

Date: 20 Iyar 5786 (May 7, 2026)

Torah Portion: Behar / Bechukotei

Topic: Transcending Human Nature

How great is the merit of conquering one's nature—of taming one's negative character traits (*middot*). The Midrash describes the days of R' Tanchuma, when Yisrael was in need of rain. He fasted. He prayed. He instructed the people to give charity. Yet no rain came. It was then reported that a man had acted in a seemingly improper way by giving money to his ex-wife. The man explained: "When I saw her lacking proper clothing and in great distress, I was filled with compassion and gave her money, in fulfillment of the verse: 'Do not hide yourself from your kin.'" R' Tanchuma turned to Hashem and said: "They are the children of Avraham, Yitzchak, and Ya'akov, and You are responsible for their sustenance. If this man was able to overcome his feelings and show compassion, how much more so should You be filled with compassion toward us." At that moment, rain fell and relief came to the world. Nothing had succeeded in arousing Divine mercy—not the fasts, not the prayers. Yet a single act, in which one individual overcame his personal feelings and showed compassion, was enough to bring the long-awaited rain. For there is nothing more difficult than overcoming one's *middot*—and nothing more powerful.

R' Shimon ben Yochai declared: "With my merit, I can absolve my entire generation from strict judgment. And if we were joined by Yotham son of Uzziyah, we could absolve all generations" (Succah 45b). What was so unique about Yotham? Rashi explains that he was exceptionally righteous and humble. His father, Uzziyah, was afflicted with *tzaraas* for twenty-five years and could not fulfill his royal duties. During that entire time, Yotham governed the land—yet he never placed the crown upon his own head. Every decree he issued, he attributed to his father. From here we learn that overcoming even one trait—the desire for honor—is so great that it can shield the entire world from Divine judgment.

In the story of Purim, the Talmud asks: Why did Esther invite Haman to the feast she prepared for King Ahasuerus? One answer given is that she said, "Perhaps YHWH will take notice and perform a miracle for us" (Megillah 15b). Take notice of what? Rashi explains: "Perhaps He will notice how I am compelled to flatter this wicked man and diminish my honor." This is striking. The entire nation faced destruction. Communities fasted, prayed, and repented. Yet Esther believed that salvation might depend on her personal act of overcoming her own nature—setting aside her honor.

There is also the account of R' Preida, who had a student that required each lesson to be repeated four hundred times. One day, R' Preida needed to attend to another matter. Before leaving, he reviewed the lesson four hundred times—but the student still did not understand. When asked why, the student replied: "From the moment I heard you had somewhere else to go, I was distracted, thinking you might leave at any moment." R' Preida responded: "Let us begin again. Focus, and I will repeat the lesson." He then reviewed the material another four hundred times. A heavenly voice declared: "What do you prefer—four hundred additional years of life, or that you and your entire generation merit the World to Come?" He chose the latter. Hashem then said: "Give him both." Few would have the patience to teach a single student in this way. Fewer still would begin again after such effort appeared wasted. Yet R' Preida mastered his frustration, and through this, brought blessing not only upon himself, but upon his entire generation.

Avimi, a Talmudic sage, once forgot his learning of Tractate Menachos. He traveled to his student, Rav Chisda, in order to relearn it. The Gemara asks: Why did he not summon Rav Chisda to him? Because Avimi believed that in this way, his efforts would be more successful (Menachos 7a). Why would this be so? It appears that Avimi understood that in order to recover his Torah, he needed the merit of conquering his nature. He therefore humbled himself—leaving his place of honor to sit among the students of his own disciple. From here we learn that overcoming one's *middot* brings Divine assistance, even in Torah itself. This stands in contrast to the opposite behavior. The Sages teach: if a Torah scholar becomes arrogant, his wisdom departs from him; if he becomes angry, the same result follows (Pesachim 66b).

From all these accounts, a single principle emerges: Not the outward act alone, but the inner conquest defines its greatness. To overcome resentment, to relinquish honor, to master frustration, to humble oneself—these are acts that carry immeasurable weight. And through them, a person does not only refine himself—he brings blessing, mercy, and redemption to the entire world.

Shalom.