughter, Tzipporah, your wife. Yitro was not asking for

honor, which Moshe ended up giving - much more honor than any father-in-law can expect. Yitro was asking *not to be disgraced*. "If you won't respect me for being your father-in-law, at least don't disgrace your wife, Tzipporah."

You can inspire, motivate and educate anyone, if you just know the right way to communicate to that person. This is something that needs thought and preparation of how to say what you need to say, in a way that they can understand. The best way to get anyone to do anything is knowing how to communicate its importance to them. If you know how to communicate the beauty and depth and truth of Torah, you can get the whole world to serve G-d and keep His Torah. Torah, itself, can be taught to anyone in the world; it is just a question of how you package the message. This is something that G-d made sure that we would be aware of, in the way He teaches Torah, Himself. Just one example: The Torah has two ways of speech. אמר, he said. דבר, he spoke. Saying is softer, while speaking is harsher. When teaching Torah to the men, G-d uses speech, but when G-d communicates to the women, He uses a softer way of getting the message across. הנה האמר לביית יעקב אָמַר לְבָנַי יִשְׂרָאֵל When talking to the men, G-d wanted the message to be clear, mentioning punishment and detail to the men who are more receptive to it, using the word ותגיד. While when speaking to the women, to the בֵּית יְעָקֹב, those who build the Jewish home, G-d prefers to speak softly, using the word אמר, and not mentioning punishment.

When G-d gave us the Torah, He communicated His G-dliness and commandments in a way that was uniquely suited to each and every person. As it says מִבֵּית אָנֹכִי יְקֹנֵן אֶלְקִיךְ מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם I am YHVH your G-d Who took you out of Egypt, from the house of bondage! Rashi asks the following question. What is the point in mentioning that G-d took us out from Egypt? It is superfluous! Didn't the Jews, who just left Egypt 49 days earlier, know that G-d took them out of Egypt?

Rashi answers, that it is coming to tell you that G-d revealed Himself in different ways, which made things confusing. At the Sea, He revealed Himself

as a mighty warrior יְקֹנֵן אֶשְׁמָמָה, and now, at Har Sinai, He was coming across as a "wise old man". To make it even *more* misleading, everyone heard G-d's message, according to who he was. An elderly person heard G-d's voice as the voice of an older person; the youth heard His voice as the voice of a youth; a woman heard a woman's voice, the wise heard a wise message, and the simple heard a simple message. (Shemot R. 29a) Each one heard a different sound and from a different place, as the passuk says, אֵת הַקּוֹלָן. Each one saw his/her own version of the meaning behind what was being said. This is why G-d is blessed as הָכֶם הַרְזִים, the Wise One of the secrets, when there are 600,000 Jews in one place: because G-d knows and appreciates the differences of the 600,000 different opinions, and He knows how to communicate the reason of His commandments to each one of the 600,000, in a way that is unique to each one, simultaneously. This is why G-d made sure to mention, "I am your G-d who took you out of Egypt." Despite the confusion, it is all one G-d, the One that took you out of Egypt!!! This ability of G-d, of knowing and appreciating the differences of opinions, is crucial in leadership, getting followers to do what is most important. This is why, when Moshe asked G-d to appoint a leader for the Jews after him, he asked for someone who had this ability. (Midrash R. Pinchas)

You can't lead the house, the synagogue, the community, you can't set the rules and guidelines without acknowledgement of all the parties involved. Just because you understand and are open minded to the opinion, it does not mean that you accept it. Appreciating opinions is the beginning of the search for truth, as long as you investigate the honesty within each and every opinion. Yitro tried serving all the gods of the world, before he converted to Judaism. He was consistently searching for the truth, not trying to fool himself, or live a lie. Yitro had these two traits, open-mindedness, and search for the truth. Just because he entertained a thought, it does not mean he ended up with it, regardless of whether it served him better. This is why he ended up with the truth.

Only a calm voice can communicate your truth. Those who scream and shout and threaten are not

backed by the truth, or don't have enough clarity about it. It takes time and patience to communicate effectively, to provide the necessary rules of life for each person on his level; but, it is the only way. The basic principle of leadership is to be able to appreciate and understand the vast spectrum of opinions of the parties involved, and communicate, effectively, to all of them. It takes time and guidance to communicate the truth, to each person

THE ART OF CHARACTER IMPROVEMENT(2021)

The advancement in bio-technology is amazing. There is a fairly recent Korean invention: brain implants, a nano chip, the size of a grain of salt, can be inserted in our brain to change our mood via a smartphone. Imagine being able to change our own mood, our character, by the click of a button!

Whether our character or mood is from our nature or how we were nurtured, the Torah expects us to rise above it. Judaism has this emotional calendar, regardless of how you are actually feeling, to push the "button of the month." Feel happy in Adar, free and renewed in Nissan, self-improvement mode in Iyar, accepting in Sivan, mourning in Av, self-reflective in Elul, holy in Tishrei, thankful in Kislev, and growing in Shevat.

In the Zohar this week, **חכמת הפרצוף**, the study of assessing a person's character or personality based on their facial appearance, is mentioned. Moshe used this wisdom to find the right character to appoint judges, men of valor, men who didn't care about money, men of truth. This concept is hinted to in the words of our Rabbis, **כשם שאין פרצופיהם שוות שווים**, just as the people's faces are not the same, so too, their opinions are not the same. (Sanhedrin 38a) Over the years, we have lost this wisdom, (Ramak) and the signs the Zohar gives are too cryptic for us to use to decipher. But a person's unique face is a sign of his unique character.

Aristotle taught Alexander the Great his own version of reading faces, and Alexander used it to properly appoint military positions. Robert L. Whiteside, in a study that used 1068 subjects, found 90% accuracy of 68 behavioral traits in relation to facial expression. Many argue that Whiteside's study is all pseudo-science, and these

on their level, but it is the only way to have a clear set of rules – a plan, a map. You can't and won't hear the opinions of those you need to work with, if you scream when you are ignored, if you threaten, when disobeyed. You need to hear the opinions, search for the truth, and then bring out the truth via communication and structure. This is your job as a parent, as a teacher, as a leader.

THE ART OF CHARACTER IMPROVEMENT(2021)

studies are not accepted in race-sensitive cultures. In 2020, a study by University of Colombia concluded that with the advancement of facial recognition technology, power, warmth, and honesty can be inferred from facial features. This is relevant in marketing research for ad targeting.

I, personally, noticed how changes in facial features, weight, etc., - affect the personality, as well. If the face is the map of a person's character, changing your face can change your character. In the Far East, people do facial surgery to change their character. It is a *halachic* question if one is allowed to undergo facial surgery and change the way G-d made you, changing your personality. It's a principal of Judaism that when one's natural tendencies contradict the Torah, they can be overcome with due diligence.

I always wondered why the Torah begins the Parasha that mentions G-d giving the Torah on Har Sinai, specifically, with the story of Yitro, Moshe's father-in-law. And why is it important to learn about the delegation of judges and the character Moshe required of them, to be chosen as a Torah authority?

The answer is that Yitro taught us about some character improvements that are a prerequisite to accepting the Torah. When the world leaders saw their own waters split and felt the world shaking, when G-d was giving the Torah on Har Sinai, the leaders came, petrified, to their prophet Bilaam to ask if G-d is going to bring another flood. Bilaam said, **יְקֹנֵן שָׂנֵן לְעַמּוֹן וְקֹנוֹן** *G-d is giving His Torah to the Jews*, and the leaders of the world sighed a sigh of relief, saying **יְקֹנֵן יְבָרֵךְ אֶת-עַמּוֹן בְּשָׁלוֹם** *May G-d bless His nation with peace!*... and they went back to their palaces and idols. Yitro, in contrast, got the

message and became a Ger, a convert. This teaches that a prerequisite to accepting the Torah is to leave behind false beliefs, false lifestyles, and to become a seeker of truth. Every character has its own bias, and we need to be humble enough to discard our own character-bias versions of the truth, to accept the truth of the Torah.

The Torah is not an intellectual study; it is a lifelong study of character improvement and control of instinct, mood and attitude. In order for a person to connect to Torah and be worthy of becoming a Torah authority, he needs to first master a strong character, i.e., to be G-d- fearing, to stop chasing after money, to be a man who seeks truth and stands up for the truth, the signs Moshe looked for. Our Rabbis warn against teaching Torah to a student with bad character traits, without first helping him fix his character. (Chullin 133a; Makkot 10a; Chida) When G-d gave the Torah, He gave it to 600,000 men, with 600,000 facial features, and opinions. 600,000 is the maximum diversity of character and opinion, and any new Torah idea over all future generations, was thought by at least one of those 600,000 people who stood at Har Sinai. (See Maharsha 58a) No matter what character you have, you can connect to Torah, you have your own portion of Torah, if you first work on your character. And you *can* overcome your character, if the Torah expects you to. What is the master key, that can unlock any character and make it worthy of learning Torah? If I can't, yet, put in a chip in my brain, and I am not going to do plastic surgery, what is the ancient remedy for all character improvement, no matter what character I have?

The Torah was given at Har Sinai - not on Carmel or Har Tavor – but on Sinai, on the lowest of the mountains, to teach us that the Torah is given to the humble. The Torah was given by Moshe, the humblest of men, and was called after his name, *Torat Moshe*, for he made himself humble, saying, *What am I that G-d gave me His Torah?* (Shabbat 89a) The Torah is compared to three liquids, water, milk and wine, because these three liquids are unique in that if they are put into gold or silver utensils, it will affect their taste. These three need to be stored in the simplest of utensils, to preserve

them, just as the Torah can be preserved only in the humblest of men. (Taanit 7a)

אָנֹכִי יְקֻנֵּךְ I am אֶלְקֹנֵךְ אֲשֶׁר הָצָאֲתָךְ מִאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם עַבְרִים עַבְרִים אֲנֹכִי אָנֹכִי. G-d begins His first words to our Nation, אֲנֹכִי הוֹצִיאָתָךְ וְלֹא־אָיִשׁ ; וְאֲנֹכִי עָבֵר וְאָפֶר אֲלֹהָמֶר גַּעַר אֲנֹכִי; לְשׁוֹן אֲנֹכִי Here specifically, our Rabbis tell us, that the word *anis* is the acronym that G-d put Himself in the Torah. (Shabbat 105a) The Midrash Tanchuma gives another explanation. The word אֲנֹכִי is the Egyptian way of saying I. How do we make sense of all these explanations?

We find that although G-d is “haughty over those who are haughty” (See Rashi) and that in the days of Mashiach G-d wears haughtiness, יְקֻנֵּךְ... at the same time, G-d displays His humility by “lowering Himself” to deal with the orphans, widows, poor, humble, and abused. Whenever you find G-d’s greatness, you also find His humility. (Megillah 31a) So too, G-d was saying to the Jews, I was with you in Egypt!!! I came down to be with you, when you first entered, and was with you throughout the whole slavery! When you were carrying the bricks, I was carrying bricks with you! וַיַּרְא אֶת אֱלֹהִי יִשְׂרָאֵל וַיַּקְהֵל רְגִלֵּי בְּמִשְׁעָה לְבִנְתֵּה הַסְּפִיר (See Rashi 24:10)

G-d prefers the simple. The humble. G-d even chose that the letters of His Name be spelled with *Yud*, and *Heh*, and *Vav*, and *Heh*, the four letters that have the lowest numerical value of all the Hebrew Aleph-Bet. He revealed Himself in the *סנה*, the thornbush, the lowest of the trees, because He loves the Jews when they are humble, and He is with us when we are humble. (Midrash Rabbah 2) This is why no matter how you split the stone of Mt. Sinai, you will always see a picture of a thornbush on it.

This moment of accepting the Torah, the Jews became on the level of Adam before the sin. Why? Because all these lessons of humility, were to undo the drive of haughtiness, of **וְהִיאָתָם פָּאָלָקִים יְקַנֵּי טָוב בְּרָע**, of Adam not accepting how G-d made us, and not accepting that we are just human. That sin of haughtiness, was the root of the drive for honor, lust, and jealousy, things that the humble don't busy themselves with.

The Ten Commandments finish with **לֹא תְחַנֵּן**, *Do not covet, do not want what others have, the*

epitome of humility, of recognizing that what I have and don't have, is all decided by G-d. The Parasha finishes with G-d asking for us to make a **מִזְבֵּחַ אֲקָדָם**, an Earthen Altar. When a person humbles himself, when a person overcomes his nature, it is as if he brought all the *Korbanot* in the world, and G-d will never turn away this man's heartful prayer. **בְּתִינוּ אֱלֹקִים רַוֵּשׁ נְשָׁבֵרָה לְכַבְּשָׁבָר וּנְקָהָה**: (Sotah 5b)

Selfie steps to character improvement to accept the Torah

1. Search for the real truth, not accepting our biased version of the truth.
2. Help those who we can, recognizing that we have the good fortune to be in the position of being able to help.
3. Stay simple. Humility is the master key to all character strength.

UNLIMITED POWER

The greatest sin a parent can be guilty of is not making a child aware of the power he possesses. There is no power in the world that can cure like saying the blessing *Asher Yatzar* after using the WC. The Seder Hayom (time of Arizal) wrote that *if a person would say each word of Asher Yatzar carefully, he would never get sick and would not need a doctor, nor his medicines...* There is no power in the world that can bring you a better *parnassah* than saying *Birkat Hamazon* from a siddur, with intent. The Sefer Hachinuch (430) writes in the name of his teacher (the Ramban or the Rashba) that *anyone who is careful in Birkat Hamazon will have a respectable parnassah available for him, a whole life long* (Mishna Berura 185).

But most people have a hard time in believing in the power they have. They prefer to be humble. But R' Ben Tzion Aba Shaul zt'l would teach us that this is not a place to be humble. Hacham Ben Tzion would point to the seeming contradiction. **תֹּוֹשֶׁבֶת הַלְּוָקָן פָּלָגָבָה-לְבָב** *All haughty people are abominable*

וַיַּגְבֵּה לְבָבוֹ בְּדַרְכֵי יְלֹעֵג (Mishlei 16:5) *...and his heart was lifted up in the ways of G-d* (Divrei Hayamaim 2; 17:6) The answer is that we should be humble in regard to things of the past, everything that happened until now, the things we cannot control or change. Regarding the future, a person needs to believe in himself. (Or L'tzion 242)

The Talmud in Sanhedrin says something that is mindboggling. **וַיֹּאמֶר יִתְרוֹ בָּרוּךְ יְלֹעֵג אֲשֶׁר הָאֵיל אַתָּה** **מִןְ מְגֻרִים וּמִן פְּרָעָה אֲשֶׁר הָאֵיל אַתָּה-עַם מִקְהַת זְדַמְּגִים** *And Yitro said, Blessed is G-d, Who saved you from the hands of Egypt and from the hands of Pharaoh, Who saved the people from under the hand of Egypt - It was said in the name of R' Papayus that it is was a disgrace for Moshe and the 600,000 Jews that they did not say Baruch-Blessed, until Yitro came and said Baruch Hashem* (Sanhedrin 94a).

What? Moshe? Aharon? Yehoshua? Kaleb? Chur? Pinhas? Anybody? How could it be that none of them thought of what Yitro thought of, to say

Baruch? Isn't it enough that they said *Shirat Hayam, Az Yashir*? Doesn't *Az Yashir* have the power to bring forgiveness from all one's sins, when a person says it with happiness, as if he had gone through the sea himself (Sefer Charedim)? Didn't they bring the Korban Pesach, and accompany it with Hallel? What, exactly, were they missing? What exactly, was the shame here?

Here is how R' Nevantzel, the Rav of the Old City, answers the question. There is a big difference between the *Shira* and *Hallel*, all that they did and said... and the magical word *Baruch*. *Baruch* is a totally new dimension. How so?

Rabbenu Bachye has two explanations of the word *Baruch*. The first is that Hashem is the *Mekor Habracha*, the source of all blessings. The second explanation is that the word *Baruch* comes from the word *Berecha*, or pool, or connecting to an original source. When you take a branch and connect it to another tree, to give it the ability to grow from the bigger tree, that is called *Habracha*. (Rabbenu Bachye Devarim 8:10)

By saying the word *Baruch*, one is adding to the pool of blessing, connecting the hose or pipe to the faucet, so that the blessing of G-d goes to the right addresses. As great as *Shira* is, it is not like the word *Baruch*. *Baruch* does something that the greatest *Shira* cannot do. *Baruch* is from the word to make greater; each of its root letters is a multiple of two. ב is two. ר is two hundred. כ is twenty. You are not only admitting that what you got came from G-d. You are adding to the Bracha in the world by saying the word *Baruch*; adding to the pool of blessing in the Universe. Yitro was telling them, now is the time to say that G-d is blessed, so that He continues to bring blessing to the world. You are much more powerful than you think.

This concept of R' Bachye, of the *Nefesh Chayim*, is something that is so hard for us to understand. After all, even for the ability to bless, to move our

lips, we need G-d. **אֶל שְׁפָטִי תִּפְתַּח וּבַיְגִיד תְּהִלְמָךְ** And still, G-d says to each and every one of us, **תַּנְבַּע עַז לְאֱלֹקִים**, *Give strength to G-d* (Tehillim 68:35). **בְּאֶלְקָרִים נְעֹשֵׂה חִיל** *In G-d, we will make strength* (Tehillim 108:14) **וְעַתָּה יִגְדֵּל נָא כִּחְד'** *And now, may the strength of G-d become great* (Bamidbar 14) (see Eicha Rabbah 1:33). Of course, we cannot change G-d. But G-d allows us to direct His *Shefa*, His Source of Plenty, through our good deeds, and through our *Berachot* (Sefer Hachinuch Mitzvah 430). As we find that Hashem told Moshe, **הִיָּה לְךָ לְסִיעָנִי**, you should have helped me (Shabbat 89a).

And this is exactly what the Jews did not yet realize, until Yitro came along. The Jews did not recognize the power they had. They did not realize that HaShem designed the world in such a way that we are empowered to "help" Him, as it were, to bring blessing to His creations, and that He awaits our "help". When Yishmael the Kohen Gadol met G-d in the Holy of Holies, G-d asked Yishmael Kohen Gadol to bless Him (Berachot 7a). How can anyone bless G-d? The answer is that G-d gives us the power to give *Him* the power.

Yitro explained to the Jews that the words of their prophecy at the Sea, **בָּהּ אָלֵי וְאַנְהָהוּ**, means that G-d set up creation in such a way that He and the Jews run the world together! **אַנְהָהוּ וְאַנְהָהוּ**. As G-d refers to the Jews in His eternal Song of Songs, G-d called the Jews, **יִנְנֶה מֶלֶתִי** My Dove, My twin. As the Midrash learns this to mean, that *I am not above you, and you are not above Me*. And the Torah Temimah expounds on this with what we know: *Yisrael, the Torah and G-d are one*. And as we see, anyone who says **וַיַּכְלֹו** on Friday night - it is as if he is a partner with G-d in the Creation.

The power to literally bring Hashem down into our daily lives is in our hands. It's up to us to connect Hashem to everything we do. This is what Yitro added to the Jews. Something that we forget too often...

WHY NOT LIE?

In his book *The (Honest) Truth About Dishonesty*, Dan Ariely, professor of psychology and behavioral economics at Duke University,

scientifically tested in great detail how and why humans lie, and what makes it easier or harder for them to keep to the truth. His research was done on

college students. The students were offered to step into a classroom, where they were handed a paper of ten math exercises. They were given ten minutes, and for each one of the questions they got right, they were to receive one dollar. After they finished the test paper, though, they were given an answer sheet and told to mark their own papers, and then put their papers through the shredder machine in the back wall of the classroom. They would then inform the tester what their mark was, and they would be rewarded one dollar for each question answered correctly.

How did Dan learn whether or not they lied? The shredder was not a shredder. On the other side of the wall, all the papers went into a basket, so that Dan could see exactly how many students were dishonest and exactly by how much. They were led to think that they were in an honor system, that no one would ever know if they lied or not. And it is interesting to note that many of them lied, but not by a lot. The most common was the small lie, falsifying the results by reporting two questions more than the real score. If they got 4 right, they wrote 6. From this, Ariely disproves the belief of SMORC, Simple Model of Rational Crime. SMORC is the belief that dishonesty is generally rational and the result of a balance between three factors: A - the benefit of the dishonesty, versus B - the likelihood of getting caught and C - the severity of punishment. Here, the people that were tested thought they could have lied and not gotten caught (no B or C factor), and they could have reported ten and gotten ten dollars (high A factor). Ariely played around with these factors, by giving more or less money for each question. He played with the B or C factors, but the factors of SMORC did not bring about more or less dishonesty. Rather, Ariely found that even people who are, on the whole, honest, lie just a little bit, no matter which factors are involved.

Small lies account for the major part of the sum total of all dishonesty in the world. Small theft accounts for most cases of stealing. The majority of stealing is from people who do not steal big. Locksmiths will tell you that your lock is not there to protect you from the professional thief; a

professional thief can break any lock. The lock is there to protect you from the people who are, on the whole, honest, but who might be tempted to try your door if it has no lock.

Ariely concluded that when people lie or cheat, it is a compromise. Every person has in him a drive for pleasure. In great contrast, every person has a sense of morality. (In Judaism, this may be referred to as the conflict between *Neshama* and *Nefesh*.) When a person is being tested for honesty, he finds himself in a dilemma: which voice should he listen to? Which voice should he obey? His morality, or his materialistic drive? The reason why people lie and cheat, and mostly in small proportions, is because that is something that one's sense of ethics will find it easy to ignore or excuse. It's easier to compromise one's ethical values when there is just a "small" matter involved; the bigger the gamble, the harder it gets to compromise.

Then, Ariely did something that made me fall off my chair when I read it. He made students recall the Ten Commandments before taking the test. Then, there was no cheating whatsoever, despite the fact that no one was able to recall all ten!! Even atheists, who swore on a Bible, lied less on their tests! Ariely realized that the way to keep people from lying is by reminding them of moral behavior, by recalling G-d and His Word and by being reminded of G-d's word on a daily basis. (Ariely himself is not religious.)

It seems that we compromise less on our morality when we are reminded of G-d. Our morality is not a rational cost/benefit analysis, like the claim of SMORC. It is dependent on how much we remind ourselves of G-d in our lives. And, on how much we *connect* to the Torah.

One of the reasons to be religious, to be a Torah observant Jew, is exactly this. If you are not Torah observant, and your child asks you why he/she should be honest and moral, you can't tell him, "Because that is the right thing to do," or "that is the way he will be more successful in life," because he will tell you that even the presidents and government officials lie. Most liars and cheats don't get caught. Who decides what is considered



moral? And what if we catch those people, themselves, being immoral?

The only answer we have as parents to our children is that G-d decided what is moral in His Torah. And only if we live with Torah in our lives, can we explain to our children that Torah is our moral code, and that we obey the Torah because G-d is real, and G-d is everything. And the only thing that will bring morality into our lives is Torah. Not self-help books, not books on etiquette, and not stories of the honesty of George Washington or Abraham Lincoln.

I have a friend who can't get over an incident that happened in his Yeshiva many years ago. It was a dormitory yeshiva, and a wave of robberies was being reported. My friend, together with another dorm member who was robbed of 300 dollars, decided to put an end to it. They set up a trap in the dorm. They left a wallet with 20 dollars on a desk, and they took turns of endless hours (a sum total of three days, to be precise) standing in the closet, peeping through a tiny hole, to see which student was the thief. It felt like endless hours, and then, they caught him. They reported him to the Rosh Yeshiva, and the Rabbi had certain proof that this boy was the thief, because of the ink powder that was put on the 20-dollar bill. After seeking the counsel of a Gadol, the Rosh Yeshiva decided not to expel the boy. "Nobody is learning from this boy to be a thief. A Yeshiva is a rehabilitation center, because Torah cures people and gives them

morality. Everyone just needs to be more careful to safeguard their money."

All of the Ten Commandments were given with a G-dly Fire, thunder and lightning. Even the Commandments לֹא תִּרְצֹחַ לֹא תִּגְנֹב לֹא תְּמַצֵּנָה קְרֵב עַד שְׁקָר Do not kill, Do not have improper relations, Do not steal, Do not lie as witness, which are all mitzvoth that are dictated by common sense, needed all the pizazz of Har Sinai. Why? Doesn't the Talmud teach us, אמר רבי יוחנן: אם לא למד לא ניתנה תורה הינו למידין צניעות מחתו, גוזל מנולא, ועריות מינונה. Said R Yochanan, if not for the Torah, we would learn the way of modest conduct from the cat, not to steal from the ant, and not to be in inappropriate relationships from the dove. (Eiruvin 100b). We could learn from Abe Lincoln not to lie! We could learn from George Washington! Why did we need the great sound-and-light show at Har Sinai for these four Commandments?

The answer is that in order for us to become really moral, it does not suffice to work on becoming a gentleman. The only way to really become moral is by recharging our G-dliness through Torah. All the "special effects" of Har Sinai at the giving of these commandments were aimed at infusing our morals with G-dliness in these commandments, as well.

If only we would connect to Torah, if only we would remind ourselves daily of the G-dliness inside each and every one of us, we would merit to be G-d's light to the world.

AN ELECTRIFYING THOUGHT

Motivation is an interesting thing. It is the secret of all success and one of those things that everyone wants, but money can't buy. Someone once asked me to coach him on being motivated. I did not know how to coach someone for motivation. I asked my mentor, and he suggested that motivation means that someone wants something very much. Most people want to want, but not necessarily want. They want to be motivated, but are not necessarily willing to pay the price of giving up some other things that come along with what they

say they want. *Help him clarify his values, and then he might find that he does have motivation for what he really wants.* Sometimes that is what he wants – he wants to want; that's it.

But I felt that there was something deeper. Something that is *behind the wants* and at the *root of all motivation*. There is a word that we sometimes say backhandedly. It is a big word, but I was hesitant to write about it, because once you go deeper than the surface in this field, people start to



feel that you are a mystic, or something. The big word is *energy*. To have a want means to have energy to want. To have motivation means to have the energy for motivation. Energy here does not mean muscles, but rather, an inner strength or energy. This energy is the greatest resource of the successful. Did you ever notice that when you meet certain people, stay in their company, even briefly, and then walk away, you feel that you have energy, light, and are optimistic about things? Have you noticed that there are other people who affect you in the opposite way: when you walk away from them, you feel that your energy has been sapped, and you are left with no strength to do the things that need to be done? Certain people have energy and give it to others. And certain people lack energy and take it away from you when you meet them.

Imagine, for a minute, that someone has the secret of how you can tap into your inner self and create such energy. And right now, he is going to reveal that secret to you. Well, I am going to reveal it to you, but just hold on, and don't get turned off by the "mystics."

Humans have countless thoughts throughout the day; they come and go so fast that we do not even notice many of them. Thoughts are usually pictures or words of past memories or imagination of the future. The words and pictures going through someone's mind will create his feelings, energy and lack of it. People with more energy are people with more "light" in life. People who lack energy are people who have a "dark self." The people who are light are people who can get up and do things, don't hold a grudge, are optimistic, easy to get along with ... The "dark" people are those who are not easy to get along with, are pessimistic, hold a grudge, can't get up and do things... The thoughts, the pictures and words going through the mind of a person are what make a person "light" or "dark." If one thinks words or pictures that are positive, he or she will be light. Positive words that go through the mind are – blessed, happy, peaceful, successful, generous, abundant, easy, fun, cheerful, delighted, love, thank, appreciate, energetic... (Tip:

Many words we say in our prayers are "light" words – blessed, salvation, great, kind, trust, praise etc. If we would think and feel what we say in our prayers, we would have more "light" in life, more energy.) The words that are dark words are cursed, upset, miserable, fight, fear, failed, defeated, tired, stingy, poor, difficult, sad, bored, not happy, hate, ungrateful, depressed... Just reading the lists, you might feel something, a feeling that is either a light, energetic feeling by the first list, or a dark, depressing feeling by the second. (I still remember one of my best friends in a top Yeshiva: he was a "top guy in learning" and also one of my study partners. He befriended a person who was full of "dark" words and thoughts. Not long after, he stopped showing up to the Beit Midrash, stopped wanting to eat, learn or do anything – except hang out with that negative guy. They did nothing except talk about subjects that were negative. The results, "*Ich hub nisht ken koach*" – *I just do not have the energy to come to learn*. It didn't make sense, such a thing happening to such a guy; but it happened.)

Many people have both dark and light thoughts going on inside, feelings that cause one to feel happy and feelings that make one depressed, something many call "mood." But the mood depends on the words and pictures, and that is something that a person can control, adding positive language to his lexicon. He can start changing around words that he says to himself in his head or pictures that he thinks. He will then start picking up a lighter self, and then he will find a lot more motivation in life. He won't be so tired or "moody". (This is also the "secret power" of a life coach. The language of a life coach is full of words that give power – *goals, options, resources, dream, picture, "would like things to look..."*, *positive, solutions etc.* And the life coach uses questions to get these words into the other person's thinking pattern.)

King David said something we say every Thursday - זר לא יהיה בך Do not have in you a foreign god (Tehillim 81, 10). Our Rabbis tell us (Shabbat 105b) that this foreign god is none other than the



Evil Inclination. This is interesting, when we think about it. It is also hard to understand. Especially, because one of the things that we say in *Kriyat Shema* is to love G-d בכל לבבך with our *Yetzer Tov* and *Yetzer Hara* (see last Mishna in Berachot). How can we understand that the Evil Inclination is like an idol or a foreign god, a “god” that we are to use to serve G-d?

The Tiferet Yisrael (on the last Mishna in Berachot) says something interesting. The *Yetzer Hara* is not exactly an advisor to do evil, and the *Yetzer Hatov* is not exactly an advisor to do good. Rather, the *Yetzer Hara* is the dark side of man, and the *Yetzer Hatov* is the light side of man. The *Yetzer Hara* is what holds a person back from doing things, saps his energy, and the *Yetzer Hatov* is what gives a person energy and motivation. The *Yetzer Hara* should be used to hold one back from doing the חמש עשׂות אַל negative commandments, and the *Yetzer Hatov* should be used for the חמש עשׂות, the positive commandments. They “advise,” through the words and pictures that go through a person’s mind, to be light – or dark and heavy. (see *Tiferet Yisrael* inside.)

When I come home and my wife needs help, I can either serve her or serve myself. There is no “not serving” state a person can be in. If I do not change the baby’s diaper, I am not serving the baby, but I am serving myself. More precisely, I am serving the dark side of me that says – push things off, procrastinate, just “chill” and the smell just might go away. This is like a god inside a person that says, “Do not serve anyone else except your evil thoughts.” And these thoughts that are dark and heavy are no different from a god, because we serve these thoughts. The only time when we listen to these ideas and it is not like serving them as a god, is when we hold ourselves back from doing things that G-d does not want us to do. Then, we are serving G-d with the “dark part of me.”

I thought that idol worship did not exist. I thought that the second and third commandments do not pertain to us. But after this thought, it looks as if idol worship – depression - is the most rampant scourge of the generation.

PERSPECTIVES OF WEALTH

Workaholics devote no thought to the minimum they need in order to get by each month. Estimating a realistic sum and trying to reach it through jobs one can do, eliminates stress. Knowing the basic sum needed for personal and family needs, replaces the stress a person has from undefined goals with positive energy. *Stress comes when one is looking forward to an unclear desire to “make it big.”*

There is a whole world of people who like to believe that this question of how much they need is insignificant. Their reason for going to work is not to support their needs. It is to see “*how much I am worth.*” This is, in essence, ridiculous. *You are not worth how much you make.*

This reminds me of the question that I heard being asked amongst my friends in high school, who wished they would be working instead of studying in Yeshiva. The Mishna in Avot (Ch. 4) asks: *Who is rich? One who is happy with his lot.* My friend commented – *but I do not want to be happy. I want to be rich!*

Everyone laughed. I gave it some thought. The underlying question that was asked is how did the answer complement the question? The question was “*who is rich?*” If someone were to approach us off the street and ask what person is considered rich, our minds would search our memory for the richest people we knew. We would not say, “*the person with an average salary, who is happy with his lot.*” So, what is this Mishna teaching us?



Rashi on the Mishna writes: *There is no difference between a rich man who is troubled, looking for more and the poor man, who really does not have anything, and is also looking for more. Wealth is a perspective. There is no way to measure it.*

In our *parasha*, Yitro suggested to his son-in-law, Moshe Rabbeinu, that he find men of caliber to aid him in judging the nation. *And you should look with your Ruach Hakodesh amongst all the nation for men of valor, G-d fearing and men of truth, people who hate "gain" (money of others and their own money; see M. Tanchuma and Mechilta) and place them responsible...* Moshe, however, was only able to find men of valor, knowledgeable and well-known people (see Devarim 1:15). Rashi defines men of valor as people who are rich and do not care about flattering others or trying to find favor in their eyes. The Talmud states in Sanhedrin that there are seven qualities we look for in the candidate for a judge: four mentioned by Yitro, and the three mentioned in Devarim. The more of these traits one has, the more he is worthy to be a judge. Moshe, however, could find only four.

The question is obvious. How could it be that amongst such great people of the generation who received the Torah there was no one who hated money? Even today, we know of great people who sacrificed a great deal of money for good causes, or in order to lead a proper way of life. One of the traits that the Rambam lists as requiring repentance is that of running after money. This makes it sound as if *there are* people who can and have perfected themselves and transcended this desire for riches. How, then, did Moshe not find such a person, especially in the generation who had their sustenance taken care of for them (*Manna*) and were laden with the spoils of Egypt?

The answer here is a lesson for life, and a lesson we all should think about. Some things in human

behavior or in the principles governing it, do and must exist. You cannot break them. If you try to break them, then they break you! One of these basic, immutable principals is the great value human beings place on money, and the deep inner recognition of its importance. The *Chovot Halevovot* writes in *Shaar Habechina*, one of the ways to recognize the Supreme wisdom of G-d and His Kindness is to note that all the humans of the world agree to give value to gold and silver, to use it for trade and to try to gather as much of it as they can. This is the Mercy of G-d. Even though gold and silver, in and of themselves, do not bring any gain to a person, and they will not fill his needs – neither nutrition nor medicinal.... Why then do people value these two natural elements? This is out of G-d's kindness, in order that trade and commerce be able to flourish among humanity.

Valuing money (not running after it but valuing it) is an inborn human trait, beginning with life itself. And this is why Moshe did not find anyone who did not value money. No one **hates** money. People may value religion, as expressed in keeping Shabbat, more than money. Or, they can love their family life and family time more than they do their money. They can even love honor more than money. But, when all is said and done, everyone values money.

When the Rambam says that one must do teshuva for the bad trait of running after money, this means valuing money more than the values of life: spirituality, stress-free life, family life, self-dignity. If a person is not careful to keep his love of money in proportion, this love becomes addictive. Workaholics want to get to an infinite amount of money. There is no end. A sure recipe for frustration is to set for one's self an unreachable goal.

THE ARAB NEXT DOOR



There were three advisers to Pharaoh in the plot against the Jews. Bilaam, Iyob, and Yitro. Bilaam advised to enslave the Jews. Iyob kept quiet. Yitro ran away. Bilaam was punished; he was killed with the sword by the Jews. Iyob suffered for not protesting. And Yitro was rewarded that his grandchildren would be part of the Sanhedrin. (Sanhedrin 106a)

Years later, when Bilaam came to curse the Jews, נירא אֶת-קְנִינִי וַיֹּאמֶר אֵתָן מִזְבֵּח וְשִׁים בְּפָלָע קְנִינָך: (Bamidbar 24; 21) And he saw the Kuni, (Yitro) and he came up with his Parable and he said, you settle with a stronghold, and you put your nest in the rock. What do these words mean?

Bilaam asked Yitro, Hey! You were with us in the plot! You were one of the boys! How did you merit to sit and be involved with such great people, with Moshe and Aharon? The Midrash answers with a parable. There was once a hunter that caught a bird. But the bird escaped and flew from the hands of the hunter. The hunter chased the bird, and the bird found a brilliant haven. It landed in the hands of the sculpture of the king. The hunter praised the wisdom of this bird on finding such a safe place; now the hunter could not capture the bird, for it was next to the bust of the king. And anyone who would try to catch it, could possibly damage the king's statue. Bilaam said that Yitro was saved from the fate of his two counterparts by associating with G-dly people. (Shemot Rabbah 27/ 3)

Why is that so important? Why does it make such a difference in your life who you associate with?

A Jew and an Arab lived next door to each other, in a duplex. One day, the Jew decided he was going

to sell his house. He started renovations. Everything grade A. Designers, workers, materials. The Arab neighbor also decided to sell, so he also started renovations. But the Arab did it all Grade B. Designers, workers, materials. They both finished about the same time. And they both put up 'For Sale' signs.

One day, the Jew enters his house, just as the Arab is going out. The Jew tells the Arab that he just sold his house. The Arab says, Wallah, I also just sold mine! How much did you sell it for? The Jew said, 600,000 dollars. How much did you sell yours for? The Arab says, I sold mine for 750,000. The Jew says, WHAT? How could that be? I renovated with Grade A; you renovated grade B, and you sold for more than I did?

The Arab smiled and said, "It's simple! When you sold your house, you sold a house with a neighbor who is an Arab. So, you got 600k. I sold mine, and the neighbor is a Jew. So, I got 750 k!"

You do not even realize how the people you surround yourself with affect your life. They affect how you value yourself, your self-perception, which is probably the most important factor in your psychology. They affect how you value your life. And they affect your choices.

וישמע יתרו כהן מדין – מה שמועה שמע ובא ונתגיר What news did Yitro hear and come and convert?.... It is not enough to just hear a good piece of *Mussar* and try to change by yourself. The main idea is to come, to join people who are the people you want to be like.

JEWISH PEPPER SPRAY

We are never defeated unless we give up on G-d. We cannot allow ourselves to get used to the current situation: Israel news does not go a day without an attack. I attended a Bar Mitzvah in the

Aish Hatorah building in Jerusalem this last week. I parked in the Har Tzion parking lot, and I walked about twelve minutes to the building. The whole way, I held my SABRE 25 Burst pepper-spray in



hand, proudly advertised as “Making Grown Men Cry Since 1975!®,” just in case. I said to myself, “Wow! I feel more secure just holding on to this thing.” But then, I realized how foolish I sounded. If only we could hold on to G-d like that! For, what is our most potent ‘pepper-spray’ in these hard times, that can supply us with limitless bursts against the evil decrees? The ability to say, especially after learning Torah or attending a Torah class, *Amen Yehe Sheme Rabba Mebarach*, with all of our energy. Not only is the one who says those holy words a person that merits Olam Haba, (Berachot 57a) but by saying these words, the Heavens rip up the evil decrees against him (Shabbat 119b). Giving up on this power – is giving up on G-d. What is this infinite power?

ויהִי יתְרוּ עַל כָל הַטּוֹבָה אֲשֶׁר עָשָׂה הָאֱלֹהִים לִיְשָׂרָאֵל אֲשֶׁר הֶצְלָה מִן־מִצְרָיִם *And Yitro “rejoiced” over all the good that G-d did for the Jewish Nation, that He saved the Nation from the hand of the Egyptians.* **עַתָּה יִדְעָתִי כִּי גָדוֹל הָאֱלֹהִים כִּי בְדָבָר אֲשֶׁר זָדוּ עֲלֵיכֶם.** *Now, I know that G-d is the greatest of all the gods, for that which was plotted against them.* The Rabbis differ with various opinions as to what the word **זָדוּ** means. One opinion is that Yitro rejoiced, **חֲדֹוחָ**. And, another opinion is that he made the Name of G-d unique and One, **אֶחָד**. (Tanchuma)

Why did Yitro join the Nation, and what did he actually say? *For G-d is greater than all gods, for G-d pays back measure for measure.* The Egyptians were killed with water for their having drowned Jewish babies. Why is “measure for measure” such a significant thing, making G-d greater than all other gods?

One of the main reasons why people of the world do not follow the Jewish religion is because they have an age-old question about G-d called **צדיק ורע לו**. *Why do bad things happen to good people, and why do good things happen to bad people?* If every time a person did a good deed, he would get rewarded, and every time a person did something bad, he would be punished, every sane person would follow the Torah, to a tee. The Egyptian slavery posed a big question about G-d’s running

the world, as if G-d does not ‘keep score.’ Or, even worse, as if there were two gods. A god of mercy and a god of strict judgment. This whole phenomenon of G-d letting good things happen to bad people and vice versa makes things very confusing, giving us the impression that perhaps, **חָזֶה**, there really are two gods. Once Yitro saw what happened to the Egyptians, the ‘measure for measure,’ it showed him that the same G-d who was with them at the sea was with them in slavery. This is what is meant when it says that Yitro made the Name of G-d one.

Our Rabbis teach that when we say the words **אמְנָה שְׁמֵה רְבָא מְבָרָךְ**, we are praying that the Name of G-d be complete and whole. From the time of the war of Amalek, the Name YHVH of G-d is incomplete, **כִּי יְדָעָה כְּסֵף**. His *throne* is not complete. What is Amalek? Amalek is the nation, or the force in the world, that resulted from the Jewish people doubting or questioning if G-d is among them, **הַיְשָׁה בְּקָרְבָּנוּ אָמֵן אֵין**. Amalek is the same numerical value as doubt, **סְפָק** = **עַמְלָק**. And this doubt, if G-d is among us or not, was answered by Yitro, who informed us from inside sources, that Pharaoh was punished for all that he plotted, measure for measure. And that, yes, G-d is among us. And, it is all the same G-d.

When we say *Kriat Sh'ma*, we say YHVH is our G-d and YHVH is One. G-d has two Attributes, Mercy and Judgment. YHVH represents Mercy, for it means that He was, is and will always be, even in dark times. And **אלֹקֵינוּ** stands for His attribute of Judgment. Reality, or G-d, can sometimes come across as Judgment. And, sometimes, come across as Mercy. It can appear as if there are two gods in the Universe, or heaven forbid, as if G-d is inconsistent. But G-d is One; it is just that we can’t understand Him. In *Patach Eliyahu*, which Sephardim say before Minha to open up the heart, we declare with Eliyahu Hanavi, G-d is a being whose only definition is that it is beyond man’s power to conceive what He is. And of course, we cannot understand His oneness, we can just believe in it and pray for it.

חֲדֹה is a type of happiness for a Jew where there is a perspective of a collective understanding of His oneness and acceptance of G-d. The word חֲדֹה, is also used as we bless a Bride and Groom with at the *Sheva Berachot*, that despite their differences, they find a collective perspective of oneness where the strengths and weaknesses of each partner complement each other. Happiness for a Jew and lack of it, is many times dependent on

this unified concept - seeing and accepting a whole and one picture of G-d, His Judgment, and His Mercy. This is the חֲדֹה, the rejoicing of Yitro, that the world has a unity to it, it has a G-d who is One. This concept is so powerful that when we pray הַלְלָה רְבָא מִבְּרָךְ, that the Name of G-d, YH, be whole, when we pray for His Mercy to shine, when we proclaim His Oneness, despite the hard times, we can rip up any decree.

HE'S ON FIRE!!!

A retired elderly couple sits on a bench at the Oceanside, watching the sunset. They say to each other, "If only this moment would never end!!"

The couple feels that way, for they have finally reached the Golden Age. They have married off their kids, paid their mortgage and are now on pension. The only way to learn Torah as it is supposed to be learned is if you view your time in the Beit Midrash as the Golden Age. Lately, I started learning with my Rabbi in a study hall where there is a Kollel of about 20 men. It is a unique Kollel. Ages 65-90. They are all into it, smiling while they learn, enjoying the sweetness of each and every word, each and every minute. One fellow has Parkinson's, and I know that there are some other health issues in the Kollel, either their own, or those of their spouse. They sometimes get into heated discussions over the topic they are learning. At the end of the Seder, they close the book with a sigh, and wish they did not have to leave, saying, "If only this moment would never end!!" Just learning in the Study Hall, witnessing this, is life-changing. If only I could tap into that Golden Age while I am still young! It gives me a glimpse of what a real Ben Torah is. It is not about learning to get a good shidduch, a good Rabbinical position, etc. It is about learning for the love of it. *"שְׁקַנְיִ מְנַשְּׁקִוָת פִּיהוּ."*

The real Ben Torah keeps reviewing and repeating what he has learned, as he walks out the doors of the Beit Midrash. You can see from the way he walks, from the way he speaks, from the clothes he

wears, that he is – just different. This is the real Ben Torah "zone." The only way to be that Ben Torah is by looking at the time you are learning as your Golden Age, despite the mortgage, worries and bills, enjoying learning *as if* you were worry free, keeping all fears and doubts outside the study hall, to be dealt with after Seder. And once you get into that zone, you can get into the next zone. The "He's on fire!!" zone.

The Torah was given to the Jewish People while Mt. Sinai was aflame. Why? The Torah is similar to fire in various ways. R' Shimon Bar Yochai has his explanation... From Hanukah till Passover, the Matzah Bakeries ovens blaze at extreme degrees. I have heard that those who are in charge of putting the Matzahs in the oven and taking them out burn off their eyelashes and eyebrows from the heat! So...just as one can easily identify those who work closely with fire, such as the bakers, so too, one can easily identify *Talmidai Chachamim*, whose Torah is like fire. From the way they talk, walk, and from the way they are dressed – *ובעיטפָתָן בְּשָׁקָן*. The burning curiosity, to learn the burning Torah, makes them "Black."

It was said about the best student in the yeshiva where I learned, that from his first day in the Study Hall, he had fire in his hands. I did not always know what that meant. But soon, I realized that the fire he had was what made him the best guy in the yeshiva. *He had a burning desire to know about the word of G-d.* You see, you can never really grow in Torah, if you are not really yearning to



know what G-d wants to tell you. This is the “make it or break it” factor for the Ben Torah. How much fire, or curiosity, he’s got. The fire at Mt. Sinai was not just side effects to the giving of the Torah. Rather, it illustrated the only proper way to learn Torah. By making yourself interested. By turning on the Fire. By making it into an experience.

Studies say that, on average, a person today does not remember more than 20 telephone numbers. Try it. If you know more than twenty, then you are considered to have been blessed with an extraordinary memory. Ironically, the average person remembers 1,200 songs!! What’s the difference? Telephone numbers are dry information. But songs are an experience, an emotion. We remember emotions and experiences, but forget information. (Someone once sent me in an email, “People do not remember what you did for them. People remember how you made them feel.”) The only way to really remember your Torah learning long term is by making it something that you connect to, an experience that is so strong that is an emotion. This is the fire of Torah, which has an effect on you, as long as you learn it with a “burning interest.”

When someone learns Torah with “fire,” a fiery passion to know the Will of G-d, that is the type of Torah that leaves a mark. Of course, just entering the study hall without learning has some sort of impact, but like fire, the closer you get to Torah, the greater the “heat” will affect you. It has different degrees. The more you get into learning, the more inspired you are to know the Word of G-d, the more you become a Ben Torah. The only way to tap into the fiery Torah given at Sinai is by learning with unquenchable curiosity. If you can’t wait for seder to finish, sorry. It is not the Mt. Sinai-type of Torah.

The self-help books and the wisdom of the gentiles are so different from Torah. Only Torah is wisdom that is fire. It is the only wisdom that changes one’s identity just by learning it, even before applying it. When one learns psychology or self-help, he needs to apply it in order to experience a change. And even then, who knows how long the change will last? But with Torah, it is so different. Studying Torah with fire affects you like the fire of the oven affects the eyebrow-less Matzah man. It is automatic.

I remember standing in the Mirer yeshiva, as the summer *z'man* came to an end, and the Hizballah were acting up close to the Lebanon-Israel border. IDF was at war in the North. R' N. Tzvi Finkel, *zt"l*, told us that there would not be a summer break. We were to stay learning in the Mirer study hall throughout the summer, *על חומתיך ירושלים הפקדתי שומרים*. He did not say much, but every word was golden. I can still remember his fiery words. “King David sang *מה אהבתך תורתך כל היום היא שיחתך*; literally, *I love Your Torah so much, the whole day it is my discussion*. R' N. Tzvi tweaked that. How can one measure how much he loves Torah? The amount that you discuss Torah is the amount that you love it.

R' N. Tzvi had that fire. With it, he built the biggest yeshiva in the world, 5,000+ students – and it gets bigger and better every day. R' N. Tzvi left us, but his fire is still burning. If you want to spread Torah like R' N. Tzvi, you can only spread it - if you have that fire.

Where can you get this fire? All the money of the world can’t buy it, but anyone can attain it. You just have to be so interested in Torah that you are not interested in anything else.

SHOULDN'T SAY SHOULD



Are you able to find humor in life? Do you go a whole day without laughing? Being funny is not a goal in the eyes of the Torah, but laughing things off is. Laughing things off is a skill. You can learn it, once you understand some basic things about humor. People who laugh have a few rules, secret rules. Their laughter has 5 secret elements, at least while the person is laughing:

1. They accept themselves and those around them for who they are.
2. They do not get caught up with what other people think about them.
3. They are willing to reach deep down to the child inside and find some playfulness and fun in life.
4. They use creative thinking and, somehow, know how to generate it.
5. They get rid of the “shoulds” when things are not “the way things should be in life” and are able to “think out of the box.” These five are connected to one another, and the 5th is the root of them all.

Laughing things off is powerful; it can help you deal with so much frustration in life. You can be much more successful if you use it to help you manage your emotions and reach goals you set for yourself. The Talmud teaches us that before giving a class on deep Torah subjects, Rabbah would first say something to get everyone to laugh. (Shabbat 30b) It is much harder to focus on deep, difficult or frustrating issues when your state of mind is not positive and cheerful. I can't resist mentioning what happened in my house at 7:30 in the morning, while I was writing this article. My 3- year-old son was reprimanded for climbing up to the cabinets, looking for Shabbat treats. He made a face and stamped to the bathroom, proclaiming angrily to all of us as he went, “I am going to the bathroom, and I'm not coming back!!!” Only a child can think of such a line. To be able to laugh things off, we need to tap into the child deep inside, regardless of how old or serious we are. We need to see things “out of

the box” in order to laugh things off. And at times, this is the only way we can connect with our children. By playing with them on their level, at least once in a while. Sometimes we have a hard time understanding them, because of all the “shoulds” we have in life.

Are you in the “could” or the “should” state of mind? “What would be the greatest thing that you could do?” is a more effective thought than “What should I be doing?” Should can break you down. Could can resuscitate the depressed.

The Chassidic masters add a great twist to the commentary on this week's parsha. *לא תעשה לך כל פסל וכל תמונה אשר בשמיimmel*.... Literally, *you should not make for yourself any idol, or picture of that which is in the sky above...* This commandment forbids making pictures of things in the heavens. One must not make or own a picture or sculpture of the sun, the moon or a star, if there is no cloud covering part of them, or if the image resembles one of the heavenly bodies, even if it is not an object of worship. The Chassidic twist is, don't make yourself a picture of how things **should** look or be in life. In plain English, *don't play G-d*. Our “shoulds”, our expectations, are many times built upon what we have seen, perspectives borrowed from people we are close to, things we have gotten used to. *It is a great thing to know and realize what one could do, but how things should be is a killer thought*. Don't confuse it with the “could” thoughts, which are the best thoughts you can have.

When did “should” thoughts kill? According to Victor Frankel, Aushwitz survivor, to survive the hell of the Holocaust, one had to survive in spirit, to survive emotionally. Some people were able to see a beautiful sunset in Aushwitz and say, “Wow! Look how beautiful the world *could* be!” There *should not* have been a holocaust. But there was. People *should not* have had to suffer in such a way. But they did. The “should” thought would sap prisoners of their emotional energy. The ones who were able to come up with a “could” thought made it. Their world was hell, not one that was worth fighting to stay alive for. People who survived the Aushwitz labor

camp had a world view different from those who did not. They saw a world that *could be better*.

My three-year-old boy, who is still in the bathroom, merited having a great man be his *Sandack* at his *Brit Milah*. R' Elyashiv zt"l. After the *Brit*, I took a boy I was coaching to the great Rabbi. The boy was not happy in his yeshiva. He asked R' Elyashiv for a beracha to get into a certain yeshiva he had in mind. R' Elyashiv answered him, but with a different blessing. "I bless you that you get into the yeshiva that is best for you." The Talmud tells us that a person should never pray that he marry a certain girl, because, in the long run, that girl might not be good for him. One should pray for the right girl, in the right time. (Moed Kattan 18b)

People in all areas of life suffer from making pictures of how things "should" be. In dating, the repercussions of this habit are at their worst. They stop daters from getting married. Before the date, it is important to find out that your values, interests, and beliefs match with those of the person you are dating. But so many times, relationships are broken off because someone says, "Everything is fine with the date... *I just did not picture my spouse this way.*" Just see if you can have a good time on the date; see if you can enjoy courting. That's what it is all about. After marriage, the relationship will be based on how you treat each other, how you talk to each other. You can never know what will be good for you in five years from now. The problem begins when a person makes an HD picture of how his or her spouse should look, and if the candidate is different, they are not willing to continue. Who said that this picture you made for yourself is good for you? Some fellows look to see if the girl they are dating is like their mother. Who said that you are like your father and that you need a girl like your mother? After making the proper inquiries before dating, all you need to do is to see if you enjoy

being with each other. If you are in the judgmental zone during the date, deciding if this person fits the picture you want for yourself, the dating will never take off. You will not be able to enjoy just chatting, or opening up. It will be more like an interview than a schmooze.

Here in Israel, people have a saying: "The first year of marriage is either the best or the worst." What does it depend on? The answer is thinking "should." Shoulds take all the vitality out of our relationships. *My spouse should respond differently... should be more interested in what I am interested in... should be like my friend's spouse or like my siblings.* For some marriages, it takes a year to chuck the shoulds out the window. In some unfortunate cases, it takes much longer. However long it takes, that's how much time will be needed to find serenity.

If you are not happy in life, it does not, necessarily, mean that there is a problem. Things can be fine, but because they are not how you pictured them, you suffer. Sometimes, it is because we feel G-d should have run our lives differently. Sometimes we punish ourselves when our expectations in school or in earning are not met. *We should have done better.* Try answering why it should be as you had pictured, and you will find that there is no reason; *that's just how things seemed to you.* G-d has his "shoulds", and you have yours. Let's see who wins. In Lashon Hakodesh there is no word should, because that state is theoretical: it does not exist. There is could, יכול, but not should. The only should is the 613 mitzvoth that we should be observing.

וילשונו רנה אז ימלא שחוק פניו In the end of days, we will laugh as no one has ever laughed before. Then, our mouths will be full of laughter. Because then, there will be clarity, and all of our "shoulds" will be gone; the only ones remaining will be those of G-d.

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